

Through a Veil Darkly

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It's time to kill my husband. Izaan Bekkar. The forty-eighth president of the United States.

I suppose assassination is the correct term. No matter. It's my responsibility. Once done, I'll be a hero. Go figure. Only in America, where killing for religious reasons is deemed sacrilegious. Hypocrites, every damn one of them.

I'm alone now, sitting in my room. Outside, trees bare as brooms claw at my window, just as Izaan's deception scrapes at my raw conscience. A winter wind rattles the thick pane of glass. My only comfort comes from thoughts of retribution and the monotonous *drip... drip... drip* of a leaky faucet. I've listened to that torturous sound ever since Izaan locked me up. It's all I have for entertainment. I've noticed that its pitch is different at night—more baritone—than in the afternoon, when the water sings like a soprano.

Interesting what we notice when alone.

A digital clock reads 4:49 a.m.

Eleven minutes before the morning call to prayer. Five hours and eleven minutes before my meeting with Dr. Truman North. Fourteen hours and eleven minutes until lights out and another sleepless night.

There are people, like the self-righteous Dr. North, who want me to accept their version of my predicament. But I silently refuse, and play along. I'll do anything to guarantee my release from this hell.

The key is the burqa.

My life didn't start in a burqa.

But it may end in one.

I stood backstage, listening, wearing a navy St. John suit that Izaan bought for me.

"America is on the brink of destruction," Izaan boomed to a packed auditorium.

Network and cable news cameras focused on his keen blue eyes and crisp, angular features. "Global warming. Oil dependence. Nuclear war. America needs leadership she can believe in."

Izaan ran his life and his campaign on high-octane fear. Constituents guzzled his message. When he swerved for emphasis, they leaned into his turn. He'd brake for effect, and they'd relax. He'd race his cadence, their hearts seemed to pound.

"That's why, at your insistence, I'm announcing my candidacy for president of the United States."

The crowd roared their approval.

He beamed, pausing for effect, his ego swelling from their admiration. Like a snake charmer he wooed them, just as he'd wooed me years before.

After a few moments, the crowd calmed.

"It gives me great pleasure to introduce you to the love of my life. My wife. My partner. Sylvia Bekkar."

I dutifully walked onto the stage and gripped his hand. Strobos flashed. He raised our clasped fingers high in the air. My heart soared at his touch. Gentle and loving. Together we left the stage and greeted constituents at the rope line. Afterward, as I tumbled over the edge of false impressions into a cold reality, staffers swept me out of the way.

"You ooze charisma," the campaign manager told Izaan, patting him on the back.

I watched as Izaan pushed past him and headed for the campaign bus. And so it went, stop after stop, month after month. Izaan's poll numbers rose. My spirits fell. Slowly, Izaan's mask of confident composure shattered under the pressure. Nervous glances over his shoulder escalated once we were issued Secret Service.

"Get them away from me," he ordered, pointing at the agents posted outside the campaign bus. "I don't need government spies watching my every move."

"They're here for your protection," an advisor said.

Izaan leveled him with a glare. "I know their claims. I also know the truth."

The campaign manager pulled Izaan inside the bus. "Are you all right?"

Izaan held up a document. "You hand me sacrilege like this and call it a speech?" He tore it in two. "Then you ask if I'm all right? Leave, before I fire you."

Drunk on the prospect of riding their horse into the White House, the staff attributed Izaan's outbursts to exhaustion.

"I don't care what the hell you need to do, just get him through the election," I overheard the campaign manager say to a deputy. "We'll deal with him after November."

Fools.

A day later, we were back home for a night. I entered Izaan's bedroom to check on him, determined to show him that I cared, that I wanted to be a part of his life. Our life.

He emerged from his bathroom wearing only a towel. "What are you doing in here? Snooping around?"

"I—"

He grabbed a handful of my red hair. "Filthy American whore. Tempting me. Is this what you want?" He dropped his towel, revealing his naked muscular frame. "Is it?"

I said nothing.

He yanked my head back, his face inches from mine. "You want to know my secrets."

I fought against crying. "You're hurting me."

"What are you?" he asked in a voice as soft as a caress.

"Please. I love—"

He jerked my hair again.

I grabbed his arm. "I'm a—"

"Say it."

"Filthy whore." I spit the words at him. "I'm a filthy whore."

