

America the Beautiful

Budie Kadir

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِّأَزْوَاجِكَ وَبَنَاتِكَ وَنِسَاءِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يُدْنِينَ عَلَيْهِنَّ
مِنْ جَلَابِيبِهِنَّ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ أَدْنَىٰ أَنْ يُعْرَفْنَ فَلَا يُؤْذَيْنَ ۚ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ
غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا ٥٩

*O Prophet! Ask your wives, daughters, and believing women
to draw their veils over their bodies. In this way it is more likely
that their virtue is recognized and they will not be harassed.*

And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

(Qur'an 33:59)

I straightened out my white collared shirt, tucking it into my beltless black slacks. I tucked the stray hairs by my ears into my headscarf. In all my years in that school, I was marked by my hijab — my religiously worn veil poking out of a sea of blonde and brunette hair. Once upon a time, in a cultural revolution of 7th century Arabia, headcoverings, or hijab, were religiously prescribed with the social purpose of allowing a woman to go unbothered. These days, after 9/11 and the War on Terror, my veiled existence was counterproductive to discretion, often scrutinized and sometimes even politicized.

In the chittering and chattering of the middle school auditorium, students scurried through and about, clad in crisp black and white concert attire. As the audience settled, I stood quietly in the aisle, and watched the orchestra assemble on stage. Students shuffled in gingerly toting their wooden instruments and long wispy bows. Violins and violas and cellos and basses. And the conductor.

I felt a tug at my elbow. My father stood behind me, holding a program pamphlet, still wearing his jacket, looking confused.

“What are you doing?” he asked. “They lookin like they wanna start soon.”

“Just sit down, it’s fine.”

“What are you doing?”

“Just sit down, it’s fine.”

We bickered back and forth with growing haste as the orchestra on stage tuned to concert “A” and our orchestra teacher introduced the first performance.

My father finally found a seat as my name was called over the PA system.

“...string orchestra...America the Beautiful, featuring.... Budie Kadir...”

A presumptive applause crept mechanically into the space, and I walked down the aisle and up the stairs to the stage, where a microphone stand was arranged to my approximate height. I lifted my chin, struggling to meet it still.

The orchestra teacher raised both her arms, baton poised effortlessly between her right thumb and forefinger, its tip bouncing ever so softly until it, too, settled, in anticipation of the down beat.

I was facing the audience and away from the orchestra, but I felt their motions in my periphery. I could vaguely make out the silent count-in: one, two, three, *and* !

The music began, and so did I. I struggled to control my breath, making up for in confidence what I lacked in skill and technique.

As far as I can remember, I hit every note the best that I could, hoping my earthquake heartbeats would propel my voice where it needed to go.

“O beautiful for spacious skies...”

The balloon of my lungs traded places with the room, and I felt my breath could touch the far walls of the auditorium, curved in a hug that returned my voice to my own ears.

“for amber waves of grain...”

Like wind over a field, I imagined my voice the color of sunshine, warming the earth of my chest.

“America! America! God shed his grace on thee!”

I sang out the grandiose prayer, with the naivete of a child’s faith behind it.

“... and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.”
And like the wave crashing onto the shore, I receded once again, following the fermata with due rest, bowing to pay respect to the audience, and stepping away from the microphone now that my solo was complete. I began to walk over to take my place with the orchestra.

My scrawny 13-year old behind had hardly made contact with my seat yet when the waning applause gave way to an unexpected sound: the unmistakable sound of anger. One voice emerged from the audience, it was insistent, repetitive. Everyone’s attention scrambled to understand what could be the cause of such commotion, in what

should have otherwise been a brief and silent pause between songs at a middle school orchestra concert.

She was standing now, the woman who was shouting. She was infuriated, seething, angry at something, someone. From my seat, I then understood, she was angry with me.

She exclaimed at the absurdity of the performance, her shrill voice piercing through the auditorium, amplified by design. "That's so un-American!" she grieved self-righteously. "This is unbelievable. That's so un-American!"

Hundreds of adults in the room, and none dared to meet her with rebuttal. Her outburst settled into a confounding silence, drawn out like it had its own fermata dictating its indefinite length.

Finally, I heard someone call out from behind me, a fellow student and orchestra member.

"Shut up, Mom!" I turned around to face my hero of the moment. A spunky bass player had emerged from behind her instrument and come to my defense. Or maybe it was for her own good. Maybe her mother was always like this, filled with ire and ready to complain, bogged down by an unfulfilling life in a provincial suburban hellhole. Maybe her mother was habitually abrasive, and really wanted the mic that evening. Maybe she just really had something to say. No one else did.

I was the first chair in my section, seated directly in front of the conductor, our orchestra teacher. She raised her arms once more, ready to count us in for the next song.

The show must go on. I played and I played, toying immaturely with vibrato, sweeping through legato and plucking through pizzicato

sections, moving through the phrases we had rehearsed tirelessly that semester.

Though curiously, as I played, tears rolled down my cheeks, and though my body performed with mechanical ease, my heart mourned a devastation I could not understand.

No one ever did formally approach me about what happened that evening. No teacher, nor parent. The moment was wisely edited out of the school's concert footage, officially erased from media history. As the years went on, some peers would snicker and sneer about the bass player's crazy racist mom, and the phrase "Un-American" became a running joke to ease the sting of the underlying venom.

My father, though, has no recollection of the shouting woman, or the un-American remarks. He only recalls the time with such pride and levity.

"I didn't know why you stand on the side all alone, everybody already gonna start – then they call you name over the loudspeaker – 'Budie Kadir'! And my daughter wear a hijab go up on a stage and singin' America the Beautiful!" He laughed from his belly, a joy that left his smile beaming. "My daughter!"



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