

IT MUST BE

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Imam Zakir looked after the retreating figure of the woman shrouded in black. A toddler holding onto her little finger swayed with hurried steps to match her stride, looking like a diminutive sailor. The child could not have been more than two. The priest turned towards the shopkeeper who watched the scene silently. Zakir's eyebrows raised no more than a millimeter, asked a question answered with a minute nod by the tradesman. The incident had happened more than a year ago, but Shopkeeper Kareem knew precisely what the Imam wanted to know. He looked sympathetically after the woman, now a black speck against the horizon.

That morning, Khairun Nisa had no idea her life was going to change on the very day. It started normally, no more different from the hundred days past, or she believed, the hundred days that lay ahead. She woke at dawn, finished her ablutions, completed her prayers. Again, as with any other day, she trotted off to Kareem's shop to buy bread for breakfast, her arrival timed fifteen minutes after delivery of the bakery van. Sometimes, she would take her son; most often not. By the time she returned home, the warm bread tucked under her arm, her parents, husband and younger brother and sister would have woken up, and begun getting ready for their day. The younger siblings preparing for school, her mother busy in the kitchen or with her grandson, her father cleaning his bicycle that would carry an assortment of household utensils he bought from town and hawked in the adjacent villages and her husband ready to leave for work on a neighbouring coconut estate.

But that day, after she bought her bread and turned away from the counter to leave, she saw the new priest appointed to the local mosque. As their paths crossed, Khairun Nisa respectfully kept her gaze on the ground wondering if this new religious man would be better than the last. The previous Imam, a home grown candidate, had been more intent on leaving the country for Malaysia than tending to the spiritual needs of his flock. Khairun Nisa's husband often came home after Friday prayers with a complaint on his lips of the Imam's frivolity and lack of commitment. As expected, one day he reported the Imam had vanished. He had spirited himself off to Singapore followed by a journey overland to the country of his dreams. The community had to look for a replacement.

Imam Zakir, was a recent graduate from a Saudi sponsored religious school on the West Coast of the country. One of many that were dotted around the country. This was his first posting after returning from a year in Pakistan in a remote area governed by tribal law. A month after his arrival, the village began to brag about their new Imam - his Arabic accent, his Quranic knowledge, and his firebrand sermons. He was the authentic deal, the elders praised.

The brief encounter that morning at Kareem's shop left Zakir smarting with indignation. Cutting his purchases short he rushed back to his quarters adjoining the little brick mosque. Entering his small one room apartment he shoved his modest bag of supplies on the table and sat abruptly on his narrow hard bed. His light brown eyes constricted with concentration as he mechanically stroked his beard. His mind was racing. The cheek of it, he thought crossly. After a few minutes of reflection, Zakir decided to pray. "There is nothing that prayer can't solve," he muttered as he flung open his cloth prayer mat laying it carefully on the cement floor, facing west. It took three more sessions of prayers, and a reading of a passage in the Quran before Zakir came to an acceptable conclusion. Imam Zakir sighed soulfully, it was not easy bearing the spiritual responsibility of a whole group.

Khairun Nisa, in the meantime, carried on with her day which so far passed uneventfully. With her son Aman by her side, occupied with bits of paper, plastic and string in his efforts at play, she completed her household chores with her mother, chatting and sharing bits and bobs of

gossip, news, and updates from the locale. A wedding and a funeral had occurred in the past month and they cheerfully dissected and analyzed details of both, merrily passing judgment on what worked and what did not. The arrival of her younger sister and brother after their school day caused commotion, chaos and noise in the little house, as they chased the hens in and out of the dwelling, teased their little nephew needlessly to tears and willfully interrupted every chore Khairun Nisa and her mother attempted to complete. But the older women were indulgent and attended to every mess and disturbance with good humour. It was a happy home.

After the day had long passed and the event had come and gone but was never forgotten, years later, Khairun Nisa and her mother wondered how something like this could happen and a human being have no warning, no instinct, no alert, alarm or notification of an event that was about to hurtle like a bolt of lightning and change lives so completely. But it is so and they were among a hundred other souls whose lives change from one second to another so dramatically that nothing ever is the same again in their lives until they die.

