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MUSLIM GIRL

COMING OF AGE

Forgive him who wrongs you;
join him who cuts you off;
do good to him who does evil to you;
and speak the truth even if it be against yourself.

—Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him

but their surroundings as well. Enough is enough. The cycle needs to stop. In this case, it's less of a cycle and more of an uphill battle in which we toil. We're climbing toward the light with exceptional weight on our backs, digging our heels into the dirt of the past to gain our way to the top, only to slip—no, be completely knocked down—by an uncontrollable, newly emerging force that causes us to tumble all the way back to where we started, much to the jeers and cheers and additional trips of the bystanders around us. Everyone can see it happen, and complacency is a killer.

The best I can possibly do is speak on my own behalf, to be brutally true to my own lived experience, and share with you a snapshot of a walk of life that I believe has been shared by many of my brothers and sisters wandering the same familiar corridors of our English-speaking diaspora, never cultured enough for home and never American enough to truly belong.

I think we've become starved for people to actually listen to us. We've become so desperate to hear our own voices above all the white noise that we have willfully compromised and repackaged our narratives to make them palatable—to make them commercial and catchy, to make them headline-worthy, to sell a story that you will find deserving of your attention. We call it playing the game, because you consuming some semblance of our truth is better than you consuming whatever else is out there, conjured by someone else on our behalf. But that's not good enough anymore.

Chapter 1

The only time I ever cried during an interview was when I was asked to recall my memory of 9/11. Was it for *International Business Times*? The *Guardian*? I can hardly remember anymore. But, surprisingly, I had never been asked that question before, and it caught me so off guard that when I started describing the vivid image seared into my memory, the tears began to fall.

On September 11, 2001, Bowne-Munro Elementary School in East Brunswick, New Jersey, planned to hold its annual Yearbook Photo Day. We were all dressed up and excited for an excuse to leave our classrooms, go outside, and spend the day on our grassy soccer field, against whatever backdrop they had for us that year. There was an electric energy of anticipation when we got to school. Everyone was wearing their best clothes; the boys wore new sneakers and the girls had their hair plaited in cute updos, or their smiles beamed from between bouncing curls. My hair was always frustratingly thick and slightly unruly, but at least Mama tried to brush it straight for me that day; my uneven curtain of bangs resting just above my eyes. I always felt my best on Yearbook Day, if only because Mama was eager to get a new set of photos of me to add to her collection. She took pride in displaying what turned out to be a chronological evolution of my awkward haircuts over the years, in pretty frames among porcelain figurines in the heavy cherrywood cabinet that was only accessible in the dining room on special occasions.

Mama loved Yearbook Day. She had just bought me a new outfit. I was wearing a stiff pair of jeans and a blue shirt—I hated the color pink when I was a little girl and rebelled against expected "girliness" by always opting for blue and green, which is fascinating considering nearly everything I own is pink now—with a black vest over it. I finished the look by slathering on my favorite Bonne Bell Dr Pepper Lip Smacker. I was probably wearing a pair of dress shoes that I couldn't wait to show off. And I remember it was really warm and sunny outside.

From the earliest moments of our first period, however, something was weird. Actually, a lot of things were weird. First of all, it was eerily quiet in our school. The TVs in all of the classrooms, which were usually on the district's cable channel of PowerPoint slide announcements to the background tune of elevator music, were turned off. That morning, the principal didn't deliver our usual morning announcements over the PA system, either. Then, soon enough, we were told by our teachers, almost inconsequentially, that Yearbook Day was canceled. They told us pesticide was sprayed on the fields that morning so we couldn't go outside. I remember feeling confused and a little disappointed, but everyone else just accepted that we would take our pictures another day, so I did, too.

Our math teacher cried so much throughout the morning that some of us thought that someone in her family had died. I remember the class trying to make her feel better while faculty passed through the halls or popped in every now and then in a state of disarray.

"It's okay, Ms. Brady," we said to her when she was hunched over at her desk, her eyes red from the tears, her face contorted like she was hanging on by a thread that could break at any moment.

"It's going to be okay!" we cheerfully encouraged her. That only made her cry even more.

Our young fourth-grade minds were not much alarmed by these events, nor did we really think to string them together. How could we? How could we have possibly imagined what was waiting for us?

