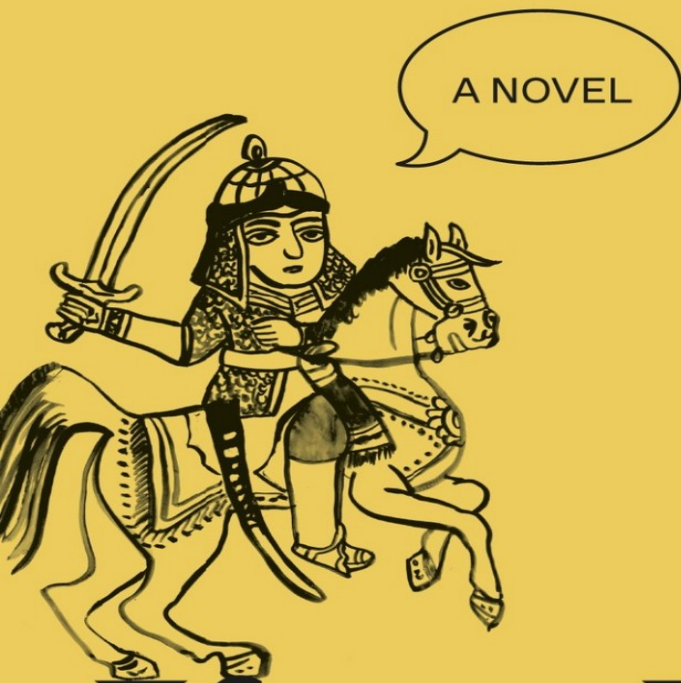


Martyr!

“Kaveh Akbar is one of my favorite writers. Ever.”

—TOMMY ORANGE



Kaveh Akbar

MARTYR!

Kaveh Akbar



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Cyrus Shams](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Monday](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[\[From: Rear Admiral...\]](#)

[\[That evening, Cyrus...\]](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[\[For as long...\]](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Bandar Abbas, Iran](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[\[WASHINGTON, July 3...\]](#)

[Cyrus and Ali Shams](#)

[Lisa Simpson and Roya Shams](#)

Chapter Six

Roya and Arash Shirazi

Chapter Seven

[From: Rear Admiral...]

Tuesday

Chapter Eight

Zee Novak

Chapter Nine: Bobby Sands

Friday

Chapter Ten

[I am setting...]

Ali Shams

Friday

Chapter Eleven

Arash Shirazi

Chapter Twelve

[Gilles Deleuze called...]

Cyrus Shams

Chapter Thirteen

[The iron law...]

Roya Shams

Chapter Fourteen: Qu Yuan

Saturday.

Chapter Fifteen

[It feels so...]

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Beethoven Shams

Chapter Sixteen

[From: Rear Admiral...]

Arash Shirazi

Chapter Seventeen: Bhagat Singh

Sunday.

Interlude

Chapter Eighteen: Roya Shams/Mom

Roya Shams

Chapter Nineteen

Sunday.

Chapter Twenty

Sunday.

Chapter Twenty-one: Ali Shams

Sunday.

Chapter Twenty-two

Orkideh and President Invective

Chapter Twenty-three

Roya Shams

Chapter Twenty-four: Orkideh

Monday.

Chapter Twenty-five

[If the mortal...]

Ali Shams and Rumi

Monday.

Chapter Twenty-six

[In the balancing...]

Roya Shams

Monday.

Chapter Twenty-seven

[When asked about...]

[Sitting on a...]

Chapter Twenty-eight

[I believe that...]

Orkideh

Chapter Twenty-nine

Orkideh

Chapter Thirty

Monday.

Chapter Thirty-one

[There are no...]

Orkideh

Chapter Thirty-two

[I feel dangerous...]

Monday.

Coda

Sang Linh

Epigraph

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

for the martyrs, who live



My God, I just remembered that we die.