Imam Zakir was at peace. He had made his decision and it sat well with him. The day was Friday and he reasoned there was purpose in his morning encounter. Friday was like no other day for Muslims and today would be like no other day for his people.

He conducted Jumma prayers calmly and steadily. But before prayers began, before even his sermon he made an announcement. He asked that all those present return to the mosque well ahead of the sunset prayer and to kindly spread the message to others. He emphasized that all men of the area, young and old should come. An important pronouncement would be made at that time. This was nothing new to the commune. The mosque was the only institution that had a loudspeaker system and often it was used to disseminate information for the welfare and good of the village, be it state, religious, school, or even world affairs that dealt with the Muslim community at large.

By 5.45pm a fairly large crowd of men had begun to assemble outside the mosque. Imam Zakir walked about the crowd, welcoming his parishioners here and there, looking at the gathering, identifying and noting all those present. Half an hour earlier, Imam Zakir had made sure he wore

his bleached and pressed crisp white Saudi robe, that his long beard was carefully combed and groomed, and that he was wearing his best, elaborately embroidered skullcap on his head when he entered the mosque. He wanted to make a good impression and the reaction from the community when they caught sight of their new Imam, spoke of approval. In his exercise of greeting and meeting, Zakir saw Khairun Nisa's husband and father slip in through the small wooden gate; he inclined his head in salutation but didn't speak to them. Imam Zakir readied himself to begin proceedings when the assembly had grown to about two hundred men. The entire male population was present. A low hum prevailed as the men-folk chatted in low tones about sundry topics. Not a single one of them was uneasy, except perhaps Shopkeeper Kareem.

The Imam solemnly climbed up to the pulpit. The crowd hushed. He looked down at a sea of expectant faces all focused on him. He was the star. He grasped the microphone, cleared his throat and made an announcement. "Send a message to the women of the House of Mansour to come to the mosque." There was an immediate uproar from the crowd before him. Imam Zakir silenced them with a raise of his hand and a look of his eye. Shopkeeper Kareem standing in the middle felt a cold finger caress his spine. The consternation around him continued in low tones. He looked around for Khairun Nisa's husband and father. They stood with bowed heads as a small space arose between them and the rest. He saw Mansoor's younger son push through the throng and dart out of the mosque. The message was being sent.

In a small rural society nothing is secret. By now all present knew the subject matter of today's meeting, but they didn't quite understand the reason *they* were there. A few busy men clicked their tongues in annoyance at this interruption to their daily lives. Why were they asked to interfere in essentially a woman's problem? Yet, not a single man left the mosque. A few of the men looked sympathetically at the two men most affected. A wealthy man close to them, the sand contractor, knew that had it been him, he would have been able to smooth things over, but poor families like Khairun Nisa's were utterly powerless and when it came to religion there was little anyone could do. God trumped the State. That was the order of life for them.

Khairun Nisa sat with her mother on the kitchen floor preparing dinner. Her younger sister played with her son in a corner of the room from which emitted giggles, coos and whispers. The two worked mostly in silence, wondering occasionally what the message from the mosque could be about. Her younger brother ran in breathless and recited his message with great speed. The women stopped whatever they were doing mid way- one holding a knife, the other a half peeled onion. As soon as the boy stopped speaking his mother began to wail and beat her breast. The two children stopped their play and the toddler began to cry loudly. For Khairun Nisa, in an instant, all had gone from tranquil to turbulence, from routine to disturbance, from happiness to distress. The little boy gabbled on hurrying his mother and sister to come immediately. Khairun Nisa looked at the onion in her hand and felt her stomach lurch. Her heart pinched with fear but outwardly she remained composed – a Seneca upon hearing Nero’s centurion knock on his villa door. She rose in one fluid moment shook the vegetables out of her dress and without saying a word, her face stone set, began to prepare to change her clothes and make herself suitable for the religious place she had been ordered to enter. Against her brother’s dither, she took her time. She washed her face and took ablutions at the outside tap. Combed her hair and changed her clothes. Her heart banged wildly against her breast but outwardly she looked unperturbed and controlled. She donned her black outer gown over her tunic and trousers. The gown dropped heavily to her feet covering her neck, arms. Lastly she carefully draped a black veil over her head, covering every strand of hair, adjusting and settling the cloth well on her scalp. She stood in front of the sole mirror in the house, cracked and discoloured. Satisfied with her reflection, she turned towards her mother, dressed similarly standing by the entrance, her wrinkled hand enclosed over a tiny fist. The toddler stood beside his worried grandmother, his cherubic face lightened by a smile, now that calm reigned over the household once again. Khairun Nisa smoothed his hair gently, smiled at him and the three of them began to walk the half kilometer towards the mosque, her brother having raced ahead like an emissary from an enemy camp.

