

'Friday' by Zarin Nuzhat
First runner up
2021 Young Writers Award

Friday

Friday

Like characters in a video game, they fall.

In the distance there are the faint echoes of screams. But in the room there is silence, except for the panting breaths of the man wearing the camera, holding the gun.

I can't watch I can't watch I can't watch

Friday

I pull on my disguise for the afternoon without much grace. Baba beeps the horn as the car idles on the driveway, waiting for me to finally make my way down. With unpracticed fingers I try to wrap the hijab around my head. I clasp a safety pin under my chin, almost stabbing myself in the process. I look at myself in the mirror, this version of Maryam that comes out only on Friday afternoons for Jummah prayers. Looking at her feels like when you pass a stranger on the street, but you have to look back because you could have sworn you had seen them some place before.

The car beeps again and I hurtle down the stairs. Ma has just arrived home from work, unbuckling her shoes on the steps. "Bye Ma! Khodahafez! Let's have lunch together when Baba and I get back from Jummah."

"In sha Allah," she replies. *God willing*. "Get home safe."

Baba rolls his eyes at the traffic queuing down the main road leading to the mosque. "Maryam, I told you I wanted to leave early. It is so hard to find parking if you do not leave on time." Throngs of people from all corners of the globe are jaywalking across the street in front of our car. Fridays are almost festive in our suburb; people take some

time out of whatever they are doing to come to Jummah. Sometimes afterwards, if my friends also make it to Jummah, we go to Maccas down the road for apple pies.

Baba likes to describe Jummah as an anchor in his week. “Everything else gets a bit too much sometimes,” he once told me. “Work, home, thinking about your grandparents overseas, thinking about our home loan, worrying about you and your brother. But Jummah is a moment to sit still and... breathe. It holds me steady.”

We finally find a park a little way away from the mosque. We are just on time – the azaan, the call to prayer, is floating softly down the road towards us. Before we part ways at the main entrance Baba says, “Keep your phone on. I will text you when I am done, meet me just here.” He heads towards the men’s section, while I head towards the women’s.

I step into a room full of murmured conversations in countless languages. Arabic, Bosnian, Urdu, Bengali, Turkish, English. I nod hello to family friends across the room as the imam begins the prayer over the speaker. Instantly everyone’s conversations fall silent, and we stand together shoulder to shoulder. I can feel the warmth of the women next to me as we fold our hands over our hearts and look towards the floor. The woman on my left smells faintly of rosewater. The woman on my right smells like the perfume I bought Ma for her last birthday.

As one body we follow the imam and kneel on our prayer mats. Our foreheads rest on the mat and we put our hands, palms down, on either side of our head. A faint collective whisper gathers around us as we pray. Outside it suddenly starts to rain, but no one glances up. A tornado could be brewing outside and no one would bat an eyelid, not for these few minutes while the world stands still in this room.

Jummah ends and my phone buzzes. Baba is asking me to meet him outside, surely trying to beat the chaotic queue of cars all trying to merge onto the main road at the same time. As I stand up to leave a group of women towards the front of the room gasp and begin speaking frantically in Arabic. They are huddled around one of the women, who is showing them something on her phone. Sitting next to the exit another pair of women are also looking down at their phones. “Inna lillah,” one of them breathes. I have no idea what is going on but my heart beats a little quicker. We say “inna lillah” when something terrible happens, or when someone dies.

As soon as we pull into the garage, even before Baba and I have stepped out of the car, Ma rushes towards us. My chest fills with an awful heaviness as she clutches me to her chest, her tears damp on my cheek. She grips my father's hands in her own. "I didn't know if you were going to come home," she says.

"What on earth are you talking about?" Baba demands. We walk inside to find the television on. The first thing I see is two women wearing hijabs embracing each other. I can only see one of their faces. Her mouth is open in a cry of pain, tears spilling down her cheeks. The women are standing in front of crime scene tape. It is only a few moments later that I realise in the distance behind them is a white mosque with a golden dome. Finally I see a strip of text running across the screen: *Christchurch mosque attack – reports gunman has opened fire during Friday prayers, three dead and eight injured.*

I catch Baba's eye across the room. His face is pale, eyes wide. He slips down onto the couch. He leans forward and holds my face in his hands, as if in awe that I am still here. He turns back to the television and changes the channel. All of them show the same thing – heartbreak. A man stands in the middle of the road with his hands on his head. He wears a long grey gown and the front of it is soaked through with red. A woman in a purple hijab kneels on the floor outside the police tape. She is holding her hands open, up to the sky, wailing and begging for an answer. A police woman kneels next to her, a hand on the woman's shoulder.

