

Upside-down
by Rohina Malik

Noor is in her late twenties. Modest dress but no headscarf.

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I live in a six-unit apartment building. I'm embarrassed to admit that I barely knew any of my neighbors. It's not entirely my fault. I was juggling school and work, plus my family who live an hour away, and I just never had time for my neighbors. But COVID would change that.

Muslims believe Paradise lies under the feet of mothers, so, we spend our life trying to honor and serve our mothers. Not always easy but we try. Last year, I lost my mother to breast cancer. And it shook me to my core. My mom was my everything. Who do I serve now? All of my aunts are back home in Palestine, and now, I was in need of new feet.

If I barely knew my neighbors before the quarantine, maybe now, I know them a little bit too well. The young Hipster couple that lives directly above me, Mason and Lana, I know all the variations of their baby's cry. I can tell when she's fussy, tired, or just needs a cartoon.

Mr. Rodriguez and his wife live across from me. Who needs TV shows when I get to hear all the drama of their marriage and his infidelities. They fight, they make up, and then Mr. Rodriguez sits on the back alley stairs and smokes. I'm usually already out there reading a book and six feet apart we chat.

It was actually Mr. Rodriguez who told me about Mrs. Lee's son. Mrs. Lee is a Korean immigrant, and she lives alone on the third floor. Her son visits once in a while but mostly she's alone. Mr. Rodriguez puffed on his cigarette while telling me the gory details of what happened to Mrs. Lee's son. "Two White dudes beat the shit out of that poor man. They blamed him for the "Chinese" disease. They said China spread the virus on purpose and blamed the Wuhan lab. And all of this bullshit happened a week after Trump called COVID the "Chinese" disease."

My heart broke for Mrs. Lee. But, I also felt clarity. I knew that Mrs. Lee would be my new adopted mother.

So, how do I serve her? She speaks zero English and I speak zero Korean.

Also, I can't enter her home and she can't enter mine. I pray to God and ask Him to guide me. It comes in the form of a dream. I see that I'm cooking *Makloobah* in my kitchen for my mom. I wake up and say "That's it!"

So, I cook *Makloobah* for Mrs. Lee. Palestinian *Makloobah*. It consists of meat, rice, and fried vegetables placed in a pot that is flipped upside down when served, hence the name *Makloobah*, which translates literally as "upside-down." It's my mother's famous recipe, and as I cook I feel my mom in the kitchen with me.

I packed the *Makloobah* in a big Tupperware and place it in a big Macy's bag. I add a box of chocolates and a card. I put on my mask, and then I walk upstairs to the 3rd floor.

Her son answers, no mask so I take a step back. I feel both pain and joy. Pain because his face is dark purple and joy because I have a translator. I'm standing at a safe distance and I point to the floor at the bag and tell him I cooked a special Palestinian dish for his mom. Can he call her? He takes the bag inside and returns with Mrs. Lee. They both wear masks.

I look at her. It's weird because her soft, silver hair reminds me of my mother. I tell Mrs. Lee how heartbroken I was when I heard about her son and the hate crime. I told her how I, as a Muslim understand hate crime. I told her that I knew at a cellular level what it feels like to be blamed for something you had no part in. As a Muslim-American, I've been blamed for religious terrorism and now, Asian-Americans are being blamed for Biological terrorism.

I've been there, done that, worn the T-shirt. I know what it feels like to be "Othered". I tell her what happened to me recently outside my Mosque and why I no longer wear *Hijab*. Her son translates.

I tell her I made her *Makloobah*, which means upside down, because right now, the world feels upside down, and yet, here I am, finally meeting my neighbor of three years. And maybe the world was upside down *before* COVID when we had no time for each other. And maybe now we are finally realizing that.

I tell her about the passing of my mother and how Muslims believe that Paradise lies at the feet of mothers. I tell her she is my elder, my adopted mother and now, *my* Paradise lies under *her* feet, so whatever she needs, she must call or text or knock at my door because she's no longer my neighbor, she's my mother.

I stop talking. Her son translates. There is a moment of silence.

Awkward silence.

She stares at me intently as if she sees something on my face that she recognizes.

She takes a small step toward me.

And then, in perfect English, Mrs. Lee says.

"Thank you, daughter."