The trio walked on the red earth gravel road with quick fast steps and within a few moments, the little boy whimpered unable to keep up. His face puckered, his eyes about to crinkle in a cry. Khairun Nisa looked down and swooped him up in a sinuous movement, not missing her stride. She straddled him on her hip and continued. They walked in silence. She passed Shopkeeper

Kareem's store boarded and padlocked, she went by the primary school, the neighbourhood water tank, the small playground- all strangely absent of people and children and the normal activity that punctuated rural life. If at this point Khairun Nisa witnessed the sky turn green, she would not have been surprised. Instead, as she gave a quick glimpse, it was its normal cerulean blue. She noted a yellow orange sun hung low above the horizon but sunset was still a quarter of an hour away. The coconut trees rippled their leaves overhead serrating the air above them and homing birds twittered and screeched as they circled the sky.

As they neared the mosque, they heard the strident voice of the Imam over the loudspeaker closing the evening prayer. Women from the houses closest to the mosque had gathered near the entrance to their compounds but upon seeing the little group walking rapidly towards them the spectators slipped inside not wanting to make eye contact with the women. Khairun Nisa knew they were the women who had sympathy for her, but there were others who stayed on glaring at her, throwing insults and taunts in low voices, making sure she could hear them. Khairun Nisa walked on, her head held high, her eyes directed in front. Her mother however, began to flag under the heavy judgment volleyed from the sidelines. Unlike her daughter, she was not made of stern stuff and by the time they entered the large compound belonging to the mosque, her mother had fallen behind forcing Khairun Nisa to wait at the low wooden gate for her mother to join her and her son. The setting sun cast a glow around them, and Khairun Nisa glancing up saw pink streaks reflecting the rays of the sun, evenly spaced, splayed in an arc against indigo. She had never seen a sunset like this, before. Involuntarily the beauty of the moment made her lips twitch upwards. As her mother reached her, Khairun Nisa put her son down pushing his hand into her mother's. The boy happily smiled at his grandmother while he pushed the fist of his other hand into his mouth and sucked contentedly.

Upon seeing the trio a few men standing by the door of the mosque relayed a message that swelled and surged through the crowd towards the Imam. The two women and child stood by the gate awaiting further instructions. Imam Zakir stepped down from the pulpit smoothing his robe and with solemnly folded hands across his stomach, walked through the corridor of space that

formed within the assembly. As he passed each line, they closed in so that he marched at the head of a large following like a regent with his entourage.

He stepped out of the door of the mosque and halted halfway on the grounds. The crowd paused behind him. Holding a hand to stay them, Zakir left the flock, moved up to the women and stood in front for a moment until he was sure the male congregation had arranged themselves suitably in a semi-circle around the visitors. Then he began. It was to be his finest hour.

