

My Accidental Jihad

BY KRISTA BREMER

Early one morning in September, when our house is pitch-dark and the entire family is still asleep, my husband, Ismail, sits upright at the first sound of his alarm, dresses quickly, and leaves our bedroom. Later, after I've woken up and made my way downstairs for a cup of coffee, I find him standing at the counter, stuffing the last of his breakfast into his mouth, his eye on the clock as if he were competing in a pie-eating contest at the fair. The minute hand clicks forward, and, on cue, Ismail drops the food he's holding. I'm momentarily confused. My husband and I usually sit down together over our first cup of coffee, and he rarely eats breakfast. Then I realize: Ramadan has begun.

For the next month, nothing will touch my husband's mouth between sunup and sundown: Not food. Not water. Not my lips. A chart posted on our refrigerator tells him the precise minute when his fast must begin and end each day. I will find him in front of this chart again this evening, staring at his watch, waiting for it to tell him he may eat.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the lunar calendar, the month during which the Koran was revealed to the Prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel. Each year, more than one billion Muslims observe Ramadan by fasting from dawn to dusk. In addition to avoiding food and drink during daylight hours, Muslims are expected to refrain from all other indulgences: sexual relations, gossip, evil thoughts — even looking at “corrupt” images on television, in magazines, or on the Internet. Ramadan is a month of purification, during which Muslims are called upon to make peace

with enemies, strengthen ties with family and friends, cleanse themselves of impurities, and refocus their lives on God. It's like a month-long spiritual tuneup.

My husband found fasting easier when he lived in Libya, surrounded by fellow Muslims. Everyone's life changes there during the fast: people work less (at least, those who work outside the home), take long naps during the day, and feast with family and friends late into the night. Now, with a corporate job and an American wife who works full time, my husband has a totally different experience of Ramadan. He spends most of his waking hours at work, just as he does every other month of the year. He still picks up our son from day care and shares cooking and cleaning responsibilities at home. Having no Muslim friends in our Southern college town, he breaks his fast alone, standing at our kitchen counter. Here in the United States, Ramadan feels more like an extreme sport than a spiritual practice. Secretly I've come to think of it as “Ramathon.”

I try to be supportive of Ismail's fast, but it's hard. The rules seem unnecessarily harsh to me, an American raised in the seventies by parents who challenged the status quo. The humility required to submit to such a grueling, seemingly illogical exercise is not in my blood. In my family, we don't submit. We question the rules. We debate. And we do things our own way. I resent the fact that Ismail's life is being micromanaged by the chart in the kitchen. Would Allah really hold it against him if he finished his last bite of toast, even if the clock says it's a minute past sunrise? The no-water rule seems especially cruel to me, and I find the prohibition against kissing a little melodramatic. I'm tempted to argue with Ismail that the rules are outdated, but he has a billion Muslims in his corner, whereas I have yet to find another disgruntled American wife who feels qualified to rewrite one of the five pillars of Islam.

People say that for a relationship to work, a

couple needs to have a shared passion. My husband and I do have one: food. Years ago, when we first met, we shared other passions, such as travel, long runs on wooded trails, live music, and poetry readings. But now that we have two small kids, those indulgences have fallen by the wayside one by one. No matter how busy our lives get, however, we have to eat. On days when it seems we have nothing in common, when I struggle to recall what brought us together in the first place, one good meal can remind me. Ismail is an amazing cook. I remember in great detail the meal he prepared for me the first night we spent together: the walnuts simmering slowly in the thick, sweet blood-red pomegranate sauce; the chicken that slipped delicately away from the bone, like silk falling from skin. The next morning the scent of coriander ground into strong coffee filled his small apartment as he served me olives and fresh bread for breakfast.

Our love heated up like a sauce on the stove, our lives slowly blending together, the flavors becoming increasingly subtle and complex. I'd watch him prepare a bunch of cilantro on the counter, carefully separating the stalks with patient attention, gently plucking each leaf from its stem. He could toast pine nuts in a pan while carrying on a conversation with me and not burn a single one, magically rescuing them from the heat just as they turned the perfect shade of brown. Using his buttery fingertips, he would separate paper-thin sheets of phyllo dough without tearing any. He always served me first and studied my expression closely as I took a bite, his face lighting up in response to my pleasure. When he took his first taste, his eyes closed halfway, and a low moan of pleasure escaped from his mouth. There in the kitchen, all the evidence was before me: he was patient, attentive, thorough, economical, generous, creative, and sensual. I was ready to bear his children.

