



## DREAM BROTHER

Asim Rizki

Something was missing. Trevor could almost feel the taste on his tongue and down the back of his throat. He shivered as he locked the front door, though it was a warm morning. The sounds of birds chirping and cars going down the road were a welcome relief after the silence of the house. He reached the station and stood at his usual place on the platform. He always got there at this time. Familiar faces he had never spoken to glanced at him.

It was his second day back at work. Maybe his fellow commuters had noticed his absence. He felt an urge to tell them about his loss. As the train pulled in he looked away so as not to catch his reflection in the windows. He stood in the aisle of the crowded carriage and mumbled to himself. Other passengers read or stared out of the window.

He changed onto an underground train. The dark tunnels made him nervous. Then he walked outside, into the bustle of the city. His eyes scouted for drinking possibilities: a sports bar, a convenience store, then there were the little, hidden pubs he knew. Office workers trying so hard to wind down were amusing to a point. Today, he was in the mood for drinking quietly.

And he wanted to start now. His legs fought the impulse and carried him past the shop. At the building where he worked, the security guard looked up

as he came in. He was late. An empty lift took him up to the floor where the IT staff were based.

He clapped once as he came into the open plan area where the technicians sat. Some desks were empty, their occupants on call in different parts of the organisation. Others were trying to solve problems over the phone.

‘Can I have a word please, Trevor?’

He turned around to see his boss standing by the doorway of his office.

‘Sure, Alan.’

Alan shut the door after them and sat with his back to the window, which looked onto another tall block. ‘Take a seat.’ He looked straight at Trevor who glanced down.

‘How are you?’

Trevor nodded. ‘I’m fine.’

‘You’ve just taken some time off, haven’t you?’

‘That’s right. One week.’

‘You had to take leave suddenly.’

‘It was for personal reasons.’ Alan looked at Trevor. He said, ‘My girlfriend moved out, for good.’

Alan nodded. ‘Do you need any more time? We only want you here if you’re fully focussed.’

Trevor grimaced. ‘I’m happy to be doing my job again.’

‘Good.’

Trevor went back to his desk and switched on his computer. A new employee had the workstation opposite. As Trevor was looking through his emails, the new bloke walked in.

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An impure thought entered Tariq’s mind. The woman seated opposite him had released her heel from her shoe and was balancing the sole of her foot on the

rim. For a moment he felt glad to look at an uncovered face. She returned the gaze. He turned away.

The brothers he shared a house with had warned him about complacency. The temptation of wasteful and demeaning distractions was everywhere: billboards, television, the internet, the people he saw and worked with every day. Their aim was to make life as frivolous and as devoid of meaning as possible.

The train pulled in at Tariq's station. This week he had started a new contract, at a government department. It had been busy. The phone had kept ringing, enquiries ranging from graphs in Excel to how to send an email.

The workstation opposite his had been empty until the day before. The new person hadn't talked much. The others seemed to know him. He had a leering face.

When Tariq had been praying in a disused office, he was sure he had glimpsed the man watching him. He had stepped away from the doorway as Tariq had finished and was folding his prayer mat. Maybe he was a racist, or a potential convert. Tariq couldn't be bothered with either.

He wanted to concentrate on his job. Anything else that tried to divert him from his religion was to be ignored.

At the Islamic circle, the group leader had described how Muslims were observed like animals in a zoo. They were mocked for their high standards. This was because of jealousy. He kept reminding himself of this.

He came outside and marched to the building where he was based. He was late, he noticed from the clock on reception.

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'You're late, mate.'

'There were problems on the Piccadilly Line.'

Trevor nodded. 'I'd stay clear of Alan. He's on the war path. He can be a right wanker sometimes, can't he?'

Tariq frowned and sat at his workstation. His phone rang. He listened and said, 'I'll come and have a look at that. What floor are you on?' He put the receiver down and walked out.

When he returned Trevor was still there. 'Dim, aren't they? It's better to talk them through it over the phone. That way, they learn. Some of them never do, though.'

Tariq looked at his watch. He took the prayer mat from his drawer and went into the office he had used before. After he had finished praying he sat at his desk.

Trevor was leaning back with his arms folded. 'Muslim, are you?'

'That's right.'

'I went to university at Warwick. A lot of Muslims live round that way. When I lived off campus with my girlfriend, two houses on our road were used as the local mosque. Every Friday that small street would be packed. Then they'd have the kid's school on weekends and a big party at the end of Ramadhan.'

Tariq looked straight at Trevor. 'Never been there.'

Trevor nodded slowly at Tariq's blazing eyes. 'It's just you're so sure of yourselves. All that "God is great".'