—*Clarice Lispector*

CYRUS SHAMS



KEADY UNIVERSITY, 2015

Maybe it was that Cyrus had done the wrong drugs in the right order, or the right drugs in the wrong order, but when God finally spoke back to him after twenty-seven years of silence, what Cyrus wanted more than anything else was a do-over. Clarification. Lying on his mattress that smelled like piss and Febreze, in his bedroom that smelled like piss and Febreze, Cyrus stared up at the room's single light bulb, willing it to blink again, willing God to confirm that the bulb's flicker had been a divine action and not just the old apartment's trashy wiring.

"Flash it on and off," Cyrus had been thinking, not for the first time in his life. "Just a little wink and I'll sell all my shit and buy a camel. I'll start over." All his shit at that moment amounted to a pile of soiled laundry and a stack of books borrowed from various libraries and never returned, poetry and biographies, *To the Lighthouse*, *My Uncle Napoleon*. Never mind all that, though: Cyrus meant it. Why should the Prophet Muhammad get a whole visit from an archangel? Why should Saul get to see the literal light of heaven on the road to Damascus? Of course it would be easy to establish bedrock faith after such clear-cut revelation. How was it fair to celebrate those guys for faith that wasn't faith at all, that was just obedience to what they plainly observed to be true? And what sense did it make to punish the rest of humanity who had never been privy to such explicit revelation? To make everyone else lurch from crisis to crisis, desperately alone?

But then it happened for Cyrus too, right there in that ratty Indiana bedroom. He asked God to reveal Himself, Herself, Themselves, Itself, whatever. He asked with all the earnestness at his disposal, which was troves. If every relationship was a series of advances and retreats, Cyrus was almost never the retreat-er, sharing everything important about himself at a word, a smile, with a shrug as if to say, “Those’re just facts. Why should I be ashamed?”

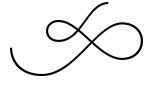
He’d lain there on the bare mattress on the hardwood floor letting his cigarette ash on his bare stomach like some sulky prince, thinking, “Turn the lights on and off lord and I’ll buy a donkey, I promise I’ll buy a camel and ride him to Medina, to Gethsemane, wherever, just flash the lights and I’ll figure it out, I promise.” He was thinking this and then it—*something*—happened. The light bulb flickered, or maybe it got brighter, like a camera’s flash going off across the street, just a fraction of a fraction of a second like that, and then it was back to normal, just a regular yellow bulb.

Cyrus tried to recount the drugs he’d done that day. The standard bouquet of booze, weed, cigarettes, Klonopin, Adderall, Neurontin variously throughout the day. He had a couple Percocets left but he’d been saving them for later that evening. None of what he’d taken was exotic, nothing that would make him out and out hallucinate. He felt pretty sober in fact, relative to his baseline.

He wondered if it had maybe been the sheer weight of his wanting, or his watching, that strained his eyes till they saw what they’d wanted to see. He wondered if maybe that was how God worked now in the new world. Tired of interventionist pyrotechnics like burning bushes and locust plagues, maybe God now worked through the tired eyes of drunk Iranians in the American Midwest, through CVS handles of bourbon and little pink pills with G 31 written on their side. Cyrus took a pull from the giant plastic Old Crow bottle. The whiskey did, for him, what a bedside table did for normal people—it was always at the head of his mattress, holding what was essential to him in place. It lifted him daily from the same sleep it eventually set him into.

Lying there reflecting on the possible miracle he'd just experienced, Cyrus asked God to do it again. Confirmation, like typing your password in twice to a web browser. Surely if the all-knowing creator of the universe had wanted to reveal themselves to Cyrus, there'd be no ambiguity. Cyrus stared at the ceiling light, which in the fog of his cigarette smoke looked like a watery moon, and waited for it to happen again. But it didn't. Whatever sliver of a flicker he had or hadn't perceived didn't come back. And so, lying there in the stuffy haze of relative sobriety—itsself a kind of high—amidst the underwear and cans and dried piss and empty orange pill bottles and half-read books held open against the hardwood, breaking their spines to face away—Cyrus had a decision to make.

