Most Sundays in my household were met by a fatigued reluctance to rise. Often
the protest being, “We wake up early five days a week, why can’t we sleep in on
the weekend?” My mother would scoff and ignore our rhetorical questions. We
knew the drill: breakfast, followed by a frenzy of bodies bumping into each other
in the narrow corridors of our home. Jostling to and from, finding socks that too
often have been left in places they don’t belong. This familiar disorder felt like
home to me. We were all trying to beat the eight o’clock deadline when the
madrasah’s doors would close. Most days, my mother would drive my younger
brothers, sisters and me to madrasah. Some days my eldest brother Zacharia
would wearily make his way in from his night shift at the women’s shelter and be
met at the door by my mother. Worn herself from ironing khamises and setting
out an array of scrambled eggs, toasts, tea and cereal for our selective
preferences, she would say: “Your car is still heated, take the kids before they close the doors, will you?”

Zacharia ushered us out of our home and into his pristine car, reminding us to stay out of the April mud.

There’s an unspoken reality in many communities of color, including my own, a diaspora of above 80,000 Somalis living in a not-so-tropical Minnesota — a haven they began to accept as a temporary home. Many still dream of the day their beloved nation will rise from the ashes of conflict and poverty. Returning was also what my mother and father dreamt of before they met each other in the heart of downtown Minneapolis and fell in love. Before that, my father graduated from Somali National University with a degree in French and Italian linguistics. In 1992, he was one of few early Somalis who settled for a laborious job, in a turkey-packing factory in Marshall, Minnesota. My parents were wed in the autumn of 1994 and gave birth to their first son Zacharia the following year when the leaves began to wilt and alter in hue. It was then the daunting realization that having children meant the initial interim residency in a foreign country would last longer than planned. This new land was brimming with the opportunities boasted about abroad. Soon enough, the discomfort settled in with the knowledge that this same land didn’t accept my father’s credentials as legitimate or my family’s culture or mother tongue as acceptable. My parents were preparing to bring seven babies into a vastly different world. We would inevitably grow up with a different language and custom than that of their own. And they were too occupied making sure our bellies were satiated to keep up with any of it.

When you grow up in a household of nine it becomes easy to drown out voices. I was jerked out of my stream of thought by Zacharia’s voice shouting my name.

“I called you only about ten times. What’re you thinking about, Shakespeare?”
That was his nickname for me ever since that one summer I’d obsessed over the English playwright’s works and we centered many of our conversations around the wisdom his characters had to offer. It’s been a couple of years since, but I was unfortunately stuck with this name.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said, straightening my hijab in the visor mirror, “Just how you’re going to fail that online quiz.”

“Ah, wallahi I almost forgot! I’m going to do it when I get home.”

“The pages with the answers are dog-eared in my book,” I said, “It’s under my bed. You’re welcome.”

He grinned and elbowed my arm. “Good looks, Shakespeare.”

My brother was in his second year of college pursuing a degree in information technology and I had been a junior in high school taking classes at Minneapolis College. We took an interpersonal communications course together that fall semester with the hopes that he would ease me into the vastly different college atmosphere.

Usually after madrasah, we were eager to head home, but occasionally, there would be a guest speaker who I was deeply enthralled by. I’d ask my mom if she could pick us up a little later than usual, much to my sibling’s dismay. We stayed longer that Sunday. The speaker’s voice echoed from the main hall. He was reciting a verse from the Qur’an that was revealed during a tumultuous time for Prophet Muhammad and his companions: “So verily, with hardship there is relief. Verily with hardship there is ease.”

When it was finally time to go home, my mother called, tension knotting her voice. I knew something was terribly wrong, but was too afraid to ask.

“He’s gone,” she finally choked out on the other end of the receiver. “They took him.”
“Who’s gone, Hooyo?” I was met with silence. “Who?!”

She spoke, her voice quivering, “Zacharia, they took him. The police took my son.”

It was my turn to reciprocate the silence. My thoughts were muddled and I found that I couldn’t form a cohesive sentence. The Zacharia that I’d been sitting next to this morning? The one who brought us here? It couldn’t be possible.

“Bring the children outside,” my mother said, breaking my train of thought, “I’m around the corner.”

