

Destination the Hereafter - Have you packed your suitcases?

... "Dad was now becoming more worried about me. I've never cried like that before" ...

Her cheeks were worn and sunken and her skin hugged her bones. That didn't stop her though; you could never catch her not reciting Quran. Always vigil in her personal prayer room Dad had set up for her. Bowing, prostrating, raising her hands in prayer. That was the way she was from dawn to sunset and back again, boredom was for others.

As for me I craved nothing more than fashion magazines and novels. I treated myself all the time to videos until those trips to the rental place became my trademark. As they say, when something becomes habit people tend to distinguish you by it. I was negligent in my responsibilities and laziness characterized my Salah.

One night, I turned the video off after a marathon three hours of watching. The azaan softly rose in that quiet night. I slipped peacefully into my blanket.

Her voice carried from her prayer room. "Yes? Would you like anything Norah?"
With a sharp needle she popped my plans. 'Don't sleep before you pray Fajar!'
"Agh ... there's still an hour before Fajar, that was only the first azaan!"

With those loving pinches of hers, she called me closer. She was always like that, even before the fierce sickness shook her spirit and shut her in bed. 'Hanan can you come sit beside me.'

I could never refuse any of her requests, you could touch the purity and sincerity. "Yes, Norah?"
'Please sit here.'
'OK, I'm sitting. What's on your mind?'

With the sweetest mono voice she began reciting:

[Every soul shall taste death and you will merely be repaid your earnings on Resurrection Day]{3:185}

She stopped thoughtfully. Then she asked, 'Do you believe in death?'
'Of course I do.'

'Do you believe that you shall be responsible for whatever you do, regardless of how small or large?'
'I do, but . Allah is Forgiving and Merciful and I've got a long life waiting for me.'

'Stop it Hanan ... aren't you afraid of death and it's abruptness? Look at Hind. She was younger than you but she died in a car accident. So did so and so, and so and so. Death is age-blind and your age could never be a measure of when you shall die.'

The darkness of the room filled my skin with fear. "I'm scared of the dark and now you made me scared of death, how am I supposed to go to sleep now. Norah, I thought you promised you'd go with us on vacation during the summer break."

Impact. Her voice broke and her heart quivered. 'I might be going on a long trip this year Hanan, but somewhere else. Just maybe. All of our lives are in Allah's hands and we all belong to Him.'

My eyes welled and the tears slipped down both cheeks.

I pondered my sisters grizzly sickness, how the doctors had informed my father privately that there was not much hope that Norah was going to outlive the disease. She wasn't told though. Who hinted to her? Or was it that she could sense the truth.

'What are you thinking about Hanan?' Her voice was sharp. 'Do you think I am just saying this because I am sick? Uh - uh. In fact, I may live longer than people who are not sick. And you Hanan, how long are you going to live? Twenty years, maybe? Forty? Then what?' Through the dark she reached for my hand and squeezed gently. 'There's no difference between us; we're all going to leave this world to live in Paradise or agonize in Hell.'

I left my sister's room dazed, her words ringing in my ears: "May Allah guide you Hanan - don't forget your prayer."

Eight O'clock in the morning. Pounding on my door. I don't usually wake up at this time. Crying. Confusion. O Allah, what happened?

Norah's condition became critical after Fajar, they took her immediately to the hospital ... Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un....this is what Norah always said to say if she died.

There wasn't going to be any trips this summer. It was written that I would spend the summer at home., i could feel it.

At hospital....

It was one O'clock in the afternoon. Mother phoned the hospital. 'Yes. You can come and see her now.' Dad's voice had changed, mother could sense something had gone deathly wrong. We left immediately.

Where was that avenue I used to travel and thought was so short? Why was it so long now, so very long. Where was the cherished crowd and traffic that would give me a chance to gaze left and right. Everyone, just move out of our way. Mother was shaking her head in her hands - crying - as she made du'a for her Norah.

We arrived at the hospitals main entrance.

One man was moaning, another was involved in an accident and a third's eyes were iced, you couldn't tell if he was alive or dead.

We skipped stairs to Norah's floor. She was in intensive care.

The nurse approached us. 'Let me take you to her.' As we walked down the aisles the nurse went on expressing how sweet a girl Norah was. She reassured Mother somewhat that Norah's condition had gotten better than what it was in the morning.

