

## **Ramadan**

By Marcus Yau

As the sun sets over the horizon, slowly disappearing below the colorful patchwork of shacks and houses, my mother prepared meals for Iftar. In our little hut made of bamboo and plastic sheets, we gathered and broke fast, and we ate a meal of rice, lentils and vegetables. We all sat on the floor in a dimly lit room, warmly lit up with a few candles, the air thick with the aroma of spices. My mother smiled warmly as she passed around plates of food to us, and my father led us in prayer: "Oh Allah (may he be praised and exalted), we thank you for this blessed month of Ramadan and for the food that we are about to receive. Bless this meal and make it a source of strength and nourishment for our bodies and souls. We are grateful for the blessings you have bestowed upon us and for the opportunity to break our fast together as a community. We pray for all those who are suffering in the world, especially our brothers and sisters who cannot find their families. May you grant them peace and ease their suffering. We ask for your forgiveness for any wrongs we may have done and for the strength to continue to serve you and our fellow humans with compassion and love. Amen." My little brother Omar could barely hold himself back during the prayer and eagerly reached for the bowl of lentils, looking as excited as ever as he took his spoonful and happily ate.

"Mmm, mom's lentil soup tastes especially good during Iftar, you know!" He exclaimed between hurried bites.

He is still young, and this city and the camp was all he had ever known in his life. He is lucky, in a way, that he does not know of the outside world, and he doesn't realize that we are in difficult circumstances. He spends his days playing with other children in the camp who grew up with him. He has not been to school yet but my mom is teaching him how to read and write. He also goes to the religious school that the Imam runs. My mother is currently applying for him to go to one of the schools in the camp, but the process is long, as always.

My mother woke me up before dawn today for the Sehri meal. We quickly said our Bismillahs, drank our cups of water and happily ate our meals. Me and my brother would always be happy when there was food, as when we first arrived to the camp, we spent many nights with empty stomachs. While on my way out to play football with the other kids, I would see men nodding off on the lanes, many people, especially those who don't know how to deal with the stress of our lives completely turning around after the soldiers started coming in, forcing us to move here, I have seen many turn to drugs to deal with the stress. I am grateful enough that I was raised well with the teachings of the Quran. My mother and the local Imam that runs his own school here taught us that the Prophet Muhammad (may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) emphasizes the sin of using drugs, so we can live more healthy and full lives. Luckily, we rarely miss our meals nowadays. As my mother helps run the community garden, me and my brother would always help out there as well so we would receive some extra food.

There was a pretty bad thunderstorm last night, I was awoken by the deafening, crackling sound of thunder and lightning. My little brother who was also woken up by the storm clung on to me, and he flinched with each tremendous bang of thunder. I calmed him down by singing some lullabies for him and reciting verses of the Surah Al-Falaq with him, and the storm calmed as he

drifted off to sleep, the soothing pitter-patter of the rain calming his nerves. Eventually I also fell back asleep, into a dream where I was back in my old house, in the village, with my family, my grandmother my grandfather and my neighbors, breaking fast for Iftar; eating a feast of dates, fresh fruits, my mother's special chickpea and chicken curry with some luri fira flatbread. I wish I could have stayed dreaming for a bit longer, but I was awoken by the dripping of water on my feet. My heart sank, and I quickly sat up to see if everything got soaked, but as I awoke I smelt the sweet scent of spices and herbs, my mother was already up cooking for our Sehri meal. I sighed with relief as I saw that my mother had put a bucket down to catch the water where there was the most leaking. She noticed that I was awake, and she exclaimed to me quite quietly to not wake my father and brother up that nothing got wet except for a blanket. It is a blessing that we were spared from the worst as it would be very hard to find firewood and replace some of our belongings. Today I will have to go out to find something to fix the leaky roof and help out the neighbors with their repairs.

My father has been feeling very homesick recently, and he talked to me about it, how he missed our home tending with the cows and the farm. He told me about the constant problems in the camp, and that dealing with the UN and aid organizations every day trying to get us resettled has been stressful, waiting in lines all day and having to fill out form after form. He said that he is sorry we have to stay here so long and that he is trying his best to get us out. It hurts me to see my father like this. I will study hard to make him happy. I prayed for him and my family today at Dhuhr. Tonight we shared Iftar with my friend Ali, his sister and his mother, as their firewood got wet from the rain last night. We sang and danced while Ali played his flute into the night. It was a nice night, and we went to sleep exhausted.

Ali, his sister and his mother were separated from his father and his brother when the soldiers arrived at their village and started shooting. Their homes and their lush fruit garden were burnt down and they were separated in the chaos. Every day his mother waits in line at the red cross and goes around the different camps trying to find his father. I prayed for him and his family today at Fajr and I thanked Allah (May he be praised and exalted) that my family never got separated. My father had the foresight to figure out that the soldiers would come back for more after they took the neighbor's cows and took him away from the village. We managed to leave before they came to attack, as we had heard from some others that some of the people of my village were rounded up and shot. I do not understand how you could harbor such hatred for people you have never met. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught us to be kind and forgive. The thought of my childhood friends Yusuf and Salim being shot sends a shudder down my spine. I shake that thought away, I believe they got away before the soldiers came again.