When we entered the house we were met with a chaos that reeked of violation. Boxes were strewn about, cabinets opened, and items cluttered every inch of the counters and kitchen floor. The couches were flipped over and the cushions littered the floor. In the center of what was supposedly our living room stood a crying aunt and cousin, a rattled father, and a mother who was, with every fiber of her being, recollecting the story of how they took him as she tried not to break into tears.

As the days and weeks progressed, worried neighbors, relatives, and friends swarmed our home with condolences infused with confusion, prayers, and protests, and any support or alleviation of burden they could offer. A gray cloud hovering our house welcomed them in, a non-spring-like drizzle showered them out. At the time we only knew the answers the lawyers gave of the whereabouts of the brother with whom I’d shared a womb, who was now being propagated on mainstream media as an alleged terrorist.

A few numbing months later, I found myself sitting in the living room of a studio painted a bleak white, furnished with a minimalistic design, a gray, modern-classic loveseat, paired with an armchair too large to be balancing on the
wooden pegs that held it up. There was a kitchen island, a large painting with a sun setting over a beach, and a washed out cream colored carpet. It looked like the home of someone who was too afraid of color to incorporate some of it in their dwelling.

There were three documentarians in the room. The first was a Chinese woman who embodied a presence larger than her otherwise petite frame. Her high pitched laughter had a way of easing the tension out of a room. The second was a tall Russian man whose perpetually inquisitive blue eyes noticed everything. He would often bring back gifts for me from the places he went to report stories, chocolates from Kazakhstan, fragrance oils from Malaysia, and a hand stitched scarf made by a woman of the Kayan tribe of Myanmar. The third was a broad shouldered Chinese man who was keen on the slightest details. He had a talent of fitting a huge camera into the tiniest crevices, capturing all the right angles. Since my brother’s arrest, they followed my family and me around asking questions and documenting our life to get a sense of what Zacharia and his family were like.

“Did your brother’s arrest alienate you?” one of the documentarians asked, cocking his head to the side.

I thought: How do you answer a question like that while dressed for the occasion to be on camera, sitting erect, and slightly angled, the air too calm, the room too quiet? Then I answered aloud: “I’m sorry, guys, but for me to give the kind of answer you’re looking for I need to be triggered. I need the emotion to wash over me as though it didn’t happen nearly two years ago.”

Their nods were followed by, “Alright, let’s try this again. Did your brother’s arrest alienate you from friends, family, maybe even colleagues? After your brother’s sentencing, is there a shift in the way you look at the world as you continue to navigate your everyday life?”
The words spewed out of my mouth before I could assess them. “I remember the days the sun shone brighter. The days I spent frolicking on the streets of my childhood home in my favorite blue shirt, chasing down the fading tune of the ice cream truck with my brothers. Or clinging on to the collar of my uncle’s shirt as I anxiously learned to ride a two-wheeled bike. I remember my mother and father sitting on the cracked cement of the steps, cooling in the shade and occasionally hollering at us to stay away from the street. There’s nothing quite like being able to enjoy the innocence of life not knowing its impending misfortunes. It is those same roads I revisit from time to time, hoping I can catch a familiar breeze of air, a whiff of our former neighbor’s West African spice mingling with sounds of children playing in the distance, the large doors of Sumner library. Anything to restore the past as it was, innocent, carefree and untainted by mishap.

Because my brother and I attended a school that was predominantly Muslim, we were let off early on Fridays so we could observe the religious prayer at noon. Many of my brother’s basketball practices were held after prayer. He’d usually wear his shorts and sneakers underneath his ankle-length white thobe. After prayer, he and his friends would rush over to the Van Cleve recreation center and do drills, or start a casual game of twenty-one before practice. After practice they would make the short walk over to Dinkytown to grab a bite, elbowing one another, and jesting about each other’s failed highlights during the game.

