

# Sufi Evening

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GRETA HOFMANN NEMIROFF

*Irene est doyenne à un collège à Montréal où un professeur de religion l'invite à assister à une présentation sur le soufisme. Elle accepte l'invitation mais se retrouve au prise avec des souvenirs d'un échec amoureux, de l'absence totale de la foi dans sa vie et de la colère qui les unit.*

It is only when Dr. Haddad appears at her door that Irene recalls the ornate invitation to the Sufi evening he has arranged for his students. She doesn't feel quite up to this event, but excuses melt on her tongue as she takes in his expectant smile.

"Do not hesitate," he assures her. "You will thoroughly enjoy the evening. Who knows how you might benefit from a new spiritual experience? Our theme this year is 'Remembrance of God.' We have a first rate guest speaker . . . and he won't cost the college one penny. As usual we have kept the students' expenses down by having my son-in-law's restaurant catering authentic regional foods. Of course, you will be my personal guest." He stretches out his hand in a halting gesture. "No, Irene, I will not discuss this. You are my guest!"

"I'll be down in a few minutes, but I'd just like to clear my desk first."

"Whatever for, my dear lady? It will all be waiting patiently for you in the morning. Every evening as I pass your office on my way home, you are still at your desk. You work far too hard. We all wonder what you can possibly be doing into the night. Even a dean must live and enjoy life. Please allow me the pleasure of escorting you to the reception hall."

Irene briefly wonders if it would be wise not to attend the Sufi evening. She is, after all, new to the college and must establish a network of allies. At her job interview she was advised to do her utmost to cultivate and support faculty initiatives, and Dr. Haddad is known to be an erudite and powerful faculty presence. He walks surprisingly quickly and she, who is younger and taller, must hurry to keep pace with him. As they walk past the long windows in the passage way and she glimpses the blue-grey winter dusk, she is struck by a sense of unreality. She shouldn't be here in Montreal on the other side of the country. She should be in Nelson preparing dinner for Phil and herself; she'd be making her special rich chili-con-carne, home made corn bread, and a fresh breathing salad

. . . everything organic. She would stop from time to time to enjoy the view of a crescent moon rising over the mountains. She would hear Phil stomping winter off his boots. She would draw comfort from imagining a similar domestic scene being played by their neighbours high in the foothills of Nelson: fireplaces glowing, the warmth of red wine, the murmur of the shared minutiae of their days.

But here she is in the "east," cramped in a fifteenth floor apartment on Rue-de-la-Montagne, where she barely recognizes her neighbours. Sometimes, though, as she picks at her take-out dinners, she wonders what they are eating and with whom. At the time it had seemed adventurous and almost romantic to leave Nelson for a new urban life in Montreal.

"Welcome to our Tenth Annual Sufi Evening." Dr. Haddad has mounted a small platform in the reception hall. "We are most honoured tonight with the presence of our esteemed new Dean, Dr. Irene Felsen, and our honoured guest speaker, Dr. Alan Balinsky. I welcome you to enjoy the buffet created by the Royal Punjab Restaurant at 1521 University Street. Before joining the queue, those stu-

dents who have not yet paid your ten dollars may give it to my 'better half' sitting at the head table." Dr. Haddad indicates his wife who nods timidly at the group. "She has the class list and will keep track of the payments. Dr. Balinsky will give his learned talk after we have eaten. We will close with a demonstration of Sufi prayer. I hope all of you will participate."

"Academic quality control! That's a good one." Dr. Balinsky gives a mixture of a laugh and a snort. "What's does that mean these days?"

"I assume you are a surgeon," Irene dislikes her mollifying tone.

"Not at all, I'm a dermatologist. Did my greens mislead you?" She cannot decode Dr. Balinsky's smile.

"Indeed they did." Irene knows

referring to himself as "nominally Catholic." She'd even encouraged his attending Sunday morning mass while she slept in, cocooned in the duvet, stretched diagonally across their bed. She'd been glad he'd found such a good friend in Father Holtz, an elderly man with an ecumenical outlook, who liked to observe that Nelson and indeed all of British

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Sixty-five students clap apathetically and, at a sign from Dr. Haddad, rush to queue at the buffet. Dr. Haddad ushers Irene and Dr. Balinsky to the head table with a firm hand on each of their elbows. "Do not worry about the buffet," he says as he steers them into their seats. "We at the head table will be served." As conversation fills the space around her, Irene struggles to overcome nagging feelings of yearning and displacement, to force herself into the present. She should really be, she is certain, in Nelson living with Phil.

"What do deans actually do?" Dr. Balinsky has turned to her in a gesture of inclusion. He is fully bearded and dressed in a green operating room uniform with a white crocheted cap on his head.