Our school day finally ended with an unscheduled early dismissal, much to our delight. Somehow, our parents were already informed of this, because when I ran out of school, my mom, who was routinely late to pick me up, was on time and waiting for me. I ran up to the car and Mama leaned over the passenger seat to unlock the door for me from the inside. I opened the door and didn't even have time to climb into the seat before she said, "Amani, something happened today."

"What's up?" I asked, getting in and closing the door beside me.

"You know the Twin Towers?" she asked.

"No—" I responded, confused.

"You know those two really tall buildings that are next to each other in New York? That we were looking at and talking about how huge they were when Dad took us for a drive in the city?"

"Yes," I said, remembering.

"Okay, well, there's been a crash, and they're not there anymore."

"They're not there anymore?!" I asked, trying to understand. "Like, at all?"

"No, honey. They're not there anymore. Two planes crashed into them."

"What? There was an accident? Is everyone okay?" I asked naively.

"Someone drove the planes into them," my mom said, but I still was not processing what had just happened. For the rest of our five-minute car ride home, I kept repeating the same questions, not sure how someone could intentionally fly a plane full of people into a skyscraper full of people, nor that those two towers in the opening credits of my parents' favorite television show, *Friends*, could possibly cease to exist. They weren't there anymore?

When I walked into our home, my family was in the living room, their eyes glued to the television screen. My dad was standing beside the TV and my mother joined him. My baby brothers, Ameer and Faris, then three and four years old, respectively, were in the family room, watching *SpongeBob SquarePants*. My grandmother and Auntie Ebtisam were sitting on the long couch in the back of the room, reacting in Arabic. They were visiting from Jordan and living with us for one year at the time, enjoying their first trip to the United States. My twenty-three-year-old aunt had her elbows up in the air, her fingers at work twisting her waist-length black hair, usually hidden beneath a veil, into one tight strand that she distractedly wrapped around the outside of her ear, which was a habit of hers. They couldn't believe what had happened. "I had just taken them there a couple of days ago," my dad, or Baba as we usually call him, told me. "They looked up at the towers through the sunroof of our car in wonder." Now, suddenly, they weren't there anymore.

But, here, on our TV, there was an image of the Twin Towers with clouds of black smoke coming out of them. I was trying to understand how they got like that, trying to imagine how this could have possibly resulted from a plane crash—and then it happened. The news channel looped the footage—a scene that would continue to loop in my mind's eye, surface in my everyday, for the rest

of my life—of two planes crashing into the sides of the towers. My eyes saw it. I was suddenly a witness to an evil that I was not even able to grasp, exposed to a tragedy that I only had the capacity to feel but not comprehend. Whenever the footage appeared in the broadcast, everyone in the room fell silent again, in a trance, probably not far from my own elementary struggle to make sense of what I was seeing.

And then, Baba said something that I didn't understand at the time, but that alerted me to the impact of the day's events beyond two beautiful towers—and, as I later would learn, thousands of people—not being there anymore.

"This is a horrible thing that happened," he told his mother. "And they're going to blame us. And it's going to get much worse."

"Sorry," I told the journalist. She paused to give me a moment to clear my voice, and I hoped to God she didn't think I was faking it—feigning emotion for some type of dramatic impact, or to prove my patriotism.

I hope she knows my pain is genuine, I thought. *I hope she doesn't doubt that a Muslim American can be this impacted by 9/11, too.* The truth is that 9/11 never ended for us.

Elementary school was a very difficult period in my formative years concerning the development of my self-esteem and self-identity as a Muslim girl. By the time I finished elementary school, the U.S. was already involved in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The feelings of vulnerability and lack of protection were only second to those that I experienced in middle school, where the early teen

years got really brutal. But, I think for many of us, elementary school creates the most sensitive impression of where we stand relative to other people and our status relative to the world around us. That's when the bullying started.

It was that same year that I heard my first racial slur. By then I had already become a class target, so the epithet only intensified my sunken self-esteem that always forced me to bite my tongue, not talk back, not stand up for myself for fear of the bullying getting worse. By fifth grade, every social interaction was distinctly marked with the preceding thought, *Dear God, please don't let them put me down.* And then the first time my heritage was held against me as an insult marked the end of the days that I innocently took pride in my culture as a source of joy and the subject of class celebrations during Culture Day, naive to the implications of race and history. It made me realize that my brown eyes and dark hair and tan skin made me feel more than just ugly compared to the other girls.