"This is what happens to whores."

He shoved me facedown on the bed. I scrambled for safety. He caught my foot, knocked me to the floor, then wrenched my nightgown up over my head, tangling my face and arms in the silk, pinning me down.

A knock on the door. "You all right, sir?"

Secret Service.

Izaan slammed his palm over my mouth.

I writhed for air.

"Leave me be," Izaan yelled.

Footsteps retreated.

He held me down, thrusting his hatred into me. For days afterward, my body ached and his words replayed in my mind like a stale song. I'd seen his anger before. Felt its wrath. But this was different, raw and exposed.

Drip... drip... drip.

I plotted to leave him. Later. After the campaign. He was under so much pressure. He didn't mean it. He loved me. Needed me. I couldn't leave. A continuous loop of rationalization circled around my mind coming back to the same awful conclusion. He was the force that held my world together, and without him, I'd spin out of control.

"You may hate a thing although it is good for you, and love a thing although it is bad for you," Izaan would say.

I didn't know from where the quote originated, but it nagged at me, made me wonder.

November loomed.

Izaan won.

Nonstop news coverage of the most recent beheading in the Middle East wound my anxiety into a tangled knot. Forty-eight hours after the election, Izaan's staff showed up at our home. Izaan jerked me to my feet, his fingers digging into my arm. He turned me to face men I'd never seen before and insisted that I look them in the eye.

"Men have status above women." Another of those quotes. "Good women are obedient."

"What are you talking about?"

With forefinger and thumb, he wrenched my chin around to face his all-male staff. I dropped my gaze. He smiled. Then he ordered them to scour our home, to cleanse it of the world of the infidel. Nothing unclean would follow us to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Infidel? I'd never heard him utter this word before.

He smacked the side of my head. I reeled. Humiliation stained my cheeks. His men ripped the designer wardrobe from my closet. I suddenly realized that they were the costumes of a disposable prop: me. I fought Izaan as he dragged me to the cellar.

"You've learned so little."

He shoved me next to the old incinerator. Radiating heat singed the hair on my arm and snapped at my skin. They fed my wardrobe into the flames, reducing the clothing he'd taught me to wear to ashes. They incinerated the lifestyle he'd insisted I master in order to project the flawless image of a model American couple: the next president and first lady of the United States of America.

Photographs of our smiling faces at our wedding, political events and holidays were burned, along with books, bibles, magazines and artwork. Only pictures of Izaan—without my presence, or that of any other woman—were kept. Beyond tears, I stood speechless. I'd kept his secret. Helped him build a secular image that America would swallow.

"Do you see how it is now?" he asked. "Do you see what we worked so hard to achieve? Now this country will be led to Allah."

Then I knew.

The Quran.

His quotes were paraphrased from the Quran.

I met his gaze.

He would pay.

Only one bag accompanied me to Washington and the Hay Adams Hotel. Demoralized, I donned Izaan's latest demand—a burqa. The top of the burqa was shaped like a pillbox hat. From there, black fabric fell in a deliberately formless shape to the floor. The only other detail was the mesh veil that hid my face and eyes. Tears slashed mascara across my cheeks.

The burqa gripped me in a bone-crushing depression. It devoured my peripheral vision and my self-respect. The veil distorted my perception. Through it, even the brightly upholstered chairs and ornately carved bed of the hotel appeared worn and worthless.

Reality, terrifying and ugly as a cobra about to strike, snapped into focus. Thoughts flew at me from a thousand broken places. I wanted to scream. If I started, I wouldn't stop. I needed to think.

To act.

A high-pitched ringing grew in my ears, and buzzed through my brain like a menacing swarm of bees. I walked into my bathroom and retrieved the prescription Izaan demanded I take.

I stared at the bottle.

Until now, he controlled me, inside and out. His precious pills were supposed to help with the ringing, my depression and everything else. They didn't. When I took them, I felt submerged beneath the world, slogging upstream against a relentless current. Detached and passive.

I studied the label. What was really in the bottle?

I unscrewed the top and dumped the entire contents into the toilet.

Izaan would be furious.

I was delighted.

Water swirled around the bowl, sucking the venomous capsules into the vortex, siphoning them down the drain, just as I'd been sucked into the dizzying eddy of Izaan's deception.

Secret Service Agent Frank Harrigan knocked on my door. "It's time."