"A little of everything," Torn from her cocoon of reminiscence, Irene tries to inject a light professional tone into her response.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dr. Balinsky sucks noisily on a chicken leg.

Averting her eyes, Irene attempts a tone of distant friendliness. "You might say that I hold things together, keep everyone on track, and maintain academic quality control."

she is smiling primly; she would like to appear friendly and open. She will not, however, engage in verbal jousting with this man. As a burning feeling rises painfully in her chest, she recognizes this sensation. It infused her last days with Phil when she'd tried to reason, to argue him back into their comfortable life

"Come on, Irene, you know nothing is guaranteed to last forever ... except for eternity." Although Phil's voice had been mild, his eyes were impenetrable. "I'm sorry to see you hurt like this, but it's not as if I'm leaving you for another woman. You know I'm a strong believer in fidelity."

"Perhaps that would be easier," she'd replied. There was nothing in her secular upbringing to prepare her for this eventuality. Her parents had claimed to be agnostics, although on the whole religion was simply ignored in her family. She tried to be open to the beliefs of others, but the thought of any religious commitment inspired in her only feelings of claustrophobia.

Over their last year or two, she hadn't been aware that Phil had become a daily communicant of St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church. She had not noticed that he had stopped

Columbia had its share of "special people" requiring a "special religious approach." He was referring to people like them and their neighbours, many of whom were also long-standing unmarried couples. Some were refugees from the cities of central Canada; others were American expatriates who had entered Canada as draft resisters during the Vietnam War. Many of their neighbours had started small, successful and environmentally impeccable businesses. Others, like Phil and herself, worked in education and government services.

Who of these "special people," she often wondered, would ever have imagined that Phil, an expatriate Californian who had had several well-established affairs since his arrival thirty years before, would choose to become a monk in a reclusive order? Regarded as a regional *bon vivant*, he was an ardent skier, kayaker and hiker who, at the age of fifty had even taken up snow-boarding with the youngsters in the community. By the time Irene had discovered the fullness of his intentions, Phil had already begun systematically divesting himself of most of his belongings. He wanted to sell the house they shared

in order to bring a significant sum of money to the order in Oregon. Time was of the essence as he'd arranged to enter a forthcoming program of spiritual formation. Irene had felt a prolonged coldness inhabit her body as they sensibly discussed the division of their shared property; he'd been conciliatory but firm in his intentions.

"It's nothing against you or our ten years together," he'd insisted. "It's been a great run! It's just that I intensely experience the need for a religious vocation. I hope God finds me worthy to take solemn vows and be ordained when I've finished my formation. What I hope for you is that one day you undertake a spiritual mission yourself. I'm sure you can do it."

Irene couldn't decide if he meant his words in a kindly or dismissive manner. Who was he anyway to try to include her in his inconsiderate choices? Even here at the Sufi evening she finds herself unable to fully concentrate and is filled with retrospective anger at his complacency.

"I can't think why you'd have such a wish for me," she'd retorted. "You know perfectly well that I've always been a secular person."

Irene's memories, so often revisited, are broken by Dr. Balinsky's voice, far too close to her ear. "I'm a convert to Islam. I was brought up in a good Jewish family. What about you?"

As Irene flounders, grasping for a neutral way to recount her secular upbringing, Balinsky sweeps on: "Thirty years ago, just after med school, I backpacked through Turkey and parts of Central Asia. In Turkey I saw whirling dervishes. They completely blew my mind. 'There's got to be more than I can see,' I thought. The rest is history." He winks at her in a knowing way as he rises to give his speech following Dr. Haddad's fulsome introduction.

Irene only hears scraps of Balinsky's speech, fragments which serve to renew her anger and sadness ... a tidal

wave she struggles to keep at bay. "As a Sufi saint once said, 'I ask nothing for me, O Lord, no favours, no graces, only yourself,'" intones Dr. Balinsky.

Why wasn't she, why wasn't their comfortable life together enough for Phil, she'd repeatedly ask as she'd tried to talk him out of his decision. "Irene, I'm not putting down our life together. I'm not trying to hurt you either. This isn't about you. It's about my life. I was happy for a long time, fifty-two years actually, but now I'm ready for more ... more depth to my life. That's what Father Holtz and I discovered during those many hours of spiritual direction."

"Spiritual direction? You've never mentioned that to me. You only said you had lunch with him sometimes."

"I've been seeing him almost every day at lunch hour for three years now to talk about the spiritual lacunae in my life. It hasn't been easy, believe me."

Irene had felt as if a heavy object had collided with her chest. It was as if Phil had been cheating on her. Even now in the college reception hall she can feel reverberations of the dull heavy thud that left her breathless.