It happened in math class. It was audible to our classroom table of four or five other students, who would witness and compound my humiliation. It was a student with black skin who said it, who was always eager to make fun of other people so he wouldn't get made fun of himself. It was a phrase that would resurface ringing in my ears with every photo and every scrap of footage coming out of the Middle East for a long time.

"Your people throw rocks at tanks!"

I could hear other students gasp. One Jewish classmate burst out laughing. My people. Throw rocks. At tanks? And in a few moments, as the blood rushed to my cheeks, I was awash with the realization that this insult was different. This one didn't sting like the comments that I smelled or that I was ugly or fat. Suddenly, I

belonged to a people, and that people was something I should be ashamed of. Shame. I didn't know why I felt ashamed, and I wasn't sure exactly what he was referring to or why it was so bad. But I did recognize that it was different. And I did feel that it hurt. And so I told my teacher.

The student got sent to the principal's office, and the principal ended up suspending him. Upon receiving the news, my other classmates shamed me even more for telling on him. And thus began this weird dynamic of getting victimized and then either silencing myself or getting victimized a second time if I talked back. When I went home that day and told my dad, he was sad and angry for me, but then he waved those feelings away with a smile.

"That's something you should be proud of, Baba," he told me, in our living room covered in tapestries and Middle Eastern upholsteries. "Your people throw rocks at *tanks*."

My family wasn't exceptionally devout, but we were practicing Muslims. While I resented not being able to wear shorts in middle school because my dad thought they were immodest, I am now so grateful for having grown up within the fold of Islam—not only because Islam did, inevitably, evolve into a backbone and an identity for me, but also because had it not been instilled in me at an early age, I'm not sure I would have had the strength or courage to find it myself after Islamophobia hijacked my life.

Baba is an immigrant from Jordan. He came to America when he was twenty-six, thanks to an opportunity granted to him through the sheer luck of a visa lottery. He arrived with only a suitcase and $300 in his pocket, two-thirds of which was scammed out of him by the time he left the airport. He hustled in New York City to

survive, working in convenience stores and staying in someone's rat-infested basement for free. When he was driving me home to Brooklyn this summer, after I returned from a trip with Microsoft to Egypt, we passed by his old dwelling, on Thompson Street in Manhattan, and he excitedly pointed it out to me.

While he didn't practice it as religiously as I think he wished he did, my dad always tried to teach us about Islam whenever he could. He would use the time during our car rides to tell me stories about the prophets or share morals from the parables. It was during those rides that he helped me memorize the last three chapters of the Qur'an, which I still repeat three times every morning to seek protection from the evil eye—a curse Muslims believe will cause misfortune—and I feel compelled to do this now more than ever. More than anything, he instilled in me the unshakable belief that the right intentions were more important than absolutely anything—and that if I stuck to my moral compass, I should trust that God will always see me through. Always.

Mama is a refugee from Palestine. Her own mother is a survivor of the Deir Yassin massacre in 1948. Deir Yassin was one of the first villages to be pillaged by incoming European militias, and those militias used the violence they carried out there as a threat to the rest of the Palestinians on the land: *If you don't get out, the same thing will happen to you.* Later on, when I researched Deir Yassin's history in high school, I would learn that my grandmother had survived purely by fate. The remaining villagers were piled into two buses: The one that my grandmother boarded was driven to the banks of the Jordan River, which she crossed with her family's gold—which would later be used to situate her family in Amman—hidden in a sash tied around her little six-year-old belly. The other bus was driven to the heart of Jerusalem, where

its passengers were killed by the city's new inhabitants. I'm not sure how old I was when I came to understand the bloody history of our family, but my grandmother's story always led my mind wandering toward a little girl who shone like a phoenix, rising from the ashes.

