

Order of the Twin Moons
(Excerpt)

*Tomorrow, when resurrection comes,
The heart that is not in love will fail the test.*

—Jalal al-Din Rumi

In the quiet cool of the back room the air smelled of cumin, of cardamom-laced coffee from the café next door. Surrounded by piles of green melons and mounds of purple figs, I touched my cousin's cheek.

At my feet, wooden crates overflowed with the mountains of mint needed to keep up an endless flow of sweet mint tea, *shay bi-na`na`*, Egypt's national beverage. I'd never tasted tea before Nikki and I came here. Mormons aren't allowed—tea is psychoactive. An altered psyche makes it difficult to hear the Holy Ghost.

The flowers and the mint didn't quite mask the metallic tang of the blood blooming across Nikki's chest, through the white damask tablecloth. We'd only covered her up to her chin. Nikki always hated anything over her face.

I'd lowered her eyelids with my fingers, once we'd laid her on the couch. With closed eyes, the dark rim of kohl she'd started using in Cairo—brushed inside her lower lids, like Egyptian women—was less visible. And she looked less surprised.

I took Nikki's hand, and her wedding band clicked against mine—Nikki whose real name is Nikelle. I am Desirae, which Nikki shortened to Rae. It makes me sound a lot cooler than I am. Mormons make up weird names. And we marry young.

In Cairo, Nikki and I were escaping from our young marriages.

The back door opened. Mustafa was back, bringing with him a gust of cool, stale air, a note of gasoline from the parking garage across the alley. His arms were filled with flowers—lilies, bergamot, and the roses and jasmine that were everywhere because of the *mawlid*, the Prophet's birthday.

He frowned at the flowers through his curly beard. "We need more." As far as Mustafa was concerned, there weren't enough flowers in all of Egypt for Nikki. "And the jasmine is not fresh. I will get fresher blossoms."

Everything was scarce, supplies of tea and sugar, even bread, iffy in the savage blooming of the Arab Spring. But if there were more flowers—better flowers—anywhere in Cairo, Mustafa would find them.

Light spilled in through the window, making precise stripes across the floor; it was midafternoon, two, maybe three. It was only February but hot, and Mustafa's forehead was beaded with sweat, his shirt darkened by wet patches. I could see him wanting to touch Nikki, though he didn't. He wouldn't.

“The Old American Cemetery,” Mustafa said. “In past times of trouble, foreigners have rested there until their families could send for them. There is always a caretaker, we can go straight away.”

“No.” We’d been arguing since just after Nikki was killed.

The violence was supposed to be controlled by the army, hemmed in by tanks, limited to Tahrir Square, where the protesters had their tents and their flags, but there was no law anymore. Anyone could have pulled the trigger: a *Salafi* who thought celebrating the Prophet’s birthday with flowers and dancing displeased God, or we’d heard of roving *jihadis* from Al Qaeda, mingling with the protesters, rebels with a deadly cause. Maybe Nikki was the target of someone angry at the sight of a Western woman in public, even a Mormon who showed no bare skin.

“Cremation is forbidden in Islam, *mamnua` khalis*. There are no facilities for this in Egypt—even the Hindus send their dead back to India.”

“We can do it ourselves.”

“*Mish ma`oul.*” Mustafa shook his head. “Impossible.”

From the front room I heard his brother Kamal’s voice, smooth and mellifluous, explaining to a woman who wanted oranges that the store was closed. The eldest, inheritor of the fruit and vegetable stand, Kamal was willowy, with velvet eyes and an elegant nose, soft mouth sensuous above the deep cleft in his chin. In his Italian sunglasses, Kamal was a sometime-Sufi, preferring—he told us often—ecstasy to discipline. He was his own spiritual master, mixing the honeyed tobacco he put in his hookah with hashish.

Mustafa was shorter, stockier, serious. While he finished a degree in Islamic law he drove a taxi. Plenty of time to study between fares, he said, not like a busy store that requires constant attention.

My head buzzed with a tinny, tight alertness. If we buried Nikki, Jake—holder of the Priesthood of Melchizedek, successful real-estate lawyer, fast-track climber of the LDS hierarchy, and Nikki’s husband—could have her dug up, shipped home. Expensive, but the Mormon Church has plenty of cash.