ONE



TWO YEARS LATER

MONDAY



KEADY UNIVERSITY, 6 FEB 2017

“I would die for *you*,” Cyrus said alone to his reflection in the little hospital mirror. He wasn’t sure he meant it, but it felt good to say. For weeks, he had been playing at dying. Not in the Plath “I have done it again, one year in every ten” way. Cyrus was working as a medical actor at the Keady University Hospital. Twenty dollars an hour, fifteen hours a week, Cyrus pretended to be “of those who perish.” He liked how the Quran put it that way, not “until you die” but “until you are of those who perish.” Like an arrival into a new community, one that had been eagerly waiting for you. Cyrus would step into the fourth-floor hospital office and a secretary would hand him a notecard with a fake patient’s name and identity on it beside a little cartoon face on the 0–10 pain scale where 0 was a smiling “No hurt at all” face, 4 was a straight-faced “Hurts a little more,” and 10 was a sobbing “Hurts worst” face, a gruesome cartoon with an upside-down U for a mouth. Cyrus felt he’d found his calling.

Some days he was the one dying. Others, he was their family. That night Cyrus would be Sally Gutierrez, mother of three, and the face would be a 6, “Hurts even more.” That’s all the information he had before an anxious

medical student in an ill-fitting white coat shuffled in and told Cyrus/Sally his daughter had been in a car accident, that the team had done all they could do but couldn't save her. Cyrus dialed his reaction up to a 6, just on the cusp of tears. He asked the medical student if he could see his daughter. He cursed, at one point screamed a little. When Cyrus left that evening, he grabbed a chocolate granola bar from the little wicker basket on the secretary's table.

The med students were often overeager to console him, like daytime talk-show hosts. Or they'd be repelled by the artifice of the situation and barely engage. They'd offer platitudes from a list they'd been made to memorize, tried to refer Cyrus to the hospital's counseling services. Eventually they would leave the exam room, and Cyrus would be left to evaluate their compassion by filling out a photocopied score sheet. A little camera on a tripod recorded each exchange for review.

Sometimes the medical student would ask Cyrus if he wanted to donate his beloved's organs. This was one of the conversations the school was training them for. The students' job was to persuade him. Cyrus was Buck Stapleton, assistant coach of the varsity football team, devout Catholic. Staid, a 2 on the pain scale: "Hurts a little bit." The little cartoon face still smiling even, though barely. His wife was in a coma, her brain showed no signs of activity. "She can still help people," the student said, awkwardly placing his hand on Cyrus's shoulder. "She can still save people's lives."

For Cyrus, the different characters were half the fun. He was Daisy VanBogaert, a diabetic accountant whose below-knee amputation had come too late. For her, they'd asked him to wear a hospital gown. He was a German immigrant, Franz Links, engineer, with terminal emphysema. He was Jenna Washington, and his Alzheimer's was accelerating unexpectedly quickly. An 8. "Hurts a whole lot."

The doctor who interviewed Cyrus for the job, an older white woman with severe lips and leaden eyes, told him she liked hiring people like him. When he raised an eyebrow, she quickly explained:

"Non-actors, I mean. Actors tend to get a little"—she spun her hands in tight circles—"Marlon Brando about it. They can't help making it about

themselves.”

Cyrus had tried to get his roommate Zee in on the gig, but Zee’d blown off the interview. Zbigniew Ramadan Novak, Polish-Egyptian—Zee for short. He said he’d slept through his alarm, but Cyrus suspected he was freaked out. Zee’s discomfort with the job kept coming up. A month later, as Cyrus was leaving for the hospital, Zee watched him getting ready and shook his head.

“What?” asked Cyrus.

Nothing.

“*What?*” Cyrus asked again, more pointedly.

Zee made a little face, then said, “It just doesn’t seem healthy, Cyrus.”

“What doesn’t?” Cyrus asked.

Zee made the face again.

“The hospital gig?”

Zee nodded, then said: “I mean, your brain doesn’t know the difference between acting and living. After all the shit you’ve been through? It can’t be like...*good* for you. In your brain stem.”

