

Cyrus Shams

In "Cyrus Shams, Martyr!", set at Keady University in June 2012, the protagonist, Cyrus, grapples with the challenges of his identity as an Iranian-American amidst the backdrop of a summer storm. He felt especially targeted by the elements, viewing storms and other weather events as direct affronts to himself, symbolizing his broader struggles against societal perceptions shaped by events like 9/11.

Cyrus recounts his experiences with prejudice throughout his schooling, where educators perpetuated insidious stereotypes about him. A math teacher, who secretly mocked him with a racial slur, and a social studies teacher, who wrongly presented U.S. military actions as beneficial to his people, made him feel complicit and ashamed. These encounters instilled a deep understanding of the intersection of Iranian culture and Midwestern politeness in his life, leading to a compulsive need to placate others even amid racist ridicule.

Cyrus becomes intrigued by Kathleen, his first Republican and wealthy girlfriend from a privileged background, who challenges his perceptions of wealth and politics. Despite initial disgust for her views, he is drawn to her audacity and charm, including her dismissive mention of John McCain at her graduation party. Their new relationship tempers his distaste, although their differences in socioeconomic backgrounds are evident as she indulges in luxuries he cannot imagine.

Their nights out, particularly at the Green Nile, a hookah bar, shift into wild escapades filled with alcohol and relaxation. Cyrus, under the influence of Klonopin and Focalin, feels detached but revels in the company of Kathleen and a server named Zee. The hookah experience becomes a novelty for Cyrus, allowing him to escape his inner turmoil and reflect on his existence as both American and Iranian — caught between cultures and expectations.

As the night wears on, he wrestles with feelings of depression and liberation, explaining the high he feels in these moments. This culminates in an emotional epiphany while listening to Sonic Youth's "Sister," where his tears blend into a sense of invincibility and sinlessness derived from addiction. Eventually, in the subsequent hours, Cyrus finds himself back at the Green Nile, where an invitation from Zee to his apartment leads to a drunken night filled with music, connection, and ephemeral bonds, leaving Cyrus to reflect on both his identity and desires in a transient world of youthful indulgence .