

Sample of Hunger for Annihilation

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Since this was the last day of the Sufi retreat, the attendees had a light schedule: rise at 7:00, breakfast at 7:30, and a final dance at 8:30. After that they were on their own to pack, say good-bye, and go their separate ways.

The retreat's rigid schedule had helped Rebecca distance herself from the gritty moral compromises of her work and had given her space to heal her injured spirit. Yet she chafed at the discipline. She couldn't wait to get out, but to what?

Breakfast consisted of all the leftovers from the past week: tofu casserole, vegetarian lasagna, fruit salad, and those tiny stale store-bought bagels no one liked. After eating, everyone gathered in the clearing outside the bathhouse. Twenty-four people joined hands in a circle around a sixty-year-old man with a gray beard and a guitar. Brady loved dancing, but Pir Jalili had appointed him musician for the week. Although disappointed, Brady accepted Pir's request by replying "*Eyvallah*." The dry fragrant air carried the smells of pine and dust. The sun began to burn off the morning September chill. Pir demonstrated the dance steps and recited the verse, while Brady strummed the chords.

"*Laa il aaha ill Allah*," came Pir's strong voice. "Literally it means, 'There is no God but God.' But the deeper meaning is that everything is God."

Pir nodded to Brady, who began to play. Soon the attendees chanted in unison. They moved in two concentric circles.

"*Laa il aaha ill Allah*." Rebecca released Martin's hands, pirouetted, and circled forward to a new partner. Jim's thin hands felt cold. She scanned his face and noted how his eyes darted, perhaps as a defense against getting close. No matter.

"*Laa il aaha ill Allah*." She changed partners to Alice, who always seemed out of step. Yet her spirit shone like the sun from her blazing blue eyes.

"*Laa il aaha ill Allah*." Rebecca took Joan's bent swollen hands and sent love flowing through her arms. If only it could heal Joan's arthritis.

On it went. They spun, circled, and bowed. Whether clothed in T-shirts, fleece vests, nose rings, or running shoes, each dancer was a precious jewel that reflected the light of all the others. Together they became a necklace shining with God's love.

"*Laa il aaha ill Allah*." Pir. Rebecca stared at the kindly face of the teacher, who'd fled Iran twenty years ago because his teachings on Islam didn't fit in with Khomeini's views. She could read the history of his persecution by the look in his eyes and the compassion he'd learned as a result.

Back in her cabin an hour later, Rebecca placed a stack of folded clothes in her flight bag and zipped it closed. The multicolor pom-pom dangling from the handle distinguished it from the other bags on the airport's baggage claim carousel. The screen door slammed.

"You gotta go right back to work tomorrow?" Mary asked. Her short salt-and-pepper hair accentuated her face's square shape.

"No, I don't have to be in until Tuesday," Rebecca said.

"What do you do anyway? You never told me."

Rebecca always hated this part. No matter how close she felt to someone, she could never admit she worked deep cover for the FBI.