I fought to find a smile, but instead I found hate and clung to it.

I greeted Frank.

The burqa so impaired my vision that I caught my hip on the door handle as I exited my room.

Frank ignored my clumsiness.

I massaged the pain.

He escorted me through the halls to my husband's temporary headquarters at the Hay Adams, across from the White House. It was a suite, of course, for U.S. President-Elect Izaan Bekkar. Heat built up beneath the burqa. My head itched. Perspiration clung to the back of my neck. Anxiety raced in my chest, seemingly appropriate for a warrior going into battle. A bead of sweat trickled over my temple.

Frank ushered me into Izaan's temporary office. Arms crossed over his chest, Frank took up his post in the back of the room. I sat on the couch across from Izaan, who aimed that smile at me, the one that blinded everyone to the truth. Everyone that is, except me.

"You look nice in your burqa."

"Islamofascist bastard."

He shook his head in tight, controlled movements.

"They'll impeach you." I kept my words short. Chatter and questions agitated Izaan, provoked his paranoia.

"Impeach?" His gaze narrowed, hard and dark. He leaned toward me and glared with laserlike intensity. "The first amendment protects religious freedom."

"But it won't protect you from the people when they learn their president is a radical Islamist."

"You've got to let go of this, Sylvia. It will destroy you."

A small victory. He was angry.

"Do you understand me?"

I smiled.

He sucked a deep breath. "How are you?"

Interesting. A change of strategy. Act like you care. Try to keep the wife happy.

"It's important that you work with me, Sylvia."

A bitter laugh rose in my throat. I swallowed it and kept quiet.

"We're so close." He spoke softly, but I could hear the threat that weighted his words. "Do you understand how important this is?"

I kept silent.

After my appointment with Izaan, Frank took me back to my room.

I wrenched the burqa over my head and threw it into the corner. I stood naked before the mirror, my boney ribs angled to a concave stomach. A purplish knot bloomed on my hip like a shriveled rose. I leaned into the mirror. Dirty green eyes stared back at me. My cheeks were free of bruise or blemish. A disfigured face would have defeated Izaan Bekkar's political agenda. The face wasn't to be touched. But that rule was about to end. The veil of a burqa would see to that.

"You must do exactly as I say." Izaan's orders and instructions permeated my mind.

Drip... drip... drip.

Fanaticism indeed had a face. President-Elect Izaan Bekkar. America would be brought to Allah, or die on her knees. Could I face the destruction I'd enabled? Turning from the mirror, I opened my suitcase. How could I have spent years married to this man without even knowing him? The answer was easy. I didn't want to know the truth.

I worked a finger into the edge of the suitcase lining. The seam gave way, revealing the long-bladed knife that I'd sewn into the gap behind the fabric. I peered out through the window into the dusky darkness and the flickering lights of the White House. I laid the blade against my wrist. How easy it would be to run a hot bath, settle into the soothing water, and slice my skin. How long would it take before I fell into an unending sleep? A gentle press and beads of blood popped up along the edge of the knife.

Drip... drip... drip.

The handle, mahogany inlaid with mother of pearl, felt smooth and reassuring in my grasp.

Not a chance.

I tossed it back onto the bed.

The bloodstained blade left a swath of pink on the comforter.

There was another way. Something Izaan would never expect from me.

Courage.

Inauguration day arrived with a flurry of snow and vibrant activity. I needed to move quickly. Not an easy task on icy ground clad in a burqa.

We walked out to the waiting motorcade and were ushered into limousines. Unable to see my feet and the floor of the car, I stumbled.

My knee clipped the door.

Another bruise.

Izaan and I were seated in separate vehicles. Snow coated my burqa and melted into the fabric. Wet material clung to my body like a cold, soggy blanket. Images swirled before me, pulsing forward, retracting. The saturated cotton clung to my face, threatening to suffocate me. I fought the urge to gasp for air. I wanted to rip the fabric off my skin.

The knife.

Focus on the knife.

Under the folds of cloth, I stroked it with my fingertips. It anchored me. Steadied my breathing.

But could I do it?

We circled the Capitol and entered the building through a private hallway behind the podium. Marble pillars towered over us, sleek and smooth. People scurried everywhere. I'd learned that no matter the amount of money spent on coordination, planning and security, the Secret Service could never manage to completely control grand events, such as a presidential inauguration. The sheer number of bodies made that impossible.