My mother's family came to the United States when she was a child. She had a Farrah Fawcett haircut in high school and hung out on the track after school, and she took great joy in listening to the jams of her beloved '80s. She saved up money at her banking job to buy a bright silver Porsche with leopard-print lining that she was especially fond of, which my dad, her then-fiancé, crashed during his first drive. Her mother's strength was passed down to her in the form of steely resolve. Mama has always fiercely fought for me and my brothers, much like a lioness protecting her cubs; we were especially grateful for her protectiveness later on in our childhood. I still remember the year that literally every student in my class took turns making fun of me and calling me horrible names, even in front of a teacher who did nothing to rectify the situation. When I went to my guidance counselor, I was told that I must be the problem, and I should change myself to make them stop making fun of me. Upon hearing this, my mother called the guidance office, demanded to speak to the stupid counselor who had given her daughter such reckless advice, and threatened to sue her and the entire school district for victim-blaming an eleven-year-old. I was promptly called down to the guidance office the next day and issued a formal apology.

After 9/11, it was like a curtain had been pulled back on my family, casting them into the spotlight, and revealing to them a world that seemed to have always been festering behind a thin veil. My parents had to navigate this new territory leading a young

and vulnerable family, while they themselves were being targeted. For most of my life, my dad has run his own electronics business, through which he sold video games, music, and toys. Immediately after 9/11, he feared for our existence in the United States. At the time, we had a store in an indoor flea market in our town, which was only open on the weekends and where he would work for a good eight years. He imagined the possibility of being unjustly interrogated by authorities or losing his business, or being arrested simply for his faith. The fear of attacks was palpable: His brother in Jordan urged him to consider moving our family "back home," out of his own concern that we would be targeted or killed. He told my dad, "Imagine how easy it would be for someone to come to your store and shoot you and your family point-blank. You have to leave."

The flea market became a microcosm of what was happening to our nation on a larger scale. My dad explicitly remembers the dramatic shift in language in the news: He watched networks quickly transition from covering an abstract entity called Al Qaeda throughout the '90s in a region that average Americans basically understood to be the Middle East, to employing sweeping language that implicated Muslims and the Islamic religion as a whole—no longer focusing on political disputes, but instead feverishly seeking to relate terrorist acts to the Qur'an and amplifying connections between the Muslim identity and violence. The change in rhetoric, he recalls, suddenly made it acceptable for other people to attack us with the expectation that they would be absolved of accountability. My family was placed in a position of extreme vulnerability and exposure, being attacked and alienated solely because of our religion.

One of the employees of another toy store in the flea market

slashed all four of my mother's tires. This act of violence is still, all these years later, stuck in my parents' memories from that time. They could feel that it was only an extension of the type of violence people around us wished to impose on us, and it was one that was blatantly hateful, inconvenient, and costly. When my father went to the owner of the toy store to inform him of his employee's actions, the owner turned aggressive against my father.

"What? Are you THREATENING ME?" he angrily demanded of my big brown dad. "Do you want to BOMB ME?" he said. Later, instead of questioning the employee who had slashed our tires, the police who arrived would instead question my father regarding accusations that he wanted to bomb the toy store. The police were used like a weapon against us, as they had been for people of color for a long time. Becoming the scapegoat meant that anyone could hold your identity against you at their will. It became a wound that people could prod and poke to try to bend us at their pleasure.

The other vendors launched a petition addressed to the flea market management, in which they demanded that all Muslim vendors and their businesses be evicted. This, of course, empowered other vendors to increase their harassment of my family. I still remember "the Jewelry Lady" from across the aisle walking into our store and openly insulting my father, in front of me and his customers, while wildly waving the petition in her hands. It was painful to watch. I felt so sorry and confused about why my dad had to suffer, and I truly thought the Jewelry Lady was evil for hating us for our religion. I didn't understand how anyone could be that mean for no reason. As all of this was happening, I felt like the entire world hated me and hated us for who we were, and, damn, that was a heavy feeling for a child. I guiltily asked myself why God had chosen to make me be born Muslim when I could

have just been born Christian in America and had my life be so much easier.

Our beautiful house in the calm New Jersey suburbs was egged, water-ballooned, and TP-ed. I remember the appearance and smell of rotting eggs. The dozens of colorful and broken latex balloons that surrounded our home would have looked pretty and festive if I hadn't been aware of the hateful sentiment that delivered them there. My mom was sitting under one of the windows in the living room with one of my baby brothers in her arms when an egg flew in and landed on her head, almost hitting her child. I remember this was the only thing she kept repeating when she found the teens who did it: "You could have hurt my baby. I don't care about the house, but you almost hurt my child. That's all I care about."

