

WHISPERING FEATHERS FROM AFAR

BY

OMAR YOUSAF

QUOTE:

'Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a
covenant with me by sacrifice' (Psalm, 50:5)

We hear birds singing. Then, a young nun singing a hymn.

FADE IN:

1 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

A close-up of Deborah, a young nun, who is singing a hymn from a hymn book. Then, a medium shot that reveals that she is standing in a cemetery with tombstones surrounding her.

DEBORAH

Abide with me! fast falls the eventide;
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

2 EXT. CEMETERY. BENCH. DAYTIME.

We now see Deborah from a distance from behind another young nun, Aliza, sitting on a bench.

We see a close-up of Aliza's fingers turning black prayer beads. Then a close-up of her.

ALIZA

My Lord, grant Esther eternal rest and reward her for her good deeds. She was a healer who cured many. With her gone, I am yet again unfocused. Show me the right path.

3 EXT. CEMETERY STREET. DAYTIME.

The wheels of Angela's (aged 10) bicycle turn (close-up), as she approaches the cemetery (we see her from the back).

2 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

Close-up of Aliza. Her eyes are shut as she prays silently.

ALIZA

I beseech you, my dear God, to grant me purity in my worship. To rid me of distractions and worldly pursuits that do not serve you, and help me to devote myself to you alone.

Aliza looks up, thinking deeply.

4 EXT. PARK BY THE LAKE. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Aliza looks down at the lake which reflects the trees and the sky. She smiles. She dances, then sits on the bench, enjoying the view of the lake with the ducks. She is holding white prayer beads.

2 EXT. CEMETERY. BENCH. DAYTIME.

Aliza is still sitting on the bench. A close-up of her holding black prayer beads and turning these as she continues to desperately pray.

ALIZA

A sign from you, my Lord, is all I ask.

Angela pulls up on her bicycle next to the bench, and walks up to Aliza from the right-hand side, handing her a letter.

ANGELA

Sister Aliza. Esther wanted me to give you this.

Aliza is confused, and takes the letter, and looks at it. The envelope says: 'To Aliza, from Esther'.

ALIZA

But Angela, when did she give you this?

Aliza looks up but does not see her. Angela appears on her left-hand side, sitting down next to her, and entering a deep state of meditation to Deborah's singing.

A close-up of Deborah singing passionately. Then, a close-up of Angela crying meditatively, deeply affected by the singing. Then shuts her eyes.

Aliza holds the letter in hesitation. We see her contemplate. She notices that Angela is in a meditative state so is hesitant to ask her anything further.

Angela opens her eyes and whispers something in Aliza's ear (close-up). Angela then gets up, hugs Aliza, and walks towards her bicycle while Aliza is in deep thought after what she just heard.

6 EXT. CEMETERY PATHWAY. DAYTIME.

Close up of Angela thinking about a past experience as she starts cycling. We start hearing Esther's line 'Worship has many forms...'

7 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Angela is sitting on the pew next to Esther, an old, mysterious woman.

ESTHER

Worship has many forms, Angela. What you are about to witness is one that is rare. It inspires epiphanies galore.

Aliza walks in. Melancholic, with moist eyes.

ESTHER

Sister Aliza. Come here, sit down.

Aliza takes a seat next to Esther, and Angela walks away, but then hides behind the pews further back, peeking to see what will happen next.

ESTHER

Angela! Where have you fled? Come hither and offer your kind assistance.

Angela walks back up to the two women, looking inquisitive but hesitant.

ESTHER

As I strike this bowl, I would like you to turn this hourglass, for that is how long we have. And it is not long at all (chuckles)!

Esther hands Angela the hourglass. Esther then initiates her ritual of hypnosis by striking the singing bowl thrice. Aliza shuts her eyes. Angela turns the hourglass with a dramatic bang.

2 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

Aliza opens the hand-written letter which says: 'The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning. Lamentations 5:15.'

Aliza looks puzzled, gets teary-eyed, and thinks for a while.

8 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Aliza, after her dance in the garden, walks into the church. She takes a seat. The reverend, Elijah, a charming and well-groomed man in his 60's, is standing behind the pulpit. He notices Aliza walk in, and pauses for a minute.

ELIJAH

....And what may be a good spiritual barometer for the believer?
Let us take worship. How many of us can honestly say that we engage our full being; our heart, our spirit, and our full attention to our prayers? Ever heard a bird sing God's praises?
How does such sincere worship sound?

