

At the next table Mitch Redding, Ralph Trumbull, and their friends were talking loudly. Mohammed heard Mitch say, “My dad says all Arabs want to be terrorists.”



Performing *Salat al-Zuhr* at school was an obligation Mohammed had always felt uneasy about. As the only Muslim at Pioneer, special arrangements had been made for him to pray at noon. The year before, his father had talked to Mr. Vander Bogart. The nurse’s office had been agreed upon as the ideal location for prayer—the wall with the vaccination chart aligned conveniently with Mecca—and the school nurse, Mrs. Kirmil, took lunch in the teacher’s lounge at that hour, so Mohammed would not be disturbed.

Even Mr. Vander Bogart had contributed to the plan. He gave Mohammed permission to use his private restroom for *wudu*, the ritual washing of face, hands, and feet before prayer. “Just don’t leave a mess,” he had advised.

Mohammed’s own preferences were not considered. He would have preferred not to be the only Muslim in middle school. He would have preferred to save his noon prayer for later, double it up with *Salat al-Asr* at home. But in Saturday Qur’an classes, his teacher, Yaseen Haneez—the bearded, bear-size Imam whose loud voice and unblinking gaze still made Mohammed tremble—had been clear on this point: Mohammed was now old enough to offer a noon prayer no matter where he was on the planet.

So every day before first lunch ended, Mohammed retreated to Mr. Vander Bogart’s office bathroom to wash—the smell of Old Spice strong inside—then to Mrs. Kirmil’s office to pray.

During the first weeks of seventh grade, he had kept the purpose of these visits to the nurse’s office a secret from friends, though his absence did not pass unnoticed. Mohammed knew he shouldn’t be ashamed, but for some reason he was. Once Merrill had asked, “Why are you going to see the nurse so much? Are

you sick?”

Mohammed had been ready. “Gotta take a pill.” Yeah, the pill of prayer.

Then one Friday at lunch, Edgar McHugh had choked on a Tater Tot. Teddy White—a member of the Young Engineer’s club and a kid Mohammed considered bold beyond his years—had jumped up and, just like the man they had watched in the health science video, he had performed the Heimlich on Edgar—picture-perfect, everyone had said—sending the Tater Tot flying across the cafeteria. Edgar had been rushed to the nurse’s office for examination. Mr. Plante, the assistant principal, had brought him in bent, coughing, gasping for air. There in front of the vaccination chart, they had stumbled over Mohammed on his knees, touching his head to the floor in private audience with Allah. The sight had been enough to halt Edgar’s cough and elicit an expletive from Mr. Plante that would be repeated in lunchroom circles for months after.

By the next day, everyone in school had heard. “Pill, eh?” Merrill had said, shaking his head.

That afternoon, after escaping Mitch and friends at the lunch table, Mohammed decided to make his prayer as short as possible. But in Mr. Vander Bogart’s office, he found the bathroom door locked. Mrs. Coutermarsh, Mr. Vander Bogart’s secretary, appeared behind him.

“The toilet is stopped, and the principal is in a meeting,” she declared, making this peculiar conjunction sound perfectly normal. “You’ll have to use the restroom down the hall.”

He had performed *wudu* in the restroom down the hall before, when the other had been in use, but this was the first time he had been told the principal’s bathroom was out of service.

Inside the tiled restroom, standing before one of the sinks, Mohammed wetted himself swiftly, not wishing to be observed by other boys who might enter. The sight of a kid with one foot in the sink always brought stares. And there was another reason for not getting too wet: unlike the principal’s bathroom, the boys’

restroom had no paper towels. Mohammed dried himself in front of one of the blow driers, holding up one foot to the warm air, then the other.

When he reached the nurse's office, another surprise awaited him. Mrs. Kirmil was back from lunch, sitting in her chair, smelling of cigarette smoke.

"Excuse me," he said, halting at the door. "I didn't know you were here."

Mrs. Kirmil, curt and unsympathetic in the face of student pain, blood, and screams, sounded more heartless than usual. "I need the office today," she snapped. "You'll have to find some other place. And tomorrow I have weight checks, so ..." She made a motion with her hand, suggesting that tomorrow had come, kids were lined up to be weighed, and Mohammed was in the way.

He left without a word, retreating to his locker, the skin of his face tight with air-blown dryness. At first he was relieved. He hadn't really wanted to pray. But as he waited for the fifth-period bell to ring, a new question troubled him. Had the stopped-up toilet and weight checks been a coincidence?



After school that afternoon, Mohammed walked from the bus stop to Norman's house, where Norman's mother answered the door. She looked surprised to find him on her step. "Mohammed," she said, forcing a smile.

"Hi, Mrs. Hazelton. How's Norm?"

Norman's mother surveyed the street over Mohammed's shoulder. "He's a little better," she said, standing in the doorway.

"Yeah. He said he felt sick."

Mrs. Hazelton frowned. "What happened—it upset him terribly. It upset all of us."

Mohammed nodded.

"I have a sister in New York. We've been crazy with worry since Tuesday."