My Jordanian aunt and grandmother were scared that they wouldn't be able to return home, or that they would be arrested and accused of something horrific. One day, they were in the public restrooms at the flea market, performing ablutions to prepare for prayer. Lots of Muslims have known the awkward experience of getting caught with their foot in the sink. When other people walked into the restrooms and saw my family washing themselves, they crowded around my aunt and grandmother like they were freak shows and started calling them horrible names. My relatives didn't understand much English, but it was easy for them to understand the spite, hate, and anger in their tormentors' voices.

My aunt and grandmother's relative obliviousness to the happenings around them due to the cultural and lingual barriers became a strange outlet for me as I renegotiated the new climate I was navigating. My aunt and grandmother didn't know much beyond the fact that right here, right now, they were being hated

for their religion, but there wasn't really anything they could do about it. They continued living their lives as they always had, while I was trying to survive unbearable judgment that I attempted to cope with in small ways. At the age of ten, I already knew that I shouldn't compromise who I was and that these moments called for resolve, but of course I searched for opportunities to avoid public scrutiny, judgment, or insult. Once, I remember my grandmother visited an accessories store in the flea market and purchased a white scarf with red hearts and English text on it that she didn't understand. When she put it on, to my horror, it said I HEART JESUS! I was terrified at what people would think, and ran to my dad to make her take it off.

"So? That's great!" he said. "We love Jesus, too. People should know that. And now she's wearing it on her head."

My father had this uncanny ability to shield me from my own negative thoughts, or those new internalized feelings of inferiority and embarrassment. He could take anything I was enduring and turn it into something noble or empowering. My aunt placed me in a similar situation that summer, when we joined my dad at his business location on the boardwalk at the beach. I spent most of the summers throughout my childhood with my father on the Jersey Shore, when he would stay there for weeks at a time to run his store, and I grew to take great pride in being a Jersey girl who slept just fine with sand in her bed. That year, my dad's landlord got us season passes to the Splash Zone Water Park across from our store, and I would go there every single day. The rest of the family would join us on some days, when my mom wasn't busy running the other store in East Brunswick, and on one of these occasions we decided that the entire family would spend a day at Splash Zone.

I almost had a heart attack when my aunt decided to join me for the raft ride, fully clothed, from head to toe, in headscarf, metallic silver button-down shirt, and black slacks. She stood in line with me at the very top of the slide, coolly looking out from behind her black sunglasses, among all the white families in their drenched swimsuits, making us the center of attention. Everyone was staring at us. I could not understand why she had to put us in that position, and I was so embarrassed that I couldn't wait to jump on the raft, rush down the slide, and get out of there.

When I went back to my dad's store, wrapped in a towel, wet hair falling in strands on my face, I was quick to unload on him what had just happened.

"Baba!" I said, pointing to the topmost slide at Splash Zone across the way, which could be seen from anywhere on the boardwalk. "Do you see that ride up there? The tallest ride at the water park? Auntie Ebtisam came with me, and she was wearing ALL HER CLOTHES, and it was so EMBARRASSING! Everyone was staring at us!" I told him.

"Wow, good for her!" my dad said. "She should be able to enjoy the ride just like anyone else. That took a lot of guts, didn't it?"

I was in the sixth grade when I first made the decision to lie about my religion. It happened one sunny afternoon on our yellow school bus, heading home from another exhausting day of middle school in which I constantly tried to blend away my differences and fit in, only to inevitably capture the attention of bullies in my classes, and even ones I didn't know in the halls. I would get taunted for being a "monster" as I walked to class in between pe-

riods, and all I ever wanted to do was disappear. I was sitting next to my "bus partner," Jesse, who was this Italian kid with nerdy glasses—a signifier at our school that made him slightly uncool, too, and thus gave us something in common—with a gorgeous thick shock of brown curls on his head. He was in my Italian class, and would be my classmate for the seven years I studied the language throughout school. The next time I saw him after we graduated was a couple of years later, in college, when he was a barista at Starbucks with a bunch of hickeys on his neck. It's always nice when the nerds get happy endings.