Angela puts her hand up. Elijah nods permissively.

ANGELA

Cuckoo! Cuckoo! Cuckoo!

ELIJAH

That's beautiful, Angela. We, humans, are not cuckoos who worship through singing, and we are not dancing peacocks for that matter. For us, worship should be meditative. In stillness and in silence. I recently read an article about mindfulness during worship. Some researchers developed a questionnaire which may serve as an eye opener for those of us who like to introspect. I have some copies here if you are interested. God bless you all.

9 INT. CHURCH NEXT TO PULPIT. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

The sermon finishes, people start leaving, and Aliza walks up to Elijah.

ALIZA

Father, I am interested in the questionnaire that you mentioned. I struggle to focus my mind when I pray. Sometimes, I feel like I'm a peacock in human form (chuckles).

ELIJAH

Here, take this. It may encourage some new insights.

Elijah hands her a few sheets of paper.

ALIZA

Thank you! Also, uhm.. I stumbled upon the book 'Purity of Heart is to Will one thing' where worship is likened to a theatrical performance...

ELIJAH (enthusiastically)

Oh yes, the Kierkegaardian metaphor of worship as theatre. He presents a reversal of the conventional roles of the priest, the congregation, and God, arguing that it is the worshipper in the

church, and not the priest, who is the performer, and God is the audience.

ALIZA

Exactly! So, if worship is a form of devotional performance, why must it be performed in stillness? Why can't it be...um.....embellished?

ELIJAH

Maybe... if one is not still during the prayer.... when one is, uhm...say.. excessively charismatic, one may be engaging in self-glorification which distracts from devotion to the divine.

Elijah pauses as he notices that Aliza is realising something. She remembers a quote that she reflectively quotes.

ALIZA

'I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside.'

ELIJAH

Yes, I think that Flannery O'Connor was on to something.

Elijah smiles and walks away. Aliza enters a deep reflective state, and seems to realise something profound.

Angela walks up to the two, carrying peacock feathers which she puts and waves on Aliza's shoulders. After a short moment of contemplation, while we see the feathers held on either side of her, Aliza looks down at Angela, smiles politely while still carrying a concerned expression. Angela hands her the feathers and walks away.

Aliza takes a seat on the front-row pew with the article in hand. A close-up of the front page of the article. She leaves through to the questionnaire itself. We see some questions about worship. She holds in her other hand the peacock feathers. She glances back and forth between the questionnaire and the feathers. She reflects profoundly(close-up).

2 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

Aliza sits in deep thought for a while. We see the text of the letter once again. Deborah's hymn can still be heard. She walks up to Deborah.

10 EXT. CEMETERT. BENCH ON HILL. DAYTIME.

Aliza stands in front of Deborah with the letter in her right hand. Deborah notices the letter, but carries on singing until the phrase is finished. Stops, and looks at Aliza with a concerned look.

ALIZA

It would appear her therapy continues.... from the eternal abode. Deborah thinks deeply, slightly puzzled (close-up).

The two now sit on the bench. Deborah has Esther's letter to Aliza in her hand, and glances back at it and reflects.

ALIZA

On whom do you think she is working her magic up there? We see the sky with some clouds visible, while the birds are singing.

DEBORAH

Maybe there's no need up there. No strangulated passions or repressed souls... One hopes....

Deborah looks as though she is not sure about the statement that she just made.

ALIZA

You're probably right. This is the abode of affliction. And with her gone, even more so for me.

Deborah looks at Aliza as if she (Deborah) is hiding something or feels guilty about something. Deborah thinks for a while

while looking straight ahead. Then, turns her gaze back to Aliza.

DEBORAH

Don't you remember anything from your sessions with her?

ALIZA

Not at all. Only that they were the only thing to keep my angst at bay. I imagine that she put me into some sort of a trance... (after a brief pause)... so that I could pray with full absorption.

Deborah looks concerned and a bit disappointed.

7 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Angela turns the hourglass (same scene as before continued). Esther strikes the singing bowl, Aliza closes her eyes, and Deborah walks over to the piano and starts playing.

Aliza's hands start moving rhythmically, and then her feet likewise. She slowly gets up gracefully, and starts dancing to the piano tune (strings are soon added to the instrumentation). It turns into a full-blown, energetic performance of emotional catharsis.