But when my husband fasts, our relationship becomes a bland, lukewarm

concoction that I find difficult to swallow. I'm not proud of this fact. After all, he isn't the only one in our house with a spiritual practice: I stumble out of bed in the dark most mornings and meditate in the corner of our room with my back to him, trying to find that bottomless truth beyond words. Once in a great while, I'll drag him to church on Sunday. Whenever I suggest we say grace at the table, he reaches willingly for my hand, and words of gratitude flow easily from him. He has never criticized my practices, even when they are wildly inconsistent or contradictory. But Ramadan is not ten minutes of meditation or an hour-long sermon; it's an entire month of deprivation. Ismail's God is the old-fashioned kind, omnipresent and stern, uncompromising with his demands. During Ramadan this God expects him to pray on time, five times a day — and to squeeze in additional prayers of forgiveness as often as he can. My God would never be so demanding. My God is a flamboyant and fickle friend with a biting wit who likes a good party. My God is transgendered and tolerant to a fault; he/she shows up unexpectedly during peak moments, when life feels glorious and synchronous, then disappears for long stretches of time.

But Ramadan leaves little room for dramatic flair. There is no chorus of voices or public celebration — just a quiet and steady submission to Allah in the privacy of one's home. For some Muslims who live in the West, the holiday becomes even more private, since their friends and colleagues are often not even aware of their fast.

During the early days of Ramadan, Ismail deals with his hunger by planning his next meal and puttering around the kitchen. In the last half-hour before the sun sets, he rearranges the food in our refrigerator or wipes down our already-clean counters. At night in bed, as I drift off to sleep, he reviews each ingredient in the baklava he intends to make the following evening. "Do you think I should replace the

walnuts with pistachios?” he whispers. In the middle of the workday, when I call his cellphone, I hear the beeping of a cash register in the background. He is wandering the aisles of our local grocery store. “I needed to get out of the office,” he says matter-of-factly, as if all men escaped to the grocery store during lunch.

The last hours before he breaks his fast are the most difficult and volatile time of day for him. Coincidentally, they are the same hours at which I return home from work. I open the door and find him collapsed on the couch, pale and exhausted, our children running in circles around the room. Ismail is irritable, and his thoughts trail off in midsentence. I dread seeing him in this state. I count on my husband to speak coherently, to smile on a regular basis, and to enjoy our children. This humorless person on my couch is no fun. Every few days I ask (with what I hope sounds like innocent curiosity) what he’s learned from his fast so far. I know this is an unfair question. How would I feel if he poked his head into our bedroom while I was meditating and asked, *How’s it going? Emptied your mind yet?*

One balmy Saturday in the middle of Ramadan, we go to hear an outdoor lecture by a Sufi Muslim teacher who is visiting from California. The teacher sits cross-legged under a tree on a colorful pillow while the sun streams down on him through a canopy of leaves. After a long silence, he sweeps his arms in front of him, a beatific expression on his face, and reminds us to notice the beauty that surrounds us. “If you don’t,” he says, “you’re not fasting — you’re just going hungry.”

I take a sidelong glance at Ismail. He is looking very hungry to me these days. I guess I imagined that during his fast a new radiance would emanate from him. I imagined him moving more slowly, but also more lovingly. I imagined a Middle Eastern Gandhi, sitting with our children in the garden when I got home from work. In short, I imagined that his

spiritual practice would look more . . . well, *spiritual*. I didn’t imagine the long silences between us or how much his exhaustion would irritate me. I didn’t imagine him leaping out of bed in a panic, having slept through his alarm, and running downstairs to swallow chunks of bread and gulp coffee before the sun came up. I didn’t imagine his terse replies to my attempts to start a conversation, or his impatience with our children.

I thought I understood the rules of Ramadan: the timetable on the refrigerator, the five daily prayers. But I didn’t understand that the real practice is addressing a toddler’s temper tantrum or a wife’s hostile silence when you haven’t eaten or drunk anything in ten hours. I was like the children of Israel in the Bible, who once complained that, despite their dutiful fasting, God *still* wasn’t answering their prayers. The children of Israel had it all wrong: God doesn’t count calories. The fast itself only sets the stage. God is interested in our behavior and intentions *while* we are hungry. Through his prophet Isaiah, God gave the children of Israel a piece of his mind:

Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. (Isaiah 58:3–4)

Ismail tells me that in the Middle East, Ramadan is a time of extremes: There are loving gatherings among family and friends at night, and a tremendous public outpouring of charity and generosity to those in need. At the same time, the daytime streets become more dangerous, filled with nicotine and caffeine addicts in withdrawal. People stumble through the morning without their green or black tea, drunk so dark and thick with sugar that it leaves permanent stains even on young

people's teeth. Desperate smokers who light up in public risk being ridiculed or even attacked by strangers. The streets reverberate with angry shouts and car horns, and traffic conflicts occasionally escalate into physical violence.