"Let me tell you what Sufi truly is," the doctor continues while the students shift restlessly in their chairs. "I know young people are mainly interested in fun, hanging out with your friends, maybe having sex or alcohol or drugs ... or all of the above." There was a subdued ripple of shocked laughter from the audience. "You want to acquire the latest video games, cell phones, clothes, DVDs ... whatever ... you name it. But there's more to life than that stuff, that shit, believe me. A Sufi on the other hand is, and I quote 'one who is separated from the many but is united to the One.' A Sufi is 'one who is free from useless desires and who has abandoned only troubles. A Sufi is one who has lost himself, but has found Allah.' Sure, in the short run your desires probably seem all-important ... I've been there,

I know, but in the long run what you need to find is God or Allah as I have found him. Finding him is your only hope for true happiness."

Irene would like to flee, or at least to stick her fingers in her ears. Balinsky sounds to her like Phil when he'd said, "I just realized that by pursuing pleasure, financial security, sports, a comfortable home and more, I was pursuing a false god. I had to find more in this life." His words had struck her as a direct affront to the life they had constructed together.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find financial security as a monk," she'd observed acidly.

"Don't you see that it's not about that?" There had been a new intensity to Phil's voice. "It's about fusing with something greater than myself, meeting my spiritual needs, giving meaning to my life before it's too late."

"I certainly can't compete with God," she'd observed. "I don't even get a vote, yet your decision has such a destructive impact on my life. What am I supposed to do now?"

"Perhaps this is a good time for you to attend to your spiritual needs. As Father Holtz likes to say, 'There's a difference between having your feet *on* the ground and having your feet *in* the ground.' It's an amazing experience to transcend the here and now and find eternal unity with God. It's a truly undeserved gift of Grace."

Irene was silenced by Phil's words; it appeared to her that they no longer spoke the same language. She didn't want him to know that the very mention of eternity terrified her as if all the darkness in the universe were pressing against her, forcing all the oxygen from her lungs.

Irene realizes by the decrescendo of Dr. Balinsky's voice that he is reaching the coda of his talk. "As I told you all, I'm a convert to Islam from Judaism. I've left my Jewishness behind, the 613 laws Jews are supposed to follow, the materialism, and even the JAPS

... the Jewish-American Princesses.” He pauses as if awaiting laughter from the audience, which does not respond. “What I want to convey to you most of all is that if I could make an about-turn from being a regular materialistic, ambitious Jewish doctor making a bundle to becoming a seeker of truth and of God, then so can you. Let me leave you with some words from Rumi, the great Sufi poet: ‘I was looking for God everywhere. I looked into my heart and found him there.’”

The students unenthusiastically join the Haddads’ energetic applause. There are no questions, and it is clear to Irene that the students are ready to leave. They are forestalled by Dr. Haddad raising his hand in a silencing gesture. “Thank you, thank you Dr. Balinsky for a most illuminating presentation. May I remind you all that we are approaching the climax of our evening, the demonstration of Sufi prayer which I hope all of you will join.”

Irene avoids Dr. Haddad’s meaningful glance. He is approaching students, asking them in a transparently off-hand manner to try Sufi prayer, but only three students agree to pray. They help Dr. Balinsky drag the prayer rugs to the center of the room.

“Surely you will join us,” Dr. Haddad has stopped directly in front of Irene.

“Thank you, but I’m not a believer, Dr. Haddad.” Irene struggles to sound neutral.

“One doesn’t have to be a believer to experience God,” Dr. Haddad replies. “One simply has to be open to recognizing His presence.”

“I would rather watch, Dr. Haddad. This has been such an interesting and informative evening.”

The three students, Dr. and Mrs. Haddad and Dr. Balinsky kneel in a row on the prayer rugs, facing the same direction. “Shahadah, shaha-dah,” Dr. Haddad leads the group in the proclamation of faith.

Irene studiously follows the notes Dr. Haddad has handed out. The worshippers repeat their chant often, especially when asking Allah for his forgiveness: “Astaghfirullah,” they repeat with growing fervour. As Irene watches them, she imagines each one as a small craft bobbing helplessly on the scuffed tile floor. They repeat “Allahu Allah” many times, a phrase she recognizes from TV reportage on the Middle East. As the group moves to chanting, “Ya Rahim,” “Oh, the merciful,” Irene is aware that even at her skeptical distance, she is waiting for something extraordinary to happen. She would like the small group on the prayer rugs to burst into song, or perhaps to rise and dance as whirling dervishes ... even to levitate. She desires a sign that they are transformed by prayer. Attached to their rugs, they call out the Prophet’s sacred attributes in tones of deep yearning. As the prayer session draws to a close, Irene notices an italicized ending to Dr. Haddad’s class notes: “The attribute ‘Ya wadud,’” it says, “means ‘loving.’”