The hourglass is half empty.

Aliza continues to dance, and Deborah continues to play. The hourglass is almost empty.

The dance intensifies, with the piano going in the background, now dominated by strings.

Angela is moved by the dance and cries, then shuts her eyes. Esther, likewise, is deeply moved by the dance performance.

The music then slowly comes to an end, Aliza stops dancing, and Esther strikes the singing bowl once again. Deborah walks away.

Angela, who seems to be in a trance, whispers to Esther:

ANGELA

For my soul is full of troubles: and my life draweth nigh unto
the grave.

Hearing this puzzles and worries Esther, and puts her into deep
reflection.

Aliza opens her eyes, and smiles blissfully; she is spiritually
and physically nourished looking genuinely happy.

11 INT. CHURCH. NIGHT.

Some time later, Esther sits by herself and picks up a pad to
write something on. Meanwhile, Deborah is singing a hymn from
the hymn book around the corner in the church.

DEBORAH

I fear no foe with thee at hand to bless,

ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.

Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?

I triumph still, if thou abide with me.

She suddenly stops singing. Deliberates for a while, as if she
is debating something. She puts away the hymn book, straightens
her posture, closes her eyes, and now has a slightly rebellious
look on her face. Theatrical lights turn on, and she looks as if
she is on stage, poised to perform. She begins to sing an
operatic piece more passionately than she was singing the hymn.
Her body language becomes more performative and energetic. At
the end of her performance, Deborah smiles blissfully; she is
spiritually and physically nourished but overwhelmed by the
excitement. She tries to compose herself after all this
excitement, and brings herself back to her usual posture and
demeanour.

Esther is moved by the performance, and turns the hourglass
melancholically.

Elijah is seen at the back of the church being moved by the
singing, and begins to cry.

10 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

Aliza and Deborah sit in silence, reflecting for a minute. The birds can be heard singing in the background.

Deborah pulls out a letter that she received from Esther and hands it to Aliza. She opens it, and it says 'Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. Psalm 100:2'

Aliza is surprised.

ALIZA

Angela gave you this?

DEBORAH

Yes. Esther must have instructed her to pass them on to us.
(after a pause) Listen, I know you haven't been feeling well. I have been praying for you in all manners that I know. But, there is something else I want to try.

Deborah produces the singing bowl from her bag. Aliza is surprised.

DEBORAH

Let's see if we can emulate her healing technique.

Aliza deliberates deeply on the idea, then straightens her posture in preparation. Deborah strikes the bowl thrice.

DEBORAH

Lord, you are the healer of us all. We ask that you ease the spiritual and mental suffering of sister Aliza.

Aliza shuts her eyes. Nothing happens. She coughs gently. Deborah looks at her hands and feet, first with suspense, then with some disappointment as nothing happens. After a while, Aliza opens her eyes, and looks at Deborah.

12 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

(Montage continued) Angela is sitting on a pew reading. As she reflects on something, looking slightly up (as if she is getting some kind of a message, or can hear something that invites her to put down the book). She puts the book on the pew, gets up and starts to slowly dance.

10 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME.

(Montage continued) Aliza and Deborah walk to another part of the cemetery, and Deborah strikes the bowl once again, in an attempt to hypnotise Aliza. Nothing happens. Aliza thinks for a while.

ALIZA

Angela was always there when Esther used to treat me. She will be able to tell us exactly what she used to do.

Deborah looks like she has some reservations about this suggestion.

13 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

Angela is sitting down, talking to her stuffed animal.

ANGELA

They will be here any minute...wanting some answers.

14 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

ESTHER

You mustn't tell her that she dances in hypnosis. She believes she stopped dancing a long time ago. If you tell her, she will not continue these sessions. And she will feel worse.

13 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

Angela notices a book on the shelf, and takes a close look at it, realising something profound. She smiles.

13 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

Aliza and Deborah walk up to Angela who is still sitting and reading.

ALIZA

Dear child! Are you here by yourself?!

DEBORAH

Dearest, Angela. Are you feeling alright?

ANGELA

Yes, I am just a bit.....(pause, as see thinks) confused.

Aliza takes the book from her. Looks in astonishment at it.

ALIZA

Well, it's no wonder! Reading this?!