“Look at this woman,” he began pointing accusingly at Khairun Nisa. He cleared his throat. He wanted his tone louder, deeper and more authoritative. “Look at this woman,” he started once again. “She is an example of how our society has disintegrated completely and how we have lost our way.” Khairun Nisa stood unbending before him. She was a tall slim woman with a beautiful face. Her black gown was cut narrow to show off her figure, there was lace trim at the wrists and neck. Her mother in contrast, stood wrapped, a shapeless black figure, bowed and quivering before the Imam unable to look him in the eye. Zakir continued strident, “This wretch leaves her family to greedily earn money in the Middle East. It is only families with no breeding, no faith who send their women off to work for men in strange countries.” He paused to look around and the other heads of households who had wives and daughters working in Arab countries, some even in Greece, Cyprus and Singapore, shifted uneasily, looked down and hid behind their neighbours hoping to divert the Imam’s wrath away from them. Imam Zakir caught sight of his neighbour, Lateef, a man he liked very much, a God fearing man, who virtually lived in the mosque, so frequently did he visit, but had unfortunately got, not one daughter working abroad but two. Zakir softened, he recollected the many generous recent donations made by Lateef both to the mosque and to himself personally. He remembered that all are not fallen angels, it is only those who have been tempted by Satan. He changed his stance and cleared his throat again. “It is not a bad thing to go abroad to earn money. We are all not rich. Many of us are poor. We must work hard, after all our religion tells us we must be useful and help one another. What better thing is there for a daughter or a wife to leave the secure loving fold of her family, go amongst strangers, work hard, be a good Muslim and return and see her family much improved due to her hard work? Those women are saints. They are examples of good true Muslims. And then,” he

turned towards Khairun Nisa vengefully, “we have harlots like this.” As if they were connected by a push-pull cord, the more Khairun Nisa stayed upright and straight her mother wilted further and further. “This creature goes to the country of our Arab Brethren and stains our community over there. She acquires a lover.” Zakir spat out the word ‘lover’ in English, so that it stood out amidst the Tamil they spoke in the area. “She is like a bitch in heat and forces the man to sleep with her. But Allah in his wisdom knows that she cannot get away. He gives us evidence of her immorality and soon she is with child.”

The men looked down at their hands clasped before them. They all knew the story. In fact the situation was nothing new. Periodically, each generation has had a similar situation which each affected family dealt with in its own way. A tolerant and mild community, they were reassured that in a few years, the woman and child would be absorbed into the families, community, village and when the time came to get married, the struggle to find a suitable partner for the child was solved by bringing in an unsuspecting stranger from another distant hamlet who could be persuaded to marry the girl or boy and take them away to live elsewhere where no one knew of how they were begotten. It was a system that worked and there had been no need for change. But Imam Zakir would have none of it and change would begin here and now.

“We cannot have this kind of woman here, living without shame in our company. We have to cleanse our homes of such filth.” Zakir paused. He had set the stage. Now he had to execute his God ordained plan.

Like a theatrical director in charge of a spectacular show he ordered each man present to strip a young coconut frond from the numerous coconut trees around the mosque. He watched pleased at the scramble to get to the trees. Fifteen minutes passed before each man was satisfied with his palm leaf. Zakir paced among the crowd recommending trees as good candidates and dismissing others. All the while, Khairun Nisa and her mother stayed standing and silent. She caught sight of her husband and father who stood apart, their faces distraught - but even they remained silent.

Zakir moved onto the next stage. He asked the men to rip away the leaves leaving the hard spine in their hands. The men obediently did so. Under Imam Zakir's eagle eye, they had become cattle. Soon each man was in possession of a large supple cane that some tested by swishing through the air, relishing the sound of beaten wind. Khairun Nisa felt her heart jump at the sound. She pressed her sweaty palms together and felt rivulets of perspiration run down her spine. She saw the men smiling, some laughing, they looked as if they were enjoying themselves, like they did when they engaged in preparations for the annual mosque feast.

The men were asked to form a large circle. The men shuffled in the dust looking like a group of dancers taking their place. But Imam Zakir realized a two hundred man circle was untenable and so two circles were formed. The night air bristled with excitement. Zakir stood back and reviewed the scene. He seemed satisfied. He turned towards Khairun Nisa and her mother and child. He motioned to the older woman to take the child and stand by the gate. He knew that once it started, they would not have a clear view of anything, but they were not the stars in this act.