Me, Ali and some of the other boys my age gathered today for a game of football today, and while resting we shared stories of how we got to the camp. One boy, his name was Rahman, told us about how he had to hide inside a bush to hide from the soldiers. In the bush there was a large python behind him and all he could do was stay still. Luckily he got away unscathed.

“No way that’s real.” Ali exclaimed, raising his eyebrows in doubt. We exchanged a knowing glance, Rahman was known for telling tall tales.

Mohamed piped up: “I had to swim through the Naf River during peak monsoon season and I had to carry his baby brother through the jungle for 3 days! Alhamdulillah, it was a miracle that we managed to make it here.” We shifted away from the serious topics and started talking about girls. One of the guys mentioned Ali’s sister and he tackled him and wrestled him for a while, we all had a good laugh about it. Hearing about the journeys of my friends makes me see them in a different light.

Sometimes we wonder when we will leave and go back home. It is but a thought for us as many of us do not have homes to go back to. The soldiers will not allow it. Today at the food queue a fight broke out between two men over a misunderstanding where one man thought the other had skipped the queue. They were quickly stopped after by people standing on the side. Many people are going a little mad from having to stay in this camp and the fasting is not helping the mood.

We always wonder about when we will go back home. Sometimes we ask each other what would be the first thing we would do when we got back. My friend Nur says he would marry the girl he liked back in his village. I would like to go back to my old school and see my friends. These are just distant fantasies though, as many of our homes have been destroyed, our villages empty.

There is news of a new disease spreading again, people are calling it Corona. Some men came around today to teach us to wash our hands and handed out masks to people, they told us to always keep our masks on. The healer that works at the garden with my mother gave us a mix of herbs and roots, and told us to boil it and drink it every evening to help us ward off the diseases.

There have been many diseases that went around the camp before, mostly from drinking bad water, but apparently this new one spreads through the air. Some men standing around saw me wearing my mask and asked me:

"Boy, why are you wearing a mask?", "So I don't get sick; haven't you heard of the new disease going around?" I responded, "Ah, that new one? It will pass like the other ones; there is no need to worry so much; just don't forget to pray for protection; that will be way better than wearing a mask in this weather." The men snickered amongst themselves as I walked away. I prefer not to take my chances with diseases; I'll choose to listen to the professionals.

I asked my mother one night, "Why was it in Allah's plan for us, the faithful, to suffer so much? Why would he plan for Ali's family to be separated or for Nur's mother to be killed?" She explained it to me softly. "Well, dear Allah, is the All-Knowing and the All-Wise; in his infinite wisdom, there are some things we cannot comprehend; all this suffering serves as trials and tests of our faith and character. Without suffering, how could we be tested? How could we grow and strengthen ourselves? You should know better than many that suffering reminds us to appreciate the blessings Allah has bestowed upon us." My mother is so wise, and I thought about these teachings while drifting to sleep and realized the truth within them. I'll make sure to keep them in mind.

At school today, the teacher taught us about the different animals, and they brought in a projector to show us a documentary about the different animals of our world. They showed us such amazing animals as the gigantic blue whale in the deep oceans. They turned off the classroom lights, and they turned on the projector that cast a screen of light across the wall of the room. The vibrant videos and images amazed me—the beautiful pink flamingos, the peacocks with their majestic, colorful plumes. Our whole class was in awe when they showed us the whale, an absolutely colossal marine animal, coming out of the ocean, causing huge waves. This documentary inspired me. In the future, when we get out of here, I would love to see one of these

majestic creatures in the flesh and witness these beautiful creations of Allah (may he be revered and exalted).

Eid Al-Fitr is coming soon, I can barely wait for the feast then. I have been so hungry fasting this past month, sometimes, wallahi I could eat a whole cow! We have to prepare many things for the occasion, we will have to get new clothes and buy food and supplies at the markets. Outside, there is an air of anticipation and excitement for Eid, as there are people going around the camp, with bags full of new clothes, good foods and supplies. The little camp market up the hill is bustling with life. I'll have to go up to the market to buy some sweets for my little brother at the festival.

I woke up before my mother even came to wake me, the anticipation of the day building in my heart. I went out to the communal wash area, and there were already some of my neighbors there. We greeted each other as brothers and sisters, and we washed ourselves, cleansing for the special day. I went back to our hut and put on my special Eid clothes, a simple blue outfit. My family was already awake and getting ready to go wash themselves as well. We had a simple breakfast in our hut, our first meal breaking fast, of tea, flatbread, and lentil soup, as my mother and my father prepared the firewood for the cooking. Afterwards, we headed to the makeshift prayer area. There was already a large congregation gathered for the Eid prayer. I spotted Ali, and we exchanged glances. We were united, shoulder to shoulder, praying together, with the Imam's voice resonating through the space. After that, I greeted and embraced my friends and neighbors, as Eid is about reconnecting with loved ones. Tonight, we will feast as a community. The aroma of spices, succulent lamb, and tender chicken fills the air in the street. The entire neighborhood comes together, with each family contributing to this communal feast. All around is the sound of

laughter, conversations, and the clinking of plates and glasses. As the glow of gas lamps illuminates the street into the night, we all forget our stresses. Underneath patchwork houses and huts akin to collages of plastic, metal, and wood, we come together tonight as a community to celebrate this holy day.