

What we don't talk about

“Subhanallah! Subhan Al Khaliq!¹” My mother cried out. She lifted her hands up to the ceiling like the cheap panels would part and start spilling beams of light. I had made her audibly promise me and the doctor that she would stay put in the corner. Stay put and *quiet*. All that went out the window when the baby's head started to crown, and she leapt over to grab onto my husband's arm like she was the one pushing. Unbelievable. Even when her daughter is giving birth, she still manages to be the center of attention. A nurse looked over to her and asked her to take a step back. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Mom!” I rasped in between heaves. My husband gently pushed her back behind him and took hold on my hand once more. If Allah was watching, now would be the time to do something. There was a new sharp pain and I felt something slice through me.

Panting I laid back on the bed, my head wet with sweat. My husband was staring towards the end of the bed with wide eyes and my mother was finally quiet.

The doctor held up an infant, my child, covered in blood.

“Congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Salah, you have a beautiful baby boy!”

He handed the baby over to my husband who took hold of the swaddle of blankets like it would shatter if he wasn't too careful. I could see tears running down his face from his brown eyes towards his beard which now looked like a sopping mess.

¹ Praise be to God! Praise be to the Creator!

“Wisam,” I said, “let me see him.” My husband obliged and leaned over to uncover the face of my son. Hair black and eyes blacker. He was looking up at me, tiny eyes locked. The pools of them seemed to extend ever inwards and before I knew it, I was lost in their void. I’m not sure what I was expecting to feel once I saw my child for the first time. There was a shift in the air and I looked around the room to see if anyone else had noticed it too.

“Mariam,” a nurse said and soon I was preoccupied with the changing of blankets and the spectacle of my mother trying to break a large pita bread over the baby’s head while an exasperated nurse struggled around her to clean and change the baby. The baby. I hadn’t even, we hadn’t even thought of a name yet. Every time I or my mother brought up the issue Wisam would say how he wanted the name to come to him in the moment. “We’ll know when I see them,” he said, “It’ll come to us.”

“Have you picked a name out?” the doctor asked. Wisam looked up at him and then back down to our son. Whatever enthusiasm he had shown in the past for choosing a name on the spot was gone. Probably washed out of his eyes and onto his beard.

“We haven’t decided on one yet,” I answered after deciding I couldn’t take the awkward silence any longer.

The doctor gave me a warm smile, “That’s okay. A lot of parents don’t choose to register their baby’s name immediately after delivery. You actually have six weeks.”

And so, it was decided. We would bring the baby home and Wisam will announce the name once it comes to him. “Perhaps I need to be around my art,” he said on the drive home, “Hospitals are too depressing to be creative.” He continued but I wasn’t listening. I kept

thinking about the void. I kept thinking about how dry my eyes were when I saw my son for the first time.

“Why hasn’t he cried yet?” I interrupted.

“Who?”

“What do you mean who? The baby Wisam. He hasn’t cried. Not once.”

Wisam shrugged, “I mean the doctor didn’t seem too concerned with it. Maybe we’ve got a quiet baby.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t feel right,” I said slowly.

“Bismillah²,” Wisam looked over at me from the steering wheel, “Don’t talk like that or you’ll give us the ein³.”

I clenched my jaw and looked through the rearview mirror to the baby in the backseat. Even now he wasn’t sleeping just staring out the window. No expression. Just the blackness of those eyes taking in everything. I swear I felt the shift again when the baby’s eyes snapped to look directly at me. There was a gravity about them.

“Look!” I exclaimed, “Look what I mean!”

Wisam turned to look in the backseat.

“What? He is sleeping. What do you mean?”

² In the Name of God

³ Ein – Arabic for “eye” referring to the Evil Eye

I quickly turned in my chair, ready to argue, but he was right. The baby was asleep. But he was just...

“Post-partum,” Wisam said, and I saw his hands grip the steering wheel tighter.

“What?” I replied slowly. I felt dazed.

“We talked about this with Dr. Hakim. That’s probably why you’re freaking out.”

I nodded and the rest of the drive was quiet.

The next couple of days came and went and still the baby would not cry. I kept waiting for that feeling of motherly bonding to come and it didn’t. There was nothing. Only the gravity of feeling like I’m being pulled inwards towards something.

It also didn’t help that Wisam couldn’t seem to come up with a name. Nothing fit. Ahmed. Bassam. Kamil. Nabeel. Mahmoud. All came up and all dismissed.