Khairun Nisa was asked to lie face down in the middle of the circle. As soon as the Imam made his request it became clear to Khairun Nisa's husband what was about to take place. He shouted desperately to his wife to stay and angrily screamed at the Imam to stop. The audience was shocked. The Imam was a man of God, one did not speak to such a man in this way. Khairun Nisa's husband spoke, breathless; he addressed the group of men. Men he knew, men he worked for, men he worked with, men he was related to, men like him. He gabbled on. He was desperate. "I married her. I married her knowing everything. I love the child, I am her husband, the only father the child knows is me. You all know the story," he appealed to the men turning round and round trying to reach one person. "Let her be, please," he begged. "If I have accepted her, why do you have a problem?"

Zakir smiled peacefully "Let's ask our brothers," he said. He looked around with authority. He spread his hands apart and asked the throng of men "Won't you do this for Allah?" A roar of approval rose from the group. Khairun Nisa's husband drooped. He knew he could not win this battle. Allah always won. He was asked to stand aside. He could not look at anyone else, he

fixated on Khairun Nisa hoping to force her to look at him. She walked to the middle of the circle. She did not focus on her husband, but she was proud of him. She knew if she looked at him, she would cry and at all costs, she didn't want to cry. Once in the middle, she stood and waited and the men fell silent. They watched and waited, all eyes focused on Imam Zakir. Zakir strode to the centre, he made noises that indicated he wanted Khairun Nisa to kneel and then stretch out on the dirt. His hands hovered over her shoulders but did not touch her. Khairun Nisa looked steadily at him and Zakir felt uneasy. He knew this was irregular and if the police got to know he would be in trouble. But as he looked at the crowd, he knew he was safe. What could the police do? This was his community, he ruled in the village, he was king and now he had started a new custom.

Khairun Nisa knelt, placing her hands down on the earth. She saw her husband and father being made to stand right in front and a coconut spine forced into their hands. Tears ran down their cheeks. She could not see her mother or her son. She was glad. She did not want the boy to see her humiliation. She stretched out and folded her arms on the soil and rested her forehead on them. She could smell the earth and waited silently for what was to come. It was a punishment she had seen meted out to many victims on a Friday in the country she worked in. It was a public spectacle that was televised commonly, she never thought that so far away from that dreadful land she would be a victim in her own country. She took a deep breath, she began to pray.

Each man was ordered to lash her once with the hard stick starting with her husband and father. Khairun Nisa felt a gentle touch on her spine. The Imam asked the man to do it again, harder, it must hurt. Khairun Nisa knew it was her husband. She heard him refuse and walk away. Imam Zakir strode back and forth orchestrating the performance. The lashes fell, and they hurt. Khairun Nisa never imagined how they would hurt. She had never in her life gone through so much pain, not even when Aman was born. Her tears fell and created a muddy pool just below her nose. It went on and on. She didn't know how much time had passed, when she was lifted up by gentle hands and turned around. She could not walk, she could not speak, she could not recognize. She felt two men carry her gently, one at her head, the other at her feet. She looked up

at the blue black sky, a crescent moon lay below Venus, the star of love. With all her strength, she filled her lungs with air and arching her back upwards, shouted weakly, “Are you happy God? I hope you are happy.”

AMEENA HUSSEIN is a writer and co founder of the Perera Hussein Publishing House, which has established itself as the frontrunner for cutting edge Sri Lankan fiction from emerging and established Sri Lankan authors. Her novel *The Moon in the Water* was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Award and the Dublin IMPAC. Her first short story collection *Fifteen* was shortlisted for the Gratiaen Prize in 1999 and her second collection of short stories *Zillij* won the State Literary Prize in 2005. She has also edited three collections of children’s stories and a collection of stories for adults. She is currently at work on a novel and a travelogue on Ibn Batuta in Sri Lanka.