



Source: Marc Santora, 'Blasted mosque a symbol of political paralysis', *New York Times* in *The Age* online, 14/02/07.

Tags: [Malaysia](#), [intimacy](#), [religion](#)

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Selina lights a cigarette and sips her dark, black coffee.

'Of course they should be allowed to wear a veil. Why shouldn't they?' Her eyes are sharp-edged, like a knife.

'You don't wear one', I tell her.

'No, I don't. Shouldn't we all get to choose?' Her hair is darkest brown, straight and firm. It drops down the side of her face and hangs around her shoulders. The cigarette smoke curls in gentle tendrils around her cheekbones.

Soon she finishes her cigarette and stubs it out firmly in the silver ashtray. The cafe around us is filled with women, their multicoloured headscarves a pastel rainbow across the wood-panelled room. Soft pinks dominate, with a splash of eggshell blue and palest green. At one or two tables, men sit uncomfortably. We are the only mixed table.

'You've only been in Kuala Lumpur for two weeks', she says. 'Wait a little longer before judging us. Do the women in here look repressed?' Selina smiles, her lips drawing tight across her face like two red crescents. I catch a flash of blinding white teeth before she draws shut again. She lights another cigarette.

'I wish you didn't have to leave town', I tell her. 'You've been a wonderful guide. If the guys at my office hadn't introduced us, I think I'd still be sitting in my hotel room, reading.'

'Those men at your office', she says, rolling her eyes. 'I think they were after some romance for you. Just because I don't cover myself up.' She pauses for effect, takes a long draw on her cigarette, then exhales savagely.

'They've come to the wrong place', she says. But she smiles again, that broad, generous smile.

Selina leaves Kuala Lumpur for a week on business. She tells me to go to the Islamic Arts Museum—to learn something about her religion, she says. I battle my way there on foot. The city swelters with smog and with summer's heat. By the time I arrive, I'm a damp, exhausted mess. The brightly shining new building is built to resemble a mosque, with white domes and pillars rising out of the lush green park. The doors slide open automatically, breathing icy air around me.

Inside, the place is almost deserted. I have to wait several minutes for anyone to appear to take my entrance fee. Every window is decorated with fine, twisting designs, like Celtic or Maori patterns. The walls are stained in royal blues, emerald greens. The ceilings bulge towards the floor, inverted domes of gold cartouches and glass. My feet seem to make no sound at all on the polished floors.

Slowly, my sweat dries. The very few other visitors, all of them apparently well-heeled locals, look at me pityingly; my damp shirt, my cap, my sunburn, my hooked nose. I wonder what my ancestors would make of me, admiring Islamic art. The display cabinets are sparsely placed, giving an impression of thoughtfulness.

In a smaller room, there are cabinets filled with scrolls and books. The oldest one, a crumbling brown codex, is more than 1000 years old, illuminated with veils of ink.

On each page the words of the Prophet sing in delicate filigreed curls. The Arabic alphabet looks like Hebrew, like Chinese, like human fingers. Pages fringed with lapis, gold, and scarlet; filled with words like peacock tails. I wonder if understanding would enhance or diminish the effect.

Selina comes back. While she's been out of town, there have been days of delicious, dirt-cheap noodles and stretched hours of boredom, punctuated by guilty visits to Starbucks. The city seems to have yielded all it can. I spend time in fifth-floor internet cafes, checking email. Only the young men seem to need to check email. The women seem to be always on buses, carrying groceries. They are all exactly the same height and they ignore me uniformly. On the streets, taller, younger women stroll briskly, their hair uncovered. Nobody looks at anybody else.

We meet in the same old cafe, so familiar now with its strong coffee and its tired-looking women behind the counter.

'How was the museum?' Selina asks, raising one eyebrow.

'Illuminating', I say. 'Peaceful.'

She looks at me without blinking.

'And didn't that seem strange, for such a warlike religion?' she asks. There's a twist of irony in Selina's smile. She's been in Australia for business. I tell her my impressions but, for the first time, she loses interest. She starts rummaging in her handbag for something. Her long slender hand emerges holding a small red package.

'I hear it's Valentine's Day in your country today', she says. 'I brought you something.' I don't know what to say, so I just take the package and open it. Inside are half a dozen chocolates, each decorated with a different coloured sugar-flower.

'That's really very nice of you', I say.

'I know it's meant to be a romantic thing', she says. 'But you seem lonely here, I thought you'd like it.'

I ask her if it's all right to try one, then put it in my mouth. It's very sweet, and tastes of oranges and violets. I offer one to Selina, but she shakes her head gently.

'I don't like chocolate', she says. 'Too sweet.' She takes another sip of coffee and reaches for her packet of cigarettes. I put my hand out and cover hers. I can feel the bones in her wrist. She looks at me sharply.

'Come back to my hotel with me', I say. As they leave my mouth, the words are already faltering.

'Are you fucking stupid?' Selina says.

She stands, shaking free of my hand and avoiding the sudden looks from other women in the cafe. I have no time to say anything before she's gone, smoke from her last cigarette still rising from the ashtray in blue-white curls.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Sam Grunhard.