Our home, too, becomes more volatile during Ramadan. Ismail's temper is short; my patience with him runs thin. I accuse him of being grumpy. He accuses me of being unsupportive. I tell him he is failing at Ramadan, as if it were some sort of exam. I didn't ask for this spiritual test, I tell him. As if I could pick and choose which parts of him to take into my life. As if he were served up to me on a plate, and I could primly push aside what I didn't care for — his temper, his doubt, his self-pity — and keep demanding more of his delicious tenderness.

And then there is my husband's unmistakable Ramadan scent. Normally I love the way he smells: the faint scent of soap and laundry detergent mixed with the warm muskiness of his skin. But after a few days of fasting, Ismail begins to smell *different*. Mostly it's his breath. The odor is subtle but distinct and persists no matter how many times he brushes or uses mouthwash. When I get close to him, it's the first thing I notice. I do a Google search for "Ramadan and halitosis" and learn that this is a common side effect of fasting — so common that the Prophet Mohammed himself even had something to say about it: "The smell of the fasting person's breath is sweeter to Allah than that of musk." Allah may delight in this smell, but I don't. I no longer rest my head on Ismail's chest when we lie in bed at night. I begin to avoid eye contact and increase the distance between us when we speak. I no longer kiss him on impulse in the evening. I sleep with my back to him, resentful of this odor, which hangs like an invisible barrier between us.

The purpose of fasting during Ramadan is not simply to suffer hunger, thirst, or desire,

but to bring oneself closer to *taqwa*: a state of sincerity, discipline, generosity, and surrender to Allah; the sum total of all Muslim teachings. When, in a moment of frustration, I grumble to my husband about his bad breath, he responds in the spirit of *taqwa*: He listens sympathetically and then apologizes and promises to keep his distance. He offers to sleep on the couch if that would make me more comfortable. He says he wishes I had told him earlier so he could have spared me any discomfort. His humility catches me off guard and makes my resentment absurd.

This month of Ramadan has revealed to me the limits of my compassion. I recall a conversation I had with Ismail in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when the word *jihad* often appeared in news stories about Muslim extremists who were hellbent on destroying the United States. According to Ismail, the Prophet Mohammed taught that the greatest jihad, or struggle, of our lives is not the one that takes place on a battlefield, but the one that takes place within our hearts — the struggle to increase self-discipline and become a better person. This month of Ramadan has thrown me into my own accidental jihad, forcing me to wrestle with my intolerance and self-absorption. And I have been losing ground in this battle, forgetting my husband's intentions and focusing instead on the petty ways I am inconvenienced by his practice.

Ramadan is meant to break our rigid habits of overindulgence, the ones that slip into our lives as charming guests and then refuse to leave, taking up more and more space and stealing our attention away from God. And it's not just the big habits, the ones that grab us by the throat — alcohol, coffee, cigarettes — but the little ones that take us gently by the hand and lead us stealthily away from the truth. I begin to notice my own compulsions, the small and socially acceptable ones that colonize my day: The way I depend on regular exercise to bolster my mood. The number of times I check

my e-mail. The impulse to watch a movie with my husband after our children are in bed, rather than let the silence envelop us both. And the words: all the words in books, in magazines, on the computer; words to distract me from the mundane truth of the moment. I begin to notice how much of my thinking revolves around what I will consume next.

I am plump with my husband's love, overfed by his kindness, yet I still treat our marriage like an all-you-can-eat buffet, returning to him over and over again to fill my plate, as if our vows guaranteed me unlimited nourishment. During Ramadan, when he turns inward and has less to offer me, I feel indignant. I want to make a scene. I want to speak to whoever is in charge, to demand what I think was promised me when I entered this marriage. But now I wonder: Is love an endless feast, or is it what people manage to serve each other when their cupboards are bare?

In the evening, just before sundown, Ismail arranges three dates on a small plate and pours a tall glass of water, just as the Koran instructs him to do, just as the Prophet Mohammed himself did long ago. Then he sits down next to me at the kitchen counter while I thumb through cookbooks, wondering what to make for dinner. He waits dutifully while the phone rings, while our daughter practices scales on the piano, while our son sends a box of Legos crashing onto our wood floor. Then, at the moment the sun sets, he lifts a date to his mouth and closes his eyes.

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