ANGELA

I was just thinking what kind of a creature I really am. Whether I can be two at the same time or whether I have to choose *either* one or the other. Sister, Aliza. If you had to choose, what bird would you be?

ALIZA

Angela, I'm not a bird, dear.

ANGELA

Sister Deborah. How about you?

Deborah thinks briefly, and then looks playful.

DEBORAH

I would be.... a.... Dove!

ANGELA

Prove it!

DEBORAH

(Makes the sound of a dove)

Angela is amused and laughs in enjoyment, then looks towards Aliza inquisitively. Angela embraces Aliza, and the three sit down on the pew, with Angela in the middle.

ANGELA

I really miss her.

DEBORAH

We do too, dear.

ANGELA

Her stories made me so happy.

ALIZA

Why don't you narrate to us your favourite story of hers.

Angela thinks for a short while, then smiles as she has just remembered the perfect story. She gets up and stands in front of Aliza and Deborah, building suspense before starting her theatrical narration.

ANGELA

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful peacock who used to bring joy and happiness to the whole village. She healed everybody who watched her dance, relieving them of their pain and suffering...

4 EXT. PARK BY THE LAKE. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Aliza is dancing in the park (same scene from earlier but from a different angle), and a few people are admiring her dancing.

OLD LADY

Hallelujah! What an angel!

13 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

ANGELA

One day, when she started doubting her true nature, she lost her magical feathers and stopped dancing. She was sad. (short pause) A kind-hearted witch then amazingly put her in a wonderland for a few minutes, and her feathers returned, allowing her to spread joy once again. The spell lasted only a few minutes, and soon after she returned from the wonderland, she had forgotten her special abilities. And once again, she was unhappy.

Angela looks into Aliza's handbag, and pulls out the peacock feathers.

ANGELA

I always imagined the feathers looking like these. Sister Aliza, why do you still carry these around?

Aliza reflects profoundly, as does Deborah.

DEBORAH

What happened next?

ANGELA

One day, a cuckoo whispered something in the ear of the peacock.

2 EXT. CEMETERY. DAYTIME. FLASHBACK.

Angela whispers something to Aliza, and we hear the whisper clearly this time.

ANGELA

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

13 INT. CHURCH. DAYTIME.

DEBORAH

What did she whisper?

Angela looks towards Aliza, who reflects for a while, and then takes a deep breath and becomes serene and at peace, after making a realisation.

ALIZA

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

16 EXT. GARDEN. DAYTIME.

Angela is sitting under a tree with the singing bowl. She strikes it three times and closes her eyes for a few seconds. She then leaves the singing bowl under the tree, gets up and skips across the passage with flower beds on each side, over to the bench where Aliza and Deborah are sitting reading. She takes a seat in the middle, and grabs her book (Jane Eyre) from underneath the bench.

A cuckoo sound is heard which makes Angela look up in surprise. She looks towards Deborah and Aliza but neither seems to have noticed anything, as they are engrossed in their reading. Angela gets up, walks around the bush, and sees a wooden box with a label: 'Deborah'. She takes it back to Deborah who opens it and finds a red microphone inside. She is surprised, and reflects for a while. Aliza and Angela are both excited on her behalf.

The cuckoo sound is heard once again, prompting Angela to go back where she discovers another box labelled: 'Aliza'. She takes it back, and Aliza opens it, finding a pair of ballet pointe shoes inside. She too is surprised, reflecting for a moment.

Angela sits back down in the middle.

17 EXT. GARDEN. DAYTIME.

Elijah is seen around the corner sitting on a bench, smiling, with a small golden box placed on the bench next to him. He is holding a letter like the ones that Aliza and Deborah received, with the envelope saying 'To Elijah, from Esther'. The letter reads: 'Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God' (Corinthians 10:31).

He gets up, grabs the box and walks around the corner. He stops, and has a playful look on his face(close-up).

ELIJAH

Cuckoo. Cuckoo. Cuckoo!

16 EXT. GARDEN. DAYTIME.

Angela hears this, and gets up and walks across the bush, seeing a third box. This time, it has her name on it. She picks it up, opens it, and is astonished that it has the red feather pen that Esther used to write the letters. She turns her gaze from down the box straight up towards the camera, thinking long and hard. Her expressions then slowly change from bewilderment to heartfelt joy as she realises something. She smiles, and slowly looks up to the sky with an expression of joy.

ANGELA

Thank you.

FADE OUT.