Friday

I can't watch I can't watch I can't watch

But I can't help it. Forty dead counted so far. Their blood soaks into the prayer mats in a mosque just a sea away. Each time I check the number is higher. The creature that murdered them has filmed it all. The video is open on the screen in front of me and I can't help but press play.

The video is from his perspective, like a first-person shooter game. There are white scrawls all over his guns as he picks up his weapons from the trunk of his car. An armory of destruction; I wonder how long it has taken for his hatred to fester into such a rotten wound.

I hear the shots fire into throngs of people gathered in the mosque but

I can't watch

but I hear a woman call someone's name and it almost sounds like my own.

I can't watch

but I look up just in time to see a pile of people in the corner of a prayer room that has a green carpet and wide open windows and the bookshelves leaning against the walls, just like my own mosque. I can almost smell it, this distant place that might smell like home, but now a veil of blood clouds my senses.

I can't watch

but I hear the sound of footsteps running, racing away from the cold face of death, and then I hear a gunshot and nothing more.

My stomach roils and I break out in a sweat. My clammy hands shake as I slam the lid of my laptop shut.

Friday

I have never seen police outside my mosque before.

There are four police cars parked at the entrance of the mosque. For the whole week since the attack just a sea away, police have been guarding our mosque. But this is the first Jummah since *that* Jummah, and police or no, *safe* feels like a foreign word. The woman walking in front of Baba and me is mouthing prayers as she walks into the mosque, her face gaunt and pale.

As usual, Baba and I stop at the main entrance before we split up. He wordlessly puts a hand on my head and looks at me for a moment before he says, "Keep your phone on. I'll... I'll text you when I am done. Meet me out here."

"In sha Allah, Baba," I reply. He nods at the policeman standing at the gate and walks off.

The women huddle a little more closely together today. We seek each other's warmth and take comfort in the tears of our neighbours on either side of us, knowing that we do not cry alone.

Halfway through the prayer, as we are kneeling on our mats, somewhere in the distance there is a bang. And then another. We all hold our breath. The imam's voice over the speaker does not falter. There is another bang. It ricochets straight through my

ribs and suddenly it is hard to breathe. None of us move. My heart thunders in my chest and I think perhaps to die here, with these women by my side, would not be so bad. And then I wonder if I am actually ready and perhaps when the shooter walks in I will cry and beg in front of them. There is another bang, followed by the harsh sound of a car accelerating. Finally we realise it is not a gun with white writing on it but the exhaust of a car. Finally, we breathe. The imam's voice does not falter.

Friday

It has been three weeks since I last went to Jummah.

The anchor has come loose and I am like flotsam in the sea between here and a faraway mosque with green carpets stained red. I thought I was brave that first week after but the sound of the car exhaust had thudded through my heart and chipped away whatever bravery I had thought I had mustered. On Friday afternoons I sit in my room alone on my prayer mat. I take off my hijab, wanting desperately to be unidentifiable, and go for walks down my street. And when a stranger looks at me for a millisecond too long I hold my breath and walk back home as fast as I can.

Baba knocks on my door. "Maryam." He sits on the end of my bed and looks down at his hands. "It has been three weeks. You don't have to go to Jummah, of course not. But I feel it causes you more pain to lie here alone."

I have no response but to keep staring at the wall by my head.

"He has won then, hasn't he?" asks Baba. I sit up and look at him. "Isn't this what that man wanted? To walk into our home and strike fear into our hearts? Are you ready to admit defeat then, Maryam?"

Friday

On the fourth week I put my hijab on and pin it under my chin.

I reverse the car out onto the driveway and beep the horn intermittently until Baba finally comes down and sits in the passenger seat. He put his hand on my head for a moment. There is a hint of fear in his eyes, but it is buried deep behind the pride glowing there.

We are early today, and we find a park right by the entrance. There is just one police car here today and there is one lone policeman standing by the main entrance. Baba nods a

greeting at him, and the policeman smiles back. "Someone left these for you," says the policeman.

He steps aside, and behind him there is a wreath of flowers wrapped in soft pink paper. I kneel and pick up the small card on top of the flowers. "We wil keep u saif" it says in blue and green crayon, in the beautifully messy handwriting of a child.

Baba smiles down at the card, and then looks back at me. "Keep your phone on. I will text you when I am done. Meet me out here."

"In sha Allah, Baba," I reply, and head into the mosque.