

Ghusl Before Maghrib

by

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The water came in spurts. Cold first, then warmer as the old geyser coughed awake. There were still a few hours before gas would disappear, making it impossible to light a flame in the small coven of the metal body. She cupped her hands, letting steam gather before pressing her palms together to rub them clean right up to the boundary of her petite, child-like wrists. She looked up at the faded showerhead, closing her eyes as she opened her mouth instead, allowing for the trickles of water to sweep inside and touch her tongue.

Salty. Bore water in Karachi was always salty, but she somehow always managed to forget it. The only thing that mattered to her was that it was clean.

She began with her hands, washing them three times, careful to reach the spaces between each finger, the cracks of each knuckle, in the depths of her fingernails which were trimmed short and filed neatly. This time, already prepared for the salt on her tongue, she rinsed her mouth thrice, letting the water sit over her taste buds a moment longer than needed. Carefully, she pulled in water through her nose, snorting it out gently, the way her grandmother had taught her when she was just five and learning to offer the *namaṣ* out of mere curiosity than necessity.

Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.

Maghrib was already upon her. The voice of the *muezzin* broke through her thoughts just as she poured water over her head. Her hair clung to her scalp in thick, wet sheets, drops running down the nape of her neck as they disappeared into the curve of her spine. She tilted her head forward, allowing the water to trail between her shoulder blades, then leaned back again, rinsing every inch of scalp and strand. She counted every movement, three on either side – right and left.

It wasn't the first time she was performing *ghusl*. She knew exactly how long it took.

Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.

The *azan* carried on and without wasting any time, she washed her arms from shoulder to wrist. Her breasts, her belly, her thighs, her knees, the soles of her feet followed by the cracks between her toes and every single toe nail. She gently poured water behind her ears and inside them. No part of her small frame was exempted from this act of piety and cleanliness. She moved with no urgency and no haste, clearly at ease with her routine, her focus solely upon purifying her body with the utmost thoroughness.

Ashhadu an la ilaha illallah.

The *aḥan* echoed louder now, reverberating through the neighborhood's rooftops, bouncing off the cheap concrete walls of her narrow home, reminding her that perhaps she should rush now. She did not want to be late. Ideally, she should have already been dressed by now and she would have been if her geyser had not failed her and she didn't have to spend one whole hour fixing it. She closed her eyes, turning off the aging shower head and filled the powder blue mug in the bucket full of clean, fresh water to pour over her hair, making sure the salt of the bore did not cling onto her already brittle, black locks.

This was the only small luxury she could afford in the name of hair care.

Despite the splash of cold, steam continued to swirl lazily around her, keeping her warm for just a minute longer. The orange bulb above her head flickered, signaling that it was best if she rushed.

Ashbadu an la ilaha illallah.

The *muezḥin* seemed to think the same. Sighing softly, she stepped out of the washroom and onto an old towel laid on the floor, patting herself dry in sequence. Hair wrapped in a smaller, silkier cloth, body swaddled in the threadbare cotton of the larger one. She sat for a moment on the edge of her single bed which creaked mercilessly, letting her skin cool before the second ritual began.

Dressing was no less deliberate and she took her sweet time with everything. She opened the steel cabinet beside her bedding and pulled out her folded *kameez*. It was black, synthetic, decorated only by a faded hem of scalloped lace. She stepped into it like stepping into water again, soft and delicate. The *kameez* was slightly crumpled, but she did not care much for it. She knew it would not be visible to anyone underneath her *burqa*. *Shalwar* followed, then cotton socks and her trusted black gloves which protected her hands from the barest of light or dust or filthy air. She disliked exposed skin, not meant for all eyes and always made sure to cover herself completely, nothing on her body visible except her eyes.

Ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasool Allah.

Sitting down on her bed again, she began to oil her arms, her wrists, her neck, and everywhere else her mother had once taught her. Her trusted bottle of rose *attar* was almost empty, reminding her that she would need to buy it in a day or two. This was essential. A staple in her household. She dabbed behind her ears with the last of it, rubbed the remnants across her throat, and paused, saving some for the next day lest she forgot to buy a new one. Keeping the rose *attar* away, she picked up her expensive bottle of jasmine perfume, and sprayed just once directly onto the chest of her *kameez*.

Ashadu anna Muhammadan Rasool Allah.

Glancing at the clock, she no longer wasted time in tiny luxuries and swiftly fastened her under scarf, tying her long, wet hair into a loose braid which she pulled into it effortlessly. Stepping into her simple black *burqa*, she pulled the *nikaab* over her head and tied it effortlessly, concealing her white skin from the onslaught of any eyes. The *nikaab* was newer than everything else. A gift of sorts, just like her expensive jasmine perfume. The soft piece of cloth still held its shape, black, with barely there sequins that caught the light in patterns which no one else seemed to notice. She tied it tight enough to hold but loose enough not to leave marks. She wouldn't want to bruise the skin of her face.

Hayya 'ala-s-Salah.

In the mirrorless room, she adjusted it by feel alone.

After applying the barest of *kajal* to her lower lids, she finally stood up, turning to glance at her bed. The urge to take off her burqa and get back under the covers gripped her but she quickly shook her head, remembering that it was nothing but *shaitan* who was trying to sway her away from something that needed to be done. *Shaitan* who had promised God to sway the righteous from their path. She was not going to succumb to it. Not today. Not tomorrow.

Hayya 'ala-s-Salah.

Shaking her head, she finally opened the door and stepped into the dying evening, the sound of the *azan* getting louder without the barrier of the metal door of her single room apartment on the ground floor of the derelict apartment complex.