There’d be a wake, with Nikki’s mother’s potato casserole—the ubiquitous LDS funeral food. Then a service, presided over by Nikki’s father, an Elder. And then Jake would bury her in temple clothes. And a veil.

Just before they close a woman’s coffin they pull the veil over her face. We’d seen them do it to our aunt Hagar. Nikki said to me then that the veil would be like suffocating, even if you were already dead.

“We can find somewhere! No one will notice; the city’s completely crazy now.”

“*You’re* the crazy one,” Mustafa said in Arabic. He turned to leave again, his broad back a solid “no.” Mustafa believed things should be done according to the *sunna*.

I imagined him ably negotiating streets thronged with holidaymakers and protesters, backseat piled with blooms, perfect lilies and better jasmine spilling from the open windows. When he came back with the next load of flowers, I’d convince him.

I had to. For Nikki.

~

My cousin, a newly renegade Mormon, died dancing at the Prophet Muhammad's birthday party. Wherever she was, Nikki must be loving *that*.

We'd been waiting for the Prophet's *mawlid* for weeks, the biggest public celebration of the entire year, the best. After the prayers and sermons in front of the Azhar mosque, we'd strolled through the twisting streets toward the City of the Dead, where the Sufi brotherhoods held their celebrations. "More fun," Kamal had assured us, with his brilliant smile.

Streets ablaze with candles and lanterns, garlands of white flowers festooning storefronts, the air shimmered with promise. The authorities who policed public festivities were distracted, watching over the protesters in Tahrir Square. Sheikhs gathered their devotees beneath tents, God's name in green and white lights—the Prophet's colors—strung above the entrance. Women distributed tea, water, and blessings, while roving vendors sold red turbushes and crispy "seeds of the Prophet." Members of a Sufi order, roses tucked into their turbans, offered *fiul wa ta`amiyya*—beans and falafel, staples of the Egyptian diet—spooned onto rounds of warm bread dusty with flour.

Mustafa bought us *mawlid* dolls made of sugar: a knight on horseback, spear in hand, for me; for Nikki, a bride in a colorful paper skirt and glittering gold crown.

Crowds milled in all directions, eddying around lone figures dancing with writhing serpents, women as well as men, eyes closed in ecstatic trance. We passed a group of men moving to the beat of drums and hymns, their gyrations governed by rhythmic repetitions of

“Allah.” Women danced too, young and old, emboldened by the chaos of revolution, veils slipping back to reveal their hair.

On a corner near an incense vendor, an old man with a young face whirled in hypnotic circles, radiant in white robe and green turban. He touched his head, then his heart, then opened his arms wide to embrace the world. He smiled as we passed, dipping and bowing, making a place for us at the center of the pulsating crowd.

We formed our own circle of four. Kamal closed his eyes and swayed, graceful arms above his head tracing serpentine patterns in the warm night air. Mustafa danced with the same seriousness he dedicated to his law books. Nikki and I twirled in unison, sugar dolls getting sticky in our hands, music moving through us like water.

Suddenly Nikki crumpled to the ground.

“She’s fainted!” Mustafa knelt beside her, the crowd parting, murmuring. But I saw the blood, pooling on the sidewalk. The fast, shallow pops I’d heard were shots, not firecrackers. I pointed, my hand shaking, unable to wail with the women beside us. Kamal ran for the taxi. Mustafa and three other men lifted Nikki, carrying her to meet Kamal behind Sayyida Nafisa’s shrine. I followed, my lips moving. I was praying, but the words were Arabic. I prayed to Sayyida Nafisa, blessing her—if she’d lain her veil across the Nile to make it rise in time of drought, she could save my cousin.

In the taxi, Nikki’s hand was in mine, my thumb searching her wrist for a pulse. I couldn’t find one.

Neither could the orderly who passed rapidly down the line of cars outside the hospital—it had been a violent night in Tahrir Square—checking the vitals of the wounded and directing the vehicles that bore them into one of three snaking queues.

“The death line,” Mustafa muttered, beads of sweat trickling down his temples. He knew because he ran taxi service for the rebels some afternoons. He and Kamal didn’t talk about it, Kamal believed all politicians were corrupt.

A medic pronounced Nikki dead at 3:26 a.m. She never left the taxi.