'Sorry. No more than one visitor at a time.' This was the intensive care unit. Through the small window in the door and past the flurry of white robes I caught my sisters eyes. Mother was standing beside her. After two minutes, mother came out unable to control her crying.

'You may enter and say Salaam to her on condition that you do not speak too long,' they told me. 'Two minutes should be enough.'

"How are you Norah? You were fine last night sister, what happened?"

We held hands, she squeezed harmlessly. 'Even now, Alhamdulillah, I'm doing fine.'

"Alhamdulillah ... but ... your hands are so cold."

I sat on her bedside and rested my fingers on her knee. She jerked it away.

"Sorry ... did I hurt you?" "No, it is just that I remembered Allah's words [One leg will be wrapped to the other leg (in the death shroud)]

... Hanan pray for me. I may be meeting the first day of the hereafter very soon. It is a long journey and I haven't prepared enough good deeds in my suitcase.'

A tear escaped my eye and ran down my cheek at her words. I cried and she joined me. The room blurred away and left us - two sisters - to cry together. Rivulets of tears splashed down on my sister's palm, which I held with both hands. Dad was now becoming more worried about me. I've never cried like that before.

At home and upstairs in my room, I watched the sun pass away with a sorrowful day. Silence mingled in our corridors. A cousin came in my room, another. The visitors were many and all the voices from downstairs stirred together.

Only one thing was clear at that point ... Norah had died!

I stopped distinguishing who came and who went. I couldn't remember what they said. O Allah, where was I? What was going on? I couldn't even cry anymore.

Later that week they told me what had happened. Dad had taken my hand to say goodbye to my sister for the last time, I had kissed Norah's head.

I remember only one thing though, seeing her spread on that bed, the bed that she was going to die on. I remembered the verse she recited: [**One leg will be wrapped to the other leg (in the death shroud)**]{75:29}} and I knew too well the truth of the next verse: [**The drive on that day we be to your Lord (Allah)**]{75:30}}

I tiptoed into her prayer room that night. Staring at the quiet dressers and silenced mirrors, I treasured who it was that had shared my mother's stomach with me. Norah was my twin sister. I remembered who I had swapped sorrows with. Who had comforted my rainy days. I remembered who had prayed for my guidance and who had spent so many tears for so many long nights telling me about death and accountability. May Allah save us all.

Tonight is Norah's first night that she shall spend in her tomb. O Allah, have mercy on her and illumine her grave. This was her Quran, her prayer mat and .and this was the spring rose-colored dress that she told me she would hide until she got married, the dress she wanted to keep just for her husband.

I remembered my sister and cried over all the days that I had lost. I prayed to Allah to have mercy on me, accept me and forgive me. I prayed to Allah to keep her firm in her grave, as she always liked to mention in her supplications.

At that moment, I stopped. I asked myself: what if it was I who had died? Where would I be moving on to? Fear pressed me and the tears began all over again.

The first azaan rose softly from the Masjid, how beautiful it sounded this time. I felt calm and relaxed as I repeated the Muadhins call. I wrapped the shawl around my shoulders and stood to pray Fajar. I prayed as if it was my last prayer, a farewell prayer, just like Norah had done yesterday. It had been her last Fajar.

Now and insha' Allah for the rest of my life, if I awake in the mornings I do not count on being alive by evening, and in the evening I do not count on being alive by morning.

We are all going on Norah's journey - what have we prepared for it?

My sister has already left on this eternal journey? Have YOU & I packed our suitcases?

Hazrat Abdullah bin Umar R.A says that someone asked the Prophet (sallallahu alaiyihi wassallam) which man is the wisest.The Prophet (sallallahu alaiyihi wassallam) said that; the one who remembers death much and is ever engaged in making preparation for it.These are the men who have become masters of this world and the next. (TIBRANI)

Hazrat Abdullah bin Umar R.A. says that the Prophet (sallallahu alaiyihi wassallam) putting his hand on his shoulder, said that they should spend life like a traveller.He forbode to wait for the morning in the evening and for evening in the morning.He advised to accumulate the prayers when he is healthy; keeping the period of illness in mind and should do something good for the death when he is ill. (BUKHARI)

Hazrat Shaddad bin Aus(R.A.) says that the Prophet (sallallahu alaiyihi wassallam) has said that the alert man is one; who takes account of his life and does alot of good actions; which may be useful to him after death. (TIRMIZI)