“Twenty dollars an hour is pretty good for me,” Cyrus said, grinning, “*in my brain stem.*”

That money felt like a lot. Cyrus thought about how, when he’d been drinking, he’d sell his plasma for that much, twenty dollars a trip, his dehydrated hangover blood taking hours to sludge out like milkshake through a thin straw. Cyrus would watch people arrive, get hooked up, and leave the facility in the time it took him to give a single draw.

“And I’m sure eventually it’ll be good for my writing too,” Cyrus added. “What’s that thing about *living* the poems I’m not writing yet?”

Cyrus was a good poet when he wrote, but he rarely actually wrote. Before getting sober, Cyrus didn’t write so much as he drank about writing, describing booze as essential to his process, “nearly sacramental”—he really said it like that—in the way it “opened his mind to the hidden voice” beneath the mundane “argle-bargle of the every-day.” Of course, when he drank, he rarely did anything else but drink. “First you take a drink, then the

drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you!” Cyrus would announce proudly to a room, to a bar, forgetting from whom he’d lifted the line.

In sobriety, he endured long periods of writer’s block, or more accurately, writer’s ambivalence. Writer’s antipathy. What made it almost worse was how much Zee encouraged Cyrus whenever he *did* write something; Zee’d fawn over his roommate’s new drafts, praising every line break and slant rhyme, stopping just short of hanging them up on the apartment refrigerator.

“‘Living the poems you’re not writing?’ ” Zee scoffed. “C’mon, you’re better than that.”

“I’m really not,” Cyrus said, sharply, before stepping out the apartment door.

—

When Cyrus pulled into the hospital parking lot, he was still pissed off. Everything didn’t have to be as complex as Zee constantly made it, Cyrus thought. Sometimes, life was just what happened. What accumulated. That was one of the vague axioms from his drinking days to which Cyrus still clung, even in sobriety. It wasn’t fair that just because he was sober, everyone expected him to exhaustively interrogate his every decision. This job or that job, this life or that. Not drinking was Herculean enough on its own. He should’ve been afforded more grace, not less. The long scar on his left foot—from an accident years before—pounded with pain.

Cyrus signed into the hospital and walked through the halls, past two nursing mothers sitting side by side in a waiting room, past a line of empty gurneys with messy bedding, and into the elevator. When he got to the fourth-floor office, the receptionist had him sign in again and gave him his card for the afternoon. Sandra Kaufmann. High school math teacher. Educated, no children. Widowed. Six on the pain scale. Cyrus sat in the waiting room, glancing at the camera, the “Understanding Skin Cancer” chart on the wall with gruesome pictures of Atypical Moles, Precancerous Growths. The ABCs of melanoma: Asymmetry, Borders, Color Change,

Diameter, and Evolution. Cyrus imagined Sandra's hair crimson red, the color of the "Diameter" mole on the poster.

After a minute, a young medical student walked into the room alone, looked at Cyrus, then at the camera. She was a little younger than him, wore her auburn hair behind her head in a neat bun. Her impeccable posture gave her a boarding-school air, New England royalty. Cyrus reflexively hated her. That Yankee patrician veneer. He imagined she got perfect SATs, went to an Ivy League school, only to be disappointed by Keady as her medical school placement instead of Yale or Columbia. He imagined her having joyless, clinical sex with the chiseled son of her father's business partner, imagined them at a fancy candlelit restaurant dourly picking at a shared veal piccata, both ignoring the table bread. Unaccountable contempt covered him, pitiless. Cyrus hated how noisily she opened the door, sullyng the stillness he'd been enjoying. She looked at the camera again, then introduced herself:

"Hello, Miss Kaufmann. My name is Dr. Monfort."

"Mrs. Kaufmann," Cyrus corrected.

The medical student glanced quickly at the camera.

"Erm, excuse me?"

"Mr. Kaufmann may be dead, but I am still his wife," said Cyrus, pointing to a pretend wedding ring on his left hand.

"I, I'm sorry, ma'am. I was just—"

"It's no problem, dear."