If they only knew where the real threat lay.

I suppressed the urge to laugh at the irony.

An agent guarded me. The Secret Service thought they directed all my movements. Izaan thought he controlled me. As first lady, the agents acted as my protectors, my lifeline. But soon they'd have to kill me.

Through the veil of the chadri, I stared out at the crowd that scurried like ants in and around the seats. My gaze landed on a man wearing a dingy down parka.

"Now arriving..." an amplified voice boomed. "Take your seats...."

Down Parka stood next to a denim-clad teenager, who bent over to tie his shoe. A woman hurried past in a faux leopard-print coat and snow boots.

Why were they so poorly dressed?

I shivered.

A cluster of pain mounted behind my eyes. I stood in the wings, waiting for my cue. Savage fluorescent lights hung low over our heads. I squinted against the glare. Pain as sharp as the tip of an ice pick scraped behind my eyes. Nausea clamped down on my stomach. I rubbed my temples through the fabric of my headdress.

Too late to take a pill. The pills are gone, remember?

Music played. It didn't sound right. Pain distorted everything. The bass thrummed in my head like a boom box. Where were the Secret Service agents? Why didn't they stop that racket?

Nonsensical chatter filled my mind as I told myself to follow Izaan.

We walked onto the stage.

A collective gasp whooshed around me as the burqa caused a stir. People dashed around us, taking their positions.

"This way, doctor," someone said.

So much scurrying. So much rush, rush.

I expected to know everyone on the stage, but strangers filled the seats around us. Dignitaries. Izaan's friends. Supporters. My gaze snagged on a police officer trailing a German shepherd. The dog's nose led their progress through the crowd. Gazes darted in my direction. I tucked myself in close to Izaan.

He shot me a hard glance.

A vice of pain pinched my eyes. I closed them to fight the building misery. When I opened them, Chief Justice Deborah Steman stood to my left. The fine fabric of her black robe glimmered in the bright light. A large gold cross dangled at her throat. She looked like a nun.

Izaan nodded. I knew my role. His instructions were explicit. I took the Quran from Izaan's grasp, and handed it to the chief justice.

Another gasp sucked through the crowd.

The chief justice's eyebrows arched over her wide eyes. Her lips parted with a quick intake of breath. I bit the side of my mouth to quell my nervous energy. Trembling knees threatened to buckle.

Why did the chief justice's robes resemble a nun's habit?

Where was Frank? And the other agents? With my limited vision, I couldn't locate them.

I fingered the knife hidden in the folds of my dress. The enemy burqa suddenly became my confidant, hiding my secret. What was the double-talk they loved to spout in political circles? Ah, yes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Izaan glared at Chief Justice Steman, then surveyed the crowd who'd come to celebrate. They'd voted for him but were now puzzled into silence.

The shadow of a new beard dusted his cheeks and chin. The audience's confusion morphed into outrage. Distorted, angry faces stared at us. Shouts echoed around me. I knew what I needed to do.

My gaze followed the justice's questioning glance as it darted over the faces of the other dignitaries. Many looked as stunned as the crowd. Others looked pleased. I focused on the knife, which sobered me.

"Raise your right hand," the chief justice said.

Izaan obeyed.

He'd raised that hand to me countless times. Every time he did so, my body absorbed another punishing blow. Now the country would take his beating. Unless—

He reverently rested his left hand on the Quran, presenting me a perfect target.

"Repeat after me," the chief justice said.

I flashed back to the countless times he'd repeated his message to woo the American people and me. The hypnotic song of the snake charmer.

"I do solemnly swear," the chief justice said.

I moved in a bit closer to Izaan as he repeated the words.

"That I will faithfully execute—"

Pain arched through my skull from the depths behind my eyes to the base of my neck. My legs quivered. Nausea rolled over me.

"—the office of president of the United States—"

The crowd pressed in.

Were they straining to hear Izaan's every word? Were they threatening the ceremony? Did they sense my intent?

I couldn't tell.

“—and will to the best of my ability—”

“—preserve—”

“—protect—”

“—and defend—”

“—the Constitution of the United States of America.”