Tariq twitched.

'What if he isn't? What if he doesn't care about your fasting and you're making yourself hungry for nothing. All that standing, kneeling, folding of arms, lifting hands five times a day, every day. Maybe no one's listening, man.'

A stinging sensation rose through Tariq's chest. He stood up. 'I don't have to take this racist shit.' His voice quivered. 'You haven't heard the last of this, mate.' He walked out.

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A shabby pigeon pecked around the bench. Trevor watched it and laughed to himself. He leaned back. Fluffy clouds were passing through the light blue sky.

He gripped the top of the brown paper bag covering the can and brought it to his lips. That was better.

‘I didn’t make a complaint.’

He looked up. Some guy with a frizzy beard was standing on the path that led through the small park.

‘Good for you.’

‘You must be upset about your wife leaving.’

‘My wife? We weren’t married, mate. Or maybe I was half cut at the ceremony and I don’t remember it.’

Tariq sat next to Trevor. ‘You met her at university?’

‘Alison was studying music. She was doing Computer Studies as a subsidiary. One afternoon we were sitting next to each other in the IT suite. I helped her with her database. We were together six years.’ He turned to Tariq, ‘Where did you study?’

He said the name of a nearby university.

‘I bet you lived at your parents’ place. You people like to stick together, don’t you?’

Tariq said, ‘I left home in my final year. I share a house with friends.’

‘What are your housemates like?’

‘They’re good people. I met them at the university Islamic Society.’

‘Do you know anyone who isn’t Muslim? What was the point of leaving home?’

‘I wanted to get away from my father. He beat me when I was a boy. My mum would pretend nothing had happened.’

A woman came through the gate with a child. She sat on the grass while the little girl ran around, throwing a ball in the air and collecting it. Trevor watched them then asked, ‘What happened to me, Tariq?’

Tariq glanced at his watch. ‘We’d better get back.’

Trevor sprung up. As they walked out of the park he threw the paper bag into a bin. ‘What are you doing after work? Let’s go for a coffee.’

Tariq hesitated then said, ‘Sure.’

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‘Are you going to drink all of that?’ A jug and glass stood on the table in front of Trevor. A cup and saucer were by Tariq.

‘This is nothing. I can get through a few of these, no problem.’ They were in a bar overlooking the concourse of a station. ‘How’s your coffee?’

Tariq looked around furtively. ‘It’s OK.’

‘Relax, man.’

‘Have you always drunk so heavily?’

‘Not always. I started at boarding school but really got going during the holidays. This was after my mother died. My dad was always on some business trip or other, but he kept the cabinet well stocked. Bless him. Then university and drinking buddies.’

‘And Alison?’

‘She wanted to look after me. God knows why. I found it amusing at first. Then I saw that she actually cared and I stopped for a while. But patients can’t be off their drip for too long.’

Trevor asked, ‘So, what do you do when you’re not working?’

‘I go to my local mosque. My friends and me have started a youth circle.’

‘Sounds serious. What would they think of you being here? With someone like me?’

‘They probably wouldn’t be too happy. They can go over the top sometimes.’

‘You need to get out more, man.’

A few people were scattered around the other tables. Two women were sitting nearby.

Trevor looked at them then turned to Tariq. ‘They’re checking us out.’

‘What?’

‘Those girls.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’ll ask them if they want to join us.’

Tariq’s voice rose an octave. ‘No.’

‘Don’t worry. They’ll just have a drink with us.’

The two women got up and left the bar. Tariq watched them.

Trevor said, ‘Don’t look too relieved. Anyway, I bet there’s some beauty behind a veil you’re after. How do you decide which one you fancy?’

‘The eyes.’

Trevor laughed. He filled his glass again. ‘You’ve never tried this stuff?’

Tariq shook his head.

‘It’s heaven.’

Tariq looked at Trevor’s dilated eyes. He said, ‘There’s a dinner for our section next week. Are you going?’

‘I wasn’t planning to. Why, are you?’

‘I think I will. It’ll be a good chance to get to know everyone.’

Trevor nodded. ‘Do you want another coffee? Or a coke or something?’

‘No, I’d better be going.’

‘Stay for a bit.’

Tariq stood up. ‘I really should go.’

‘We’ll do this some other time.’

‘Yes, next week at the dinner.’

Trevor nodded. ‘Next week at the dinner.’

Tariq looked at him for a moment then went down the staircase and into the station.

Trevor stared at the remaining liquid in the pitcher. It was the one thing that never changed. He laughed, then got up and stumbled out of the bar.

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