Dr. Monfort set down her clipboard and leaned her hand against the sink she'd been standing near, as if resetting. Then, she spoke:

"Mrs. Kaufmann, I'm afraid the scans have revealed a large mass in your brain. Several large masses, clumped together. Unfortunately, they're attached to sensitive tissue controlling breathing and cardiopulmonary function, and we can't safely operate without risking severe damage to those systems. Chemotherapy and radiation may be options, but due to the location and maturation of the masses, these treatments would likely be palliative. Our oncologist will be able to tell you more."

“Palliative?” Cyrus asked. The students were supposed to avoid jargon and euphemism. Not “going to a better place.” Saying the word “dying” as often as possible was recommended, as it eliminated confusion, helped hasten the patient through denial.

“Uhm, yes. For pain relief. To make you comfortable while you get your affairs in order.”

Get your affairs in order. She was doing terribly. Cyrus hated her.

“I’m sorry, Doctor—what was it? Milton? Are you telling me I’m *dying*?” Cyrus half-smiled as he said the one word she’d yet to speak out loud. She winced, and Cyrus relished her wincing.

“Ah, yes, Miss Kaufmann, ah, I’m so sorry.” Her voice sounded the way wild rabbits look, just on the cusp of tearing off out of sight.

“*Mrs.* Kaufmann.”

“Oh right, of course, I’m so sorry.” She checked her clipboard. “It’s just, my paper here says ‘Miss Kaufmann.’ ”

“Doctor, are you trying to tell me I don’t know my own name?”

The medical student glanced desperately back at the camera.

—

A year and a half ago in early recovery, Cyrus told his AA sponsor Gabe that he believed himself to be a fundamentally bad person. Selfish, self-seeking. Cruel, even. A drunk horse thief who stops drinking is just a sober horse thief, Cyrus’d said, feeling proud to have thought it. He’d use versions of that line later in two different poems.

“But you’re not a bad person trying to get good. You’re a sick person trying to get well,” Gabe responded.

Cyrus sat with the thought. Gabe went on,

“There’s no difference to the outside world between a good guy and a bad guy behaving like a good guy. In fact, I think God loves that second guy a little more.”

“Good-person drag,” Cyrus thought out loud. That’s what they called it after that.

“Of course not, Mrs. Kaufmann, I’m absolutely not trying to argue,” the medical student stammered. “The paper must have misprinted your name. I’m so sorry. Is there anyone you’d like us to call?”

“Who would I have you call?” Cyrus asked. “My principal? I’m all alone.”

Dr. Monfort looked clammy. The red light on the camera was blinking on and off, like a firefly mocking their proceedings.

“We have some great counselors here at Keady,” she said. “Nationally ranked—”

“Have you ever had a patient who wanted to die?” Cyrus interrupted.

The medical student stared at him, saying nothing, pure disdain radiating from her person, barely bridled fury. Cyrus thought she might actually hit him.

“Or maybe not wanted to die,” Cyrus continued, “but who just wanted their suffering to end?”

“Well, *like I said*, we offer a wide range of palliative options,” she hissed, staring at Cyrus, Cyrus-Cyrus, beneath Mrs. Kaufmann, willing him toward compliance.

He ignored her.

“The last time I thought I wanted to die, I got a fifth of Everclear, ninety-five percent alcohol, and sat in my bathtub drinking it from the bottle, pouring out a bit on my head. One pull for me, one for my hair. The aim was to finish the bottle that way and then light myself on fire. Theatrical, no?”

Dr. Monfort said nothing. Cyrus went on,

“But when I’d finished maybe just a quarter of the bottle, I realized suddenly I didn’t want to burn everyone else in the apartment complex.”