I withdrew the knife from the folds of the burqa. A slice of midday light glinted off the blade. I thrust it between Izaan's ribs, aiming deep, twisting hard. He arched toward me, mouth gaping. His fingers reached for the knife protruding from his side. Blood oozed into the fabric of his dark suit.

I braced myself for the impact of the Secret Service agents' bullets.

A woman screamed.

The body twisted. Knees buckled.

He crumpled to the floor.

A shoulder plowed into me. My chin cracked against the cold marble floor.

“Don't hurt her,” a man gasped. “She's my patient.”

Air whooshed from my lungs. Searing pain soared through my head. Shrill wails descended upon me. My hands were yanked behind my back and handcuffs snapped over my wrists.

The screaming continued.

“Got a stabbing at Union Station,” I heard a man say. “Need an ambulance.”

A radio squawked. “Man down in the main terminal. Ground level. I repeat. Man down.”

“She's wearing a burlap sack over her head.”

The uniformed officer removed the burqa from my head and shoulders.

I stared at the burlap sack in his hand. Bold print declared, Pioneer Brand, Idaho Potatoes, 100 lbs. “That's not a burqa,” I said as confusion engulfed me.

I glanced around. Trains? Union Station?

A second cop walked over. “The victim was talking to that nun over there. Looks like this woman,” he said, pointing at me, “knocked the nun down, then stabbed the guy.”

“What's your name?” I was asked.

The first cop lifted me to my feet. “Do you know your name?”

I said nothing.

“Sylvia?” I heard a voice call out.

Frank shuffled toward us.

“She lives across the street with me at the homeless shelter.” Frank tugged at his unwashed beard. A tattered herringbone overcoat snugged tight around his rotund middle. “She just got out of the nuthouse.”

“Liar.” I spun toward him. “Why are you saying that?”

Frank continued, “We were in the shelter, watching the inauguration on television. President Bekkar was taking the oath. Then Sylvia ran out.”

“According to the victim's ID, he's Dr. Truman North,” one of the cops said. “Psychiatrist.”

My mind reeled. No, no, no—not Dr. North. President Bekkar. Couldn't they see?

“He’s her doctor,” Frank said. “I told him she stopped taking her medicine.”

“North refuses to go to the hospital,” the other policeman said, “without talking to his patient first.”

I squinted at the officer. “Dr. North’s here?”

He nodded and walked me over to a gurney. I stared down into North’s blue eyes and said, “I’m a hero. I killed the Islamo-fascist president.”

“No, Sylvia.” North paused to catch his breath. “You didn’t kill the president.” Racking coughs overcame him. “You stabbed me.”

“No, I—”

“We’ve got to go,” a paramedic said.

“You stabbed *me*,” North said again. His eyes rolled back in his head as his jaw went slack.

“No.” I shook my head. “I would never do that. I—”

Paramedics rushed North’s gurney toward the ambulance. Blood seeped through the blanket that covered him.

My God, what did I do?

Drip... drip... drip.

It’s almost four years later now. Dr. North made me see that I didn’t kill any president. Instead, delusional, I stabbed North. I understand what happened—my break with reality—and I’m all better.

Gray clouds coat the sky with a steady drizzle, and I listen to the relentless drip... drip... drip of rain off the nearby eaves.

Funny how some things never change.

I stand at the rope line waiting for President Izaan Bekkar to swing through his campaign stop in Fairfield, Virginia. Television vans line the street awaiting his arrival. A petite blond in a short skirt and matching jacket advances to the rope line and thrusts her microphone in front of the man next to me.

“After a controversial presidency, President Izaan Bekkar is determined to run for a second term. Sir, how did you feel four years ago when President Bekkar revealed he was a Muslim?”

“Being a Muslim didn’t bother me,” the man says. “Man has a right to his own religion, so long as it doesn’t get forced on anybody.”

“President Bekkar has said that if he wins, he’ll be sworn in on the Quran. Does that bother you?”

“No. Why should it? He’s been a damn good president.”

I step away, fearing the reporter will approach me. Fools. Every one of them is too stupid to be afraid. They don’t understand agendas. I understand. I see the truth.

I also know habit.

I’ve watched footage from all of Bekkar’s campaign stops. He always starts on the left, shaking hands with his supporters as he moves right. I chose this spot well. He’ll come directly to me. He’ll like my burqa.

I wore it for him.

Beneath it, I grip the knife.