The street hummed around her. Crickets hidden in walls and the buzz of a motorcycle surrounded her with an occasional honk somewhere in the distance. A fan ran somewhere nearby, noisy and ineffective and a boring machine drilled the ground in the apartments next to her, fetching for underground water which too was beginning to disappear from Karachi. Her sandals slapped softly against the warm pavement, ruining her old but clean socks because of the dirt. Despite that, she continued to walk with purpose. Her steps were neither too fast, nor too slow, her gait quiet but firm. The air smelled of cooking oil, tired flowers wilting on balconies, and smoke from a trash pile burning at the end of the lane. She was used to all of it, the sights no different from anything they were every other day.

Children played cricket in an alleyway, their rubber ball cracking against a neighbor's gate, their energetic shouting giving away the innocence of their youth. She knew she had played cricket as a child right outside her house, but that time seemed from a different life altogether. She remembered it but could no longer

relate to it. A boy looked up and froze for a second as she passed, but returned to his game within a few seconds. She didn't pay any heed to him either. A man leaned against his car, cigarette forgotten between his fingers, as he watched her through narrowed eyes.

She didn't look at him. She didn't look at anyone really.

She was used to the stares.

Hayya 'ala-l-Falah.

Her footsteps quickened as the second call to prayer drifted through the loud speaker, reminding her that she needed to hurry. She was extremely late already, the sun beginning to set above her head. It would be dark soon. Somewhere, a radio played a romantic song, but cut off abruptly by a disapproving elder's voice who lectured about the importance of the *azan*. The *masjid* was just up ahead, and her steps slowed down automatically. The men were beginning to enter now, trickling in one after the other, some wiping their faces with white handkerchiefs, others checking their phones before slipping them into breast pockets. A teenage boy moved to the side as she approached the gate, giving her space to enter.

But she didn't.

The expensive jasmine clung to her skin. Soft and bitter.

She walked past them all. The men in starched, cotton *shalwar kameez* with *topis* on their heads, and the ones returning from work in their tucked in shirts and pants and the teenage boys in pajamas, most of them clearly forced by their mothers to attend the prayers in the mosque. A lot of them glanced at her and a lot of them didn't, but she quickly sped by with a lowered gaze. Her father had once taught her that a virtuous woman always kept her gaze lowered because that is what our religion taught us.

Hayya 'ala-l-Falah.

The call to prayer was much louder now, with the *muezzin* just inside the mosque on her left, and she repeated the words in her heart, exactly as she had been doing all along. She had heard someone say that an act as small and simple as this also brought a person *sawab*. And she needed the God's favor. The sidewalk narrowed, cracked in places where tree roots had pushed the stone up from beneath. She stepped over them easily, head bowed but gaze straight, still not staring directly at anyone.

She passed a *dhaba* where men drank chai and discussed politics in urgent tones. One of them fell silent as she neared while another murmured a soft *MashAllah* under his breath and refused to look away. She did not turn towards them to give them a stern look. It was pointless. They would only smile harder and continue looking. She walked further instead, past shuttered stalls and past a house with fairy lights still up from a wedding three weeks ago. She had been there when the smell of barbeque dictated the air on the night of the *mehndi* and even when the decorated corolla had left to bring the new bride to their house.

Allahu Akbar.

The *muezzin's* voice, this time from a different mosque, cracked again before rising, stronger than before. She had walked much further from her own neighborhood now, her steps quick and destination decided. She would be there soon.

Her breath was steady, her heart quieter than she could have expected. Than it was in the beginning. But lately, she had noticed that the sound of her beating heart had faded somewhere inside her, no longer accelerating in her chest. She was used to the rhythm and the pattern and all of her rituals and hearts never accelerated for routine. Something about that realization made her breathe in sharply, but she was no longer naïve enough to deny it. She had adopted it all like second skin. Like the

burqa covering her body and the *niquaab* on her face and the faint scent of rose lingering around her as she breathed in deeply.

Allahu Akbar.

The azan was ending now, the sun already dulled into pink hues around her. Past the alleyways of the large houses, she finally turned a corner and saw them.

Three women. All clad in black *burqas* with similar *niquaabs* on their faces, standing silently. One stood near the median while another leaned against a streetlight. The third sat on a low concrete divider, fingers tapping against her knee as she looked lazily at the street before them.

None of them looked up as she approached.

She took her place beside them. Not too close but not too far either.

They did not speak. It was unnecessary.

A car passed. Slowed. Then drove on.

Another came. An old Alto, its paint dulled by years of Karachi sun. The man inside rolled down his window, looked at them all, then drove on without a word.

Her eyes followed no one, but continued to stare staunchly ahead.

She heard someone cough. One of the other women pulled her scarf tighter across her chest.

La ilaha illa Allah.

The final lines of the *azan* drifted softly in the background and she repeated them, gathering all the *sawab* that she could.

A small silver car approached. Not too new. Not too old. It slowed down momentarily, but quickly sped up again as if the driver had changed their mind last minute.

Another came, tires crunching gravel. It was new, white and big, and a brand she did not recognize. The windows were tinted.

The car slowed down before stopping right before her.

The passenger window rolled down.

A man leaned across, his voice was low but clear.

“*Jana hai?*”

She took one last breath of the jasmine air clinging to her skin, soft and bitter, leaving a sharp taste in her mouth.

She hoped she had earned enough *sawab* today to compensate. She hoped if God would still be able to see her through the tinted windows.

And finally stepped forward.

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