I was having nightmares too. One where I was falling into a pit, and I never hit the bottom. Others where I could swear I was awake only to find I had fallen asleep on the chair in the baby’s room. The worst one was where the baby would be sitting on the end of a hallway looking towards me with those void-filled black eyes and no matter how much I ran towards him I never got closer. The hallway never ended.

I tried bringing this up to my mother or Wisam and each time I was shut down.

“Instead of complaining,” my mother said one afternoon as we both sat in the living room folding laundry, “You should say mashallah and be thankful He has given you a beautiful baby boy.”

“But it doesn’t feel right,” I protested, “He doesn’t cry. He doesn’t stir. Just stares up at me with those...eyes. It’s like he’s an alien.”

As soon as those words left my mouth I was filled with regret. It would have been less impactful if someone had crashed into our living room wall. My mother was looking at me like I had just killed someone in front of her.

“Don’t. Talk. Like. That,” she formed her mouth around each word like they were shards of glass.

“Momma,” I tried pleading, “There is something wrong. He doesn’t even feel like my son.”

At this my mother stood and walked over towards the stairway leading upstairs. She stood on the landing for a few seconds before turning to look at me. She was crying.

“Allah crafts a child from his mother’s bones. He took from you and created life. A gift,” her voice began to shake, “and you spit in his face.” Without another word she turned and ascended the staircase leaving me all alone.

In the days that followed I tried my best to just live with it. The nightmares, the eerie quietness of the baby, the ever-shifting gravity feeling in my chest every time I looked in his eyes. Maybe this was a punishment of some kind. Maybe someone had given me the ein after all.

Perhaps I could have learned to live with way if not for one evening when I made my way to the baby’s room to prepare a bathe and find him floating. At first, I didn’t know what I was looking at. The synapses in my brain lagged. The baby was floating upright in the middle of the room surrounded by a black mist. The gravity shift came again and I doubled over onto the floor. I felt

as if I could barely breathe. Suddenly my joints felt like they were locked in place and I was stuck on my side on the floor. If I could move my face I would make a sound. Call for help. Call out a prayer. But instead I laid there, motionless, watching my baby float in a mist that made the room around us blink in and out of existence. Hot tears streamed down my face.

“Mariam,” I heard it start to say in a deep voice that spoke from within the inky depths of the mists.

“Mariam.”

I didn't respond. My mouth was agape, and I could feel my saliva on my cheek.

“Mariam wake up!”

I jerked and saw Wisam standing over me. My mother was behind him. Her face was unreadable.

“What happened?” I sat up and felt a sharp pain in my forehead.

“You fainted,” Wisam replied and helped me over to the chair.

I opened my mouth to say, I don't know, something but was immediately cut off by Wisam holding his hand up.

“Enough of this. We are going to visit Dr. Hakim.”

“But- “

“But nothing,” my mother cut in, “we'll go tomorrow and see what he can do for you. It's...fine.” She let out a sigh, “Hamoudi's wife had something like this happen to her.”

“Part-partum,” me and Wisam said at the exact same time.

My mother winced, “Yes,” she said slowly, “I don’t remember the name but don’t tell anyone about it.”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” suddenly I was angry.

“You know Habibi,” my mom replied, “We don’t talk about these things... it’s ayb⁴.”

From behind the two of them I looked over to see the baby sitting up in his crib. I blinked a few times and the dizziness washed over me once more.

“What?” Wisam asked and turned to see what I was looking at.

“He’s sitting up,” I said.

“Whose sitting up?” My mother asked.

“The baby,” I pointed incredulously. He was right there!

Wisam slowly knelt down beside the chair and took my hand, “Mariam the baby’s downstairs.”

I looked over to the crib again and there he was. Sitting up and looking at me through the bars on the crib. The gravity feeling began to feel unbearable. Both Wisam and my mother were looking at each other now. Saying things to each other through their eyes.

“Do you not see him?” I asked again, my voice began to feel slurred.

⁴ Ayb – shameful usually used to mean something is not societally acceptable

The baby cocked his head to the side I saw some reflection pass over his inky black pupils. But whatever it was it disappeared just as fast as it came.

“Habibi,” Wisam was saying gently. My moved to stand near the window. I can hear her crying.

“Mariam, there’s no one there.”