



Rebellious silence

Elena Mitchell

There was something about art galleries that had always fascinated her. Maybe it was the stark white walls or the iridescent glow of the perfectly angled light. Or perhaps it was the thousands of paintings, each with their own story to tell, waiting patiently to be read. She was crossing the room on her way out when a small dark painting caught her eye. She walked towards it, curiosity getting the better of her; it was a black and white portrait of a woman wearing a black chador with Arabic text written over her face. The work was beautiful, the words enhancing the gentle contours of the face, which wore a calm and composed expression. The eyes were dark and piercing, nothing like her own light blue, watery eyes. However, what shocked her the most was what cut straight through the middle of the work, bisecting the face in half: a gun.

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I gently ran my finger over the edge of my bedside table, the dust turning the tips of my fingers red. When we first moved here, I couldn't stand the fine red dirt that seemed to slip under doors and slide through the gaps between windows, smothering everything in a thin, grimy layer of red. It had been five years since we had taken the long, treacherous boat journey here, but I could still vividly remember our first day. I hated the

isolation and the heat, but most of all I hated the unknown faces. In time, though, I had come to know those unknown faces, and now I finally felt like I was one of them.

The loud knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts, I glanced at the clock: 7:45 am. As usual, her timing was perfect. I swung my bag onto my back and opened the door. There she was. 'Shiri!' she exclaimed, 'You ready for our walk to school?' She had watery blue eyes and cheeks that seemed permanently flushed, with a mass of blonde curls that fell just beneath her dimples and bounced whenever she ran. We were polar opposites but somehow we just clicked perfectly, even though I think a part of me always longed for her pale looks. I had long, almost black hair, that only showed hints of dark brown when the sun caught it. My eyes were the same, the colour of midnight or the soft down of a raven's wing. I closed the gate behind us and we set off, already finding something to giggle about, our shrill chorus infectious to anyone who heard.

It was the morning of my twelfth birthday, but it felt like I had grown five years not one. The weather was almost unbearable today, a hot oppressive heat that seemed to press down on me with every step. A lone bead of sweat rolled down the back of my neck, leaving a temporary trail of coolness in its path. The long black garment was draped over the edge of my bed. I knew eventually this day would come; however, I didn't realise just how soon it would be. I gently picked it up, letting the soft black silk slide between my fingers. I knew I had to do it for my mother, for my culture, but I couldn't ignore the voice inside me wishing I could just be like everyone else. I grasped it firmly with two hands and draped it over my head, holding it close to my chin with one hand while I wrapped the excess material around my neck. I walked towards the mirror that was covered in layers of greasy fingerprints and rimmed with tired,

white wood. I couldn't believe what was standing in front of me, my silky black hair was fully covered and the long draping material covered up my womanly curves. I carefully ran a finger over the frame, feeling its cool ridges and grooves as shards of paint flaked off into my hand. I slid the gold pins my mother had bought me into my hair, fastening the material to my head. For a second, I thought about pulling it off, ripping it in half and living a normal life like everyone else, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it now.

A knock at the door: 7:45 am. I sighed with relief, maybe everything wouldn't be so different after all. I opened the door as I had done every morning; however, I was wrong, there was something different about her today. Her blonde curls usually so tightly wound and bouncing with excitement seemed flat and dull. Her smile too big, too white as though someone had plastered it onto her face. But what gave it away was the way she laughed — the sparkle was gone and her grin didn't quite make it up to those watery blue eyes.

School was different as well, I felt eyes following me like flies wherever I went, boring into my back as I walked. I could no longer keep track of the amount of awkward fleeting moments that happened when someone staring would inadvertently catch my eye then hurriedly look away, sweep their hair behind their ears and become consumed in looking at the floor. Teachers were no better, observing me with the gaze of a stranger from afar and I saw it in their eyes that an opinion had been made.

The next day, I looked at the clock: 7:46 am. I waited, maybe she had woken up late. The clock chimed eight times and I still sat there on the floor by the door, deciding whether or not it was all worth it. Perhaps I could take it off on my way to school, mother would never know. But I couldn't bring myself

to do it, out of respect for the generations before me and the way I knew it would break my mother's heart if she ever found out. So that's how it remained: no more knocks at the door. Instead, I walked alone to school, trying to ignore the sideways glances that followed me wherever I went. In about a week or two she found new friends; I saw them all walk in together at school, laughing and chatting as we had once done. A couple of times I caught her eye, just a glance for no more than a second, and in those watery blue eyes I think I saw a touch of longing and sadness.

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'The art gallery is closing in five minutes.'

Pulled from her daze, she looked once more at the painting before her, the painting once again becoming clear in her vision. She looked closer at the woman in front of her, the wisp of hair peaking from underneath the chador was black and at the tips, where the sun hit it, dark brown, while the eyes with their determined glare were like tiny pools of black ink. Her eyes slowly moved to the bottom right hand corner and she read the caption, 'Rebellious Silence, by Shirin Neshat'. She took a deep breath. It was her.