This was true. That little flicker of lucidity, light, like sun glinting off a snake in the grass. It happened a few months before Cyrus had gotten sober, and it wasn’t until he was already good and drunk that he even remembered the existence of other people, and the fact that fire spreads, that if he lit

himself on fire in a first-floor apartment bathtub, everyone else's apartments would likely catch fire too. Booze worked that way sometimes, clarifying—briefly—what his mind couldn't. It was like sitting in the optometrist's office, booze flashing its different lenses in front of your face and sometimes, for a second, it'd be the right prescription, the one that allowed you to catch a glimpse of the world as it was, beyond your grief, beyond your doom. That was the clarity alcohol, and nothing else, gave. Seeing life as everyone else did, as a place that could accommodate you. But of course a second later it'd zoom past clarity through a flurry of increasingly opaque lenses until all you were able to see would be the dark of your own skull.

“Can you believe that?” Cyrus went on. “I needed to be drunk to even consider that a fire that consumed me in a bathtub wouldn't just go out on its own.”

“Mrs. Kaufmann...,” the medical student said. She was wringing her hands, one of the “physical distress behaviors” Cyrus was supposed to note in his evaluation.

“I remember actually sitting there in the bathtub, doing the calculus of it. Like, do I even care if I take other people with me? These strangers. I had to work out whether or not they mattered to me. How fucked up is that?”

“Mrs. Kaufmann, if you are struggling with thoughts of suicide, we have resources...”

“Oh c'mon, just talk to me. You want to be a doctor? I'm sitting in front of you, talking. I ended up walking myself outside the apartment complex, wet with the alcohol, though not too wet, it evaporated quickly I think, I remember being surprised at how wet I wasn't. There was a little grassy patch between our building and the one next to us, a picnic bench with one of those built-in charcoal grills. I remember thinking that was funny, lighting myself on fire next to a grill. I brought out the Everclear and the lighter, I remember—this is bizarre—it was a Chicago Bears lighter. I have no idea where it came from. And I sat there at the bench feeling, despite the Everclear in and on me, I remember sitting there feeling, not happy exactly but simple, maybe? Like a jellyfish just floating along. Someone said alcohol reduces the ‘fatal intensity’ of living. Maybe it was that.”

Outside the clouds had grown fat and dark with rain, the whole sky a wounded animal in some last frantic rage. The hospital room had a tiny little window high on the wall, probably placed there so people from the street couldn't look in. The medical student didn't move.

“Do you have this organ here?” Cyrus asked her, pointing at the base of his throat. “A doom organ that just pulses all the time? Pulses dread, every day, obstinately? Like it thinks there's a panther behind the curtain ready to maul you, but there's no panther and it turns out there's no curtain either? That's what I wanted to stop.”

“What did you do?” the medical student asked, finally. Something in her seemed to have relaxed a little, conceded to the moment's current.

“I went back inside my apartment.” Cyrus shrugged. “I wanted to stop hurting. Being burned alive felt suddenly like it'd hurt a lot.”

Dr. Monfort smiled, gave a tiny nod. Cyrus continued:

“I took a shower and passed out. I remained. But so did the dread. I thought getting sober would help, that came later. Recovery. And it did, in its way. Certainly it made me less a burden to the people around me, created less dread in them. But it's still in me, that doom organ.” He pointed again at his neck. “It's in my throat, throbbing all day every day. And recovery, friends, art—that shit just numbs it for a second. What's that word you used?”

“Palliative?”

“Right, palliative, yeah. All that stuff is palliative. It stills the suffering, but it doesn't send it away.”

The medical student paused for a moment, then took a seat on the chair across from Cyrus. She was tinted with black-blue rays from the window as if marked by some celestial spotlight. She said, very deliberately, “You know, *Mrs. Kaufmann*, it's entirely possible, common even, to have psychological co-morbidities. It sounds like you've been getting help for addiction issues, which is great. But you may also have another diagnosis alongside it that's going untreated, an anxiety disorder or major depression or something else. It could be useful for you to seek help for those as well.” She smiled a little, then added, “It's not too late, even with the tumors.” It

was her way of inviting Cyrus back into the performance, and he obliged. He felt suddenly flush with embarrassment.

Cyrus behaved agreeably through the rest of the act. When they finished a few minutes later and the medical student left the exam room, he wrote her a quick but glowing report before rushing out of the hospital in a flurry of shame.