Gurneys with sheet-draped bodies were three and four deep at the hospital door. When Mustafa said we had to keep her so we could bury her before sundown, the haggard medic just nodded.

We took her back to the shop, we didn’t know what else to do. The city was shut down: no embassies, no consulates, spotty Internet. Mustafa’s old cell phone had bars, but there was no one to call.

“I will drive to the American cemetery,” Mustafa said. “Talk to a guy I know.”

“No.”

While she was alive, Nikki hadn’t wanted to go back to our old life. She wouldn’t want to go back dead either. Under normal circumstances, there’d have been no preventing Jake from taking Nikki home and giving her a Mormon funeral. But chaos had become my sudden and unexpected ally. I used it exactly as my cousin would have wanted me to: “Mormons believe in

reincarnation. First the soul must be liberated by cremation. It's the Mormon *sunna*." I pronounced the words with such conviction I almost convinced myself.

Mustafa looked down at Nikki. "I have not heard of this rule."

"For the good of her soul."

After a moment Mustafa nodded, tight little bobs of his head. "Each according to his law." He wiped sweat from his cheek, leaving behind a faint smear of what might have been Nikki's blood. "It is difficult, but I will find a way." The door clicked shut behind him.

"I will leave you alone with her for awhile." With a slight bow, Kamal disappeared into the front room.

I grinned giddily behind my hand. I'd saved Nikki from a Mormon funeral and, more importantly, a Mormon celestial marriage.

Celestial marriage is forever, and forever is a very long time.

~

Or I thought I'd saved her. I hadn't banked on there still being Internet at the Nile Hilton, or on Mustafa using it. By dawn, I was busted. And Mustafa was angry.

Nikki's face was cool to the touch now. She didn't look like a Mormon, hadn't for a while. I'd kept my A-line skirts and blouses with Peter Pan collars; I outed her as soon as I walked into a room, but Nikki'd loved me anyway.

I fingered the fleck of gold fringe peeping from beneath the tablecloth, the beaded scarf Nikki had tied around her hips. From her belly-dancing costume—she'd been taking classes. Learning to walk like an Egyptian, she'd said, because we were living in Cairo now. For good.

Living here *was* good, for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was not having to have sex with my husband.

~

Nikki married Jake and I married Paul when we were twenty and they were twenty-one, just back from their missions. Nikki and I were juniors in college—*not* BYU, that was one battle we'd won: we were allowed to go to the University of Chicago as long as we went together.

Nikki married Jake for sex. I married Paul because he asked me, and because I wanted to avoid the indignities of an LDS singles congregation without Nikki there to make fun of it. Paul and I were just okay, but Nikki and Jake were *good*. Perfect, even: Nikki had always danced along the knife-edge of propriety, and Jake was pure, bad-boy Jack Mormon, he was even in a band.

But with marriage, Jake had changed.

The double wedding done, the honeymoon over, Jake went into his father's business; they must have gotten to him there. He stopped designing comic books and started going by "Jacob." He quit the band and started wearing his Mormon uniform—white shirts pressed stiff, polyester pants—even on Saturdays. The sandy haired, fresh-scrubbed look he'd hidden with spiky haircuts and eyeliner came back. He started talking about babies.

That's when Nikki said we should apply to graduate programs in Arabic—medieval poetry. What could be more gloriously useless than that? Nikki liked gloriously useless. We'd study abroad, Cairo would be fun; Mormons aren't allowed to proselytize in Egypt, she said, another reason to like it.

We were practicing what Nikki called “embedded resistance”; she'd read about it in a sociology class. Embedded resistance can take many forms, as long as you're subverting a hegemonic system from inside. For us this meant mastering the Arabic language—Mormons are good at languages—purely for its own sake instead of in order to convert people.

Nikki had everything worked out. We'd get doctorates and teach at university, ideally the same one. We'd go to conferences and publish papers in obscure journals. We'd have too many students, be overworked and underpaid.

Being underpaid was part of the resistance. 88 of the 112 revelations received by Joseph Smith deal with fiscal matters. The Church has no problem with women doing business as long as they tithe. With our low salaries and insignificant tithes, we'd be throwing a wrench—a small one, but still—into the spokes of the LDS economic juggernaut.

“Way better,” said Nikki, “than lying back, legs spread, thinking of Salt Lake City.”

Nikki was always saying things I wasn't even brave enough to think.