It was drizzling out that evening so they decided to carpool to a less crowded McDonald’s. Some of the boys had their thobes slung over their shoulders, some left it in the car, my brother had slipped his back on. They went in, ordered their usual assortment of McChicken sandwiches, double cheeseburgers, sodas and fries and sat down, dipping in each other’s ketchup. Without warning, a man walked up to where they were seated, to-go bag in hand and spat out to my brother’s table: “Go back to your country!” They sat
still, stunned. One of the boys rose and told him off. As the man walked away, shaking his head, Zacharia said “I guess I’ll just walk back into my mother’s womb at HCMC,” referencing the hospital in downtown Minneapolis. They all laughed, still unnerved, peering around at the other diners who were oblivious to the effect of the verbal aggression lingering in the air. But with nothing much else to say, they continued eating, on edge about the next person who would tell them they didn’t belong.”

“Thanks for explaining your brother’s experience. But what about you? Did you become alienated? Were you waiting for the next person who would tell you you didn’t belong?” asked another documentarian.

For a moment I was lost in thought: It’s hard being a hyphenated-American. To constantly be struggling with not embodying either identity enough. To not know what it means to be either one fully. When you grow up speaking more than one language, clear expression is a luxury. Much of language is lost in translation or lack thereof. Belonging is being seamlessly part of an environment. In school, they taught us America was a melting pot; it was a place that mixed together everyone despite their differences in race, religion, and culture. The first few years of my college experience I felt starkly contrasted to everyone else. My first college professor taught us eighth grade level grammar and mechanics. On the first of class, she went around and asked us all where were from. The vast majority of the students were from the states. When my turn came, I told her I was from Minnesota, and she stopped and stared at me for while. She might’ve been either trying to read the lie in my eyes or wedging space in the ‘melting pot’ for one more. She moved on and then came back after everyone had satisfied her first inquiry and asked me again in front of the class, “Ikraan, where are you really from?” To which I answered again, “Minnesota.” Variations of that question she was bold enough to ask have followed me around to different spaces since. Whether it was the receptionist at the doctor’s office asking if I needed an interpreter after having a full conversation with her. Or the awkwardly prolonged
stares I got from white passengers on the city bus when I picked up a call from a friend. Or the one time a pastor at an interfaith gathering told me, “I’m surprised your English is better than most.” The musing, the fingers placed at the chin, wondering how it is possible that someone so colored, so covered, could string words so unaccented.

Even though I was taught that the fundamental American value was acceptance of differences I quickly noticed the categorization. The hierarchies of race, religion, language, and culture. The fervent need to contain the disarray through assimilation. The watering down of intersectional identities to what is tolerable to the dominant group. And if ever you’re too Muslim, too Somali or too black then you’re otherized, your Americaness is questioned and attributed to exoticism. I have often observed the media’s dehumanization of minorities, a tainted narrative of inherent criminality and incivility. The ability to portray people of color as monolithic, that the action of an individual somehow becomes a communal responsibility. When my brother was arrested, the media forcibly brought out my family from the privilege of privacy into the spotlight of scrutiny without consent.

Aloud I said, “I can pinpoint when exactly things started to be different. For me, it was when they took him from us. When my brother was arrested.”

“How has your family responded to all of this?” asked the first documentarian.

“In the fall of 2015, that same year that my brother was imprisoned, sprung an effort to repossess his story alongside the young men that were incarcerated in the same case. My family and I collaborated with other affected family members, friends and community members at large who were moved by who’d been affected by this same tragedy. We organized protests, basketball games, open mics, nights of prayer, working to restore the otherwise skewed version of their narratives and bring consolidation to a torn and distraught community.
“In the winter of the following year, my brother was sentenced to 10 years in a medium security federal prison. He had just turned twenty one that August.” I paused to gather my thoughts.

Ten years is enough time for my ten year old brother to grow a beard, assuming he doesn’t inherit the genes of my mother’s side as Zacharia did. For me to graduate with a BA, then a MA, then possibly a PhD in my field of study, and for my then 14-year-old sister to turn 24, and begin leading a life of her own.

“So, it comes as no surprise, then,” I said, “that many of the mothers, including my own inconsolable mother echoed the same thing to reporters as they came in hordes to the courthouse after sentencing. These mothers would utter what they could muster between gasps and tears, a single message, in many shades of broken tongue: ‘We fled a civil war, came here seeking asylum from havoc, not knowing we were to enter the belly of yet another tragedy. But this one hurts more, because what is closer to home than the heart?’