While some students hesitate, a few clap tentatively at the end of the prayers. The room fills with the familiar sounds of zippers, boots being slipped on, and knapsacks being hitched to shoulders as the students rush impatiently into their real lives. The air is thick with their liberation into a night full of possibilities. Dr. Haddad is advancing towards Irene, his arms stretched in a gesture that suggests benediction.

“May I escort you back to your office?” he asks in a tone of exaggerated gallantry.

“Thank you,” Irene responds, “but I’d like to sit here a few more moments and digest this very interesting experience.” She stretches her hand to return his program notes.

“Oh no, please keep the notes, Irene. You can never tell. They may be useful to you some day.” Dr. Haddad

affects a small salute and herds the rest of his party out of the room with gestures of solicitousness.

Irene remains immobile in the emptied room. She cannot absorb the notion of becoming “one with God.” She recalls her undergraduate religion course where everything had seemed so clear; she had easily learned the correct vocabulary and achieved an A. She recalls Elizabeth, her yoga instructor in Nelson, describing meditation as “the feeling of oneness with God that takes you beyond the world of Ego.” Irene had sat dutifully in an uncomfortable lotus position with her eyes closed, unable to find her way past the detritus of everyday life.

She knows she can frame this Sufi evening as an amusing anecdote illustrating her lack of talent for spiritual life. She doesn’t want to do that, though. What she wants is to give full vent to the rage she feels gathering and blossoming within her. Who are they, Phil, Balinsky and Haddad? Who are they to think they have special exemptions elevating them above the daily world, connecting them to a higher Being, a higher Truth?

Filled with the heat of her feelings, Irene makes her way to her office through the silent and empty halls. Preparing herself for the dark winter night, she is reminded that she is not returning to the warmth of a shared life, but to the coldness of a barely furnished apartment where she cannot name even one neighbour. As she treks along Sherbrooke street past expensive boutiques and restaurants, she imagines how she would be received if she were to let slide her well constructed façade of a reasonable middle-aged woman. Although friends and colleagues tried to persuade her to rebuild her life in Nelson, she could not have tolerated being single in a world so committed to the human arrangement of couples. “I’ve got to experience the East,” she’d joked, although what she’d meant was

“faraway.” Then the job in Montreal had come up.

She knows she should start “investing” in the here and now. She is struck, as usual, by the emptiness of her large living room ... a white leather sofa, a small table and the tv. Perhaps she should give a dinner party for people from work. That would mean buying a dining room set, unpacking her good dishes and finding her tablecloths. Whom would she invite and why, and could they even begin fill this vacuum?

She doesn't want small incremental measures of adjustment. What she wants is to scream, her voice piercing the sound-proofed walls. “Fools, hypocrites,” she wants to shriek. “You with your prayer rugs, crucifixes, jargon and silences! What do you really know about human suffering? What do you know about having to pick through shards and stones to construct a life you don't want to live?”

Irene wants her thin hair to fly in unruly clouds around her blood-suffused face, her veined eyes popping through facial distortions. She wants to be the very cartoon of a “Crazy Lady.” She wants to scrawl a letter in oily black ink, revealing to Phil the ugly but true passions that coursed through her during their many dispassionate conversations: “How do you think I feel seeing what we built up together going to a bunch of eunuchs in Oregon?”

She won't write to Phil. She knows he would not answer. His silence, she comprehends, will accompany all her brave efforts at living. It will be there for the duration.

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## CAROLE GLASSER LANGILLE

### Stir

I can hide like a thief  
but the heart is a policeman at the crossroads  
who forces me out in the open. Outside,  
where the earth is seeded, day  
cedes its place. Water has picked up  
the last shred of light and carried it away. *Hush.*  
Evening is a great brooding dog. I want to leave  
and not be followed. If I know a psalm, it's this: *journey*  
*is a type of singing*, suffused with dance,  
sufficing. The Sufis had it right. No one  
is refused. The great lie is this: that voyage means  
*going*. Each time I venture out,  
I am always led inward, stumbling, hurtling,  
as if falling were succeeding. Who holds up  
whom? No one steals away.

*Carole Glasser Langille's fourth book of poetry, Church of the Exquisite Panic: The Ophelia Poems was published in October 2012. It was recently nominated for The Atlantic Poetry Prize.*

## A. MARY MURPHY

### I don't want to be an old crazy person

I don't want to be an old crazy person  
muttering around the streets  
collecting cigarette butts  
various brands  
I don't smoke  
but what if I take it up  
what if none of the butts are my brand  
what if I don't live somewhere warm  
have to pick up stubby things  
with mittens on my hands  
being old will be bad enough

*A. Mary Murphy's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*