



The Last Night of a Damned Soul: A Novel

Slimane Benaissa

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Chapter 1 (noon prayer)

The story opens with the main character, Raouf, on his way to celebrate the Muslim feast of the Sacrifice Eid-al Adha with a fellow computer designer named Athmane. An only child, Raouf was raised by immigrant parents (Egyptian father and Lebanese mother) well-educated scientists, to become an American. Stunned by the recent and sudden death of his father, Raouf experiences a deep void in his existence. Living with his Protestant girlfriend, Jenny, in a loving and stable relationship, Raouf nevertheless finds himself inexplicably drawn to the allure of Athmane and his deep connection to a Muslim fundamentalist community. Despite his Arabic and Muslim origins, Raouf had known only the secular world of contemporary American life. A Palestinian by birth, Athmane introduces Raouf to the Koran, to Muslim beliefs, and ultimately to the decision to repent and to "surrender" himself to Islam.

Chapter 2 (afternoon prayer)

Raouf follows the lead of Athmane, and decides to devote himself to reading and studying Islam. Through the connections of the Kuwaiti prince Djamel, Raouf moves to a studio apartment and continues to discover the depths of his Muslim roots in preparation for his formal and public repentance at the Hamza mosque. His mother encounters problems with her health, that she downplays to her son.

Chapter 3 (evening prayer)


Athmane prepares Raouf to enter into a new phase of devotion, one which justifies "action" in the name of God. This stage of isolation convinces Raouf that he must leave Jenny and their dog (which is proscribed by Islam) definitively. As he prepares for the most intensive and restricted part of his training, he must also figure out how to explain a lengthy absence to his mother.

Chapter 4 (midnight prayer)

Raouf submits to a rigorous period of prayer and preparation for jihad and ultimate death. He loses himself in the highly structured regimen of the indoctrination process, in the cult of the Islamic martyr. He and his fellow conspirators concentrate on their precision training for the "action." At the chapter's end, he is on his way to the airport to meet his fellow martyr conspirators at the rendez-vous point.

Chapter 5 (dawn prayer)

This chapter begins as a letter written by Raouf to Athmane in what is essentially an explanation of his joy at being ready to pursue to the death the "action" in God's name. In a sudden shift, the narrator Raouf announces that he mailed the letter but that he is not on the plane. What follows is a description of the moments leading up to his last-minute decision not to board the plane. The chapter continues with Raouf's thoughts on suicide and Islam, and ends in prison. After days of intense interrogation, Jenny arrives to deliver a letter from Raouf's hospitalized mother. It was written after she saw his face on television as the terrorist who didn't board the plane. Written on her deathbed and "last night," Raouf's mother explores her own relationship to Islam and to the Arab-Muslim world in contrast to that of her son. The novel ends with the mother's final words to her son.

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