

paan tin

artwork | sumaya azhar

February 11, 1979. Somerset, KY.

Shan watched TV from the dining table while his wife cooked dinner in the kitchen. Behind Shan hung a picture of Ayatollah Khomeini looking upset. On the TV, a reporter standing in the streets of Tehran described the city's jubilant mood. The Islamic Revolution had just successfully deposed the Shah of Iran.

“Allahu akbar,” shouted Shan.
“Dinner is almost ready!” called Shan’s wife from the kitchen.
Suleiman, Shan’s six-year-old son, grabbed his father’s paan tin from the TV stand and handed it to him; Shan opened it, extracted a blood pressure pill, and handed it back to Suleiman while his eyes and ears remained in Tehran.
Decades later, Suleiman would tell his daughter, Shabiba, “That was the moment I understood how important the global Islamic movement was to my father.”
On the dining table, Shan’s wife placed a bowl of tomato chutney. When she turned to go back to the kitchen, Shan spoke. “Iran is an Islamic state now. They will be successful, insha’Allah.”

She looked at Shan. She looked at the TV, then looked back at the table. “Bismillah,” she said.

Suleiman wondered if she was referring to the news or to dinner.

June 17, 2016. Louisville, KY.

Suleiman sat in his home office wondering what he should do next. He called his father.
“I learned today Mufti Taqi Usmani from Pakistan issued a fatwa against my shaykh. There are allegations of sexual misconduct and embezzlement,” Suleiman said.
“I told you years ago that Sufis are corrupt,” Shan said.
Suleiman did not want to argue the nuances of good Sufis and bad Sufis with his father. “I’m confused right now. I rent my house from him. Shabiba goes to his Islamic school,” Suleiman said. “She’ll miss all her friends.”

“She can’t go back to that perverted school. Enroll her in public school for next year. Break your lease and move in with us,” Shan said.
Suleiman ran his fingers across the lid of his father’s old paan tin sitting on his desk. A new phase of Suleiman’s life was about to begin.

“Bismillah,” he said.

September 5, 2017. Louisville, KY.

Shabiba and Suleiman sat inside a blue Honda Pilot parked across the street from DuPont Manual High School. It was the first day of the school year.

"You'll be fine, insha'Allah," Suleiman said.

"I know, Baba," Shabiba said. "We didn't need to come this early."

"This school might not be run by Muslims, but it's still a good school. If you have any problems, call me," Suleiman said. He handed her the paan tin.

"Keep this," he said. "It's—"

"I know what this is," she said. "Thank you!" She leaned over from the passenger seat to hug him. "I'll put my headphones in it."

"There's something else," Suleiman said. "Dada always tells you to serve the Ummah. He wants you to be a journalist. But you study whatever you want."

Shabiba looked at the gold ring Shan gifted her. "I feel like I have to listen to him," she said.

"You don't," Suleiman said. "It's 7:48. Go to class. Say Bismillah."

April 30, 2024. Lexington, KY.

Shabiba walked to the University of Kentucky's campus to join a protest against the Israeli bombing of Gazans. She heard the crowd chanting through her left ear and through her right ear, she listened to Malcolm X's "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech. "It's time for Negroes to defend themselves," he was saying. She had started studying his speeches ever since reading his article, "Zionist Logic."

Students waved Palestinian flags. They held up signs painted red, green, white, and black. Floating with the crowd, she joined their chants.

Once the chanting got so loud she could no longer hear "The Ballot and the Bullet," she stepped away to put her AirPods in the paan tin then the paan tin inside her backpack. A middle-aged man stepped out of the crowd and towards her. He had a pistol and pointed it at her head.

"Protest this," he said.

She rushed towards him until the barrel touched her forehead.

"Bismillah," she said.