On this bus ride, we were sitting in the awkward silence familiar to those of us banished to the outskirts of social life, when Jesse broke it: "Hey, what religion are you?" he asked. Crap. I felt a wave of panic wash over me. That conversation probably lasted only fifteen seconds, but to my eleven- or twelve-year-old lost and insecure self, it triggered a repetitive loop right before my eyes of newsreel after newsreel featuring brown men who looked like my father in orange jumpsuits and women who looked nothing like me talking about what my identity represented. It was agonizing.

I didn't wear a headscarf at the time, so I had the chance to hide behind being uncovered. It was a distinctly different moment from my first day wearing a headscarf to school two years later, when I had a breakdown walking to class in the morning and seriously considered ripping the scarf off my head before walking through the school doors. But in that moment, in sixth grade, my frizzy hair catching the sun beaming in through the school bus window next to me, I had the chance to conceal myself within the veil of anonymity, ambiguity.

Finally, after what seemed like light-years of my guffaws and

hesitation, I made a fateful decision that I would recall for thousands of moments after that. "Oh, I don't know," I replied. "Something Mediterranean, I forget."

I didn't realize it at the time, but that decision would become a pivotal moment in my journey. While maybe counterintuitively I thought it would offer me some relief—a small break from the exhaustion of being a Muslim in today's society, some protection from the constant barrage of judgments, stereotypes, and attacks raining down on me from the media and my surroundings—what it did instead was cause a sense of even more palpable shame to wash over me. I was perfectly entitled to hide. Even in Islam, God permits us to renounce our religion if we are being persecuted and under threat of danger. But despite knowing this, I think what I felt at the time was the supreme unease that I had just done something against my nature. I submitted.

It's funny, because that's how Western media wants to perceive us, right? Submissive. Girls hidden behind veils who are only told what to do, who only have the mind to either follow a male family member or outrageously commit to violence as our only animalistic form of expression. And yet, what is it exactly that Western society wants us to do when it imposes an impossible pressure on us to bend, conform, assimilate, submit? When French laws supposedly aim to "liberate" Muslim women from the compulsion of wearing religious garments by ironically forbidding them to wear religious garments, and then fining all Muslim women who dare appear in the public sphere while refusing to abide by such outrageous rules upon their agency, what is Western society trying to do but make us submit? When trolls leave comments on MuslimGirl.com threatening us, telling us to shut up and accept the Western violence inflicted upon us because at least it's not the otherwise

somehow different violence that we would be met with in Muslim countries, what do they hope we will do but submit? When we are ridiculed and targeted for covering our bodies in the face of the hypersexualization of patriarchal Western society that demands we, as women, take our garments off—that is more comfortable with a pair of naked breasts than covered hair—what does Western society want from us but our submission?

We are not submissive. To the contrary, every step we take in our non-Muslim home countries, in spite of pressure, threats, judgments, and even laws, is a reluctant act of defiance. The Arabic word *islam* means submission—in our religion it means submission to God and God alone. You want us to submit. Submitting is not in our nature.

The shame I felt was two-pronged: First, I felt bad about myself, as might be expected given the societal pressure for Muslim girls to view themselves as inferior; second, I felt bad about my decision, which, though I had made it for the sake of survival, I saw as a lack of courage, integrity, and strength. Of course, I know now that I was only a child, and that that was an undue burden to place on myself, but what could I do? That's how society trained me and inevitably caged me in.

All my life I've been conditioned to feel that I'm "less than." It's hard to explain, but I know my sisters of color understand this weird feeling that sticks to your bones so early and so discreetly that it requires evolving some superhuman level of self-awareness to even notice it.[1] W. E. B. Du Bois described such confines in the context of the black community thusly:

1 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co. [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999.

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

In many ways, this phenomenon can apply to both black and, more recently, non-black Muslims post-9/11 as well. Being indoctrinated early on into a society seemingly at war with Islam, I quickly became afflicted by this condition, marked by a feeling of severe inferiority compared to my peers. This isn't some WebMD diagnosis based on a bullet-point list of symptoms: The effects of this illness vary widely and, to be frank, the greatest symptom may be that we have possibly spent most of our lives searching for a WebMD of this nature, that affirms this phenomenon we have been feeling, that echoes our symptoms and their effects right back at us. That's probably how MuslimGirl.com came to exist: the WebMD of patriarchy and Islamophobia, all wrapped up in one and sealed with a media-friendly pretty hot-pink bow.

That inferiority complex really seized me by the throat for most of