

Stolen Seconds

Sweat trails down my face like tears. My hands tremble uncontrollably beneath the flowing robes of my burqa. My mind is in disarray. I am terrified yet relieved, furious yet resigned. Everything is wrong, but somehow the perpetual pressure on my chest feels reassuring.

I peer through the small mesh rectangle that hides my fearful eyes. Around me the ancient square is rich with life - street vendors selling brightly colored woven fabrics, tourists sipping arabic coffee under green awnings in the multitude of cafés that line the walkways, women carrying shopping baskets laden with fresh vegetables and fruit from the market, seagulls circling above our heads-all ignorant of my gruesome errand. Scorching Israelian sun beats down on me, but that isn't why I am sweating. A delicate network of wires is strapped tightly under my burqa, save a single nylon cord that hangs down, ever so patiently awaiting my grasp. It constantly ticks against my chest, as if to remind that it is still there.

The past weeks are a blur. I remember the screams and the fear that permeated the days after our abduction from our small village's school in Nigeria. I remember the beatings and the pain that Boko Haram delivered to us. I remember the loneliness and the helplessness I felt when I was separated and I was brought north to this country of non-believers. Now we must be presumed dead by the world.

Finally all of the suffering will come to an end. My captors forced me into this dreadful task, and although I despise them with all my heart, a piece of me is thankful. No longer will I have to endure the brutal beatings, or hear the fruitless, anguished screams of my schoolmates. All it takes is a single tug.

I scan the crowd around me. None of these people deserve to die, despite the countries they come from or the lives they lead. I push through the masses, who appear to be moving in slow motion. I listen to their footsteps, which seem to slacken, almost as if they are savoring each one, knowing it may be their last. Glancing up at the square's clock, I notice the lengthening periods of time between the second hand's movements, and as it slows, so too does the ticking against my chest. Colors around me have become more vivid, and I am mesmerized by the tiny stitches on the clothing of passersby. Each so fine in detail, more pronounced than ever before. Rosemary and cardamom tingle my nostrils, drifting from a shop far across the square. My mind must be playing tricks on me, for I can hear the feeble screams of an infant that are coming from an alley dozens of yards away. Never have I been so close to death, yet so alive.

Head spinning, I reach under my burqa, groping the device capable of ending dozens of lives. My finger catches on something-I hold my breath, waiting for blinding lights and scalding pain. Nothing happens. I wrap my pinkie around the loose loop of material that I mistook for the cord.

Knowing my captors are watching me, I grapple beneath my burqa with the buckles that contain me, trying to appear calm and committed to my task. When the clasp finally bursts open, I have to clench my teeth to keep myself from shrieking with surprise. Fate has given me a chance to survive.

I try to disappear into the crowd, hurrying through the dawdling pedestrians. The bomb rides lower and lower on my stomach with each step I take. My hands scramble with the straps in a desperate attempt to release myself from the clutches of the wretched device. As I dart down an empty side street, it slides down to my ankles and I step out of the straps.

Then I run as fast as my adolescent legs will carry me, and as far away from my abductors as I can get.

I reach a limestone bridge, several yards above a narrow, lethargic river. Adrenaline, more than anything, is what takes me over the edge of the bridge and into the freezing water. The current carries me downstream, my burqa billowing like a great parachute, for what seems like an eternity before I trudge onto the muddy, reeded bank, soaked and shaking, but alive. Dusk is looming, and I listen to the sweet songs of the crickets as I wait for night's dark blanket to envelop me, shielding me in obscurity.

The cornflower-blue sky darkens to cobalt, then indigo, and finally black. I scramble out of the brush to embark on my long trek homeward. I walk for weeks, maybe longer, stowing away on the occasional freight train where I dwell with chickens and goats, eating food scraps and drinking murky water. There is a constant ache in my heart, a longing for my family, that consumes my thoughts constantly. My only wish is to return home to them.

After disembarking a train eighty miles north of my town and continuing southwards for several days, I arrive at the outskirts of my ancestral village. The angry sunlight is blinding, my legs are weak and my throat parched. I keep my head down as I stumble across barren dirt towards my home.

I approach the dilapidated wooden house that my father and brothers built cautiously, not knowing what to expect. I watch my feet as I shuffle up the hard-trodden dirt pathway. My steps seem to be taking longer and longer, as if time is slowing down. Grainy dust floats in stagnant clouds around my feet. The cord for the bell hangs menacingly above me, and I can see its rusted interior, rapidly decaying with age. The scents of rosemary and cardamom grace my

nose. Perhaps my mother is cooking stew for dinner. My blinks are heavy and seem to last hours rather than milliseconds.

At last my fingers close firmly around the cord. A pressure on my chest ticks steadily, each pulse more pronounced than the last. I pull down to let my family know that I am there, that I came back for them.

The explosion rips through the cobblestones, the tables, the green colored awnings with tourists sipping coffee under them. It tears apart the shops and the street vendors' stands, demolishing all life that stands in its way. The cries of the wounded and the dying echo across the square, but mine are not among them. My body is gone, and my soul escapes to the realm it was derived from, awaiting judgement to pass on into the afterlife.