“The reporters prodded broken people with relentless inquiries on their thoughts of the fate of their sons, their beacons of hope, their fulfillments of “The American Dream” who were violently stripped from their homes and youthful lives and condemned for decades behind wrought-iron bars and stale cement.”

And it was true, I thought. Here, we had a justice system, masquerading as an emblem of equality, unprejudiced towards color, religion, gender, and yet, we’re left to wonder if we’re really serving justice if defendants are coerced into pleading guilty. If they’re persuaded into a plea deal as they won’t win the case if they take their constitutional right to go to trial, how does the system not presume itself unfair? The government prolongs the years an individual needs to serve almost as though to compensate for the energy they exerted to find someone guilty, when the assumption should be the person is innocent until proven guilty.
The meaning of terrorism has become conflated with being Muslim. We’re portrayed that way in movies, on the 9 o’clock news, on FaceBook, and that’s apparently socially acceptable as freedom of expression. Then it’s no wonder why my brother, good-natured ol’ Zach, helpful, compassionate Zach, basketball playing, Denny’s lounging Zach, who hadn’t even a minor misdemeanor on his record must be surveilled extensively, incarcerated, humiliated and branded with the title of ‘terrorist.’

The documentarian asked, “What struck you the most about the court proceedings?”

“A new dilemma emerged,” I said, “when the US attorney approached my brother’s defense team with a deal. If he went to trial, and was found guilty he would suffer a harsher and longer sentence, a sentence that carried 60 years to life. But if he plead guilty, they offered a deal of only up to 15 years.”

Silently, I thought to myself: To decide whether coercing defendants is morally correct or not is another story altogether. In the end, my brother decided with the odds stacked against him, his race, his religion, the ways in which he was portrayed on the media, that he would take the guilty plea out. In the courtroom, both during his proceedings and as he testified, I couldn’t help but notice the judge’s strong inclination to side with the prosecution. It was as if he ultimately wanted to walk out of court with another terrorism conviction under his belt. To be known forever as a just ruler who saved America from would-be terrorists. And of course, he solidified this label in court. I often revisit the end of the transcript:

THE COURT: All right. Now, do you understand what you’ve done here today?

THE DEFENDANT: Yes, Your Honor.

THE COURT: And can you tell me what you’ve done here today.
THE DEFENDANT: I admitted my guilt to a conspiracy to provide material support to a terrorist organization.

THE COURT: And what terrorist organization was that?

THE DEFENDANT: ISIS.

THE COURT: And are you, in fact, guilty of that?

THE DEFENDANT: Yes, Your Honor.

THE COURT: All right. I'll take -- you may submit the Plea Agreement and Sentencing Stipulations to the Court.

One of the documentarians murmured something to their colleague and then turned back to me: “How's he doing now?”

I took a deep breath: “You know, just last week I was in the visitation room of the prison waiting for him to be brought in. I’ve seen the painting of the bald eagle on the cinder block walls of that room many times, but it never occured to me how hypocritical it was to have a symbol of freedom emblazoned on an enclosure that was otherwise. My brother recounted the experience of how it felt to be outdoors after months of wistfully peering out the chapel windows between reading breaks. His carefully detailed recollection is both painful and inducing of gratitude for overlooked blessings. He spoke fondly of the deer he witnessed during his walk, the chirping of the few remaining flocks of birds, the vastness of the sky and how gracefully it held up despite being pillarless. How peaceful it all felt amidst the chaos of the world.

“When I look at my brother in his worn, colorless uniform I grieve for the endless other people and endless other stories that have been drained of color, bleached with a singular narrative of criminality, damned to ashen trays and forced labor. I wonder how many other gray clouds loom over how many other households, waiting for justice to come knocking.”
The lights dimmed. “Cut,” the documentarian said.

Through the picture windows, I watched as the snow fell in a vertical blur, the city skyline opaque from December’s somber fog. Aside from the light tapping of flakes on the window panes, the night was still, illuminated only by the streetlights and the humming of the day as it wound down. Inside, the room returned to its bleak gray and three pairs of eyes looked on as I tried to compose myself, mounting on the face of spirited civility, the face of every other Minnesotan on the street as they hastily made their way home, bundled in colorful hats and scarves, fully immersed in living, as though nothing was ever amiss.

Just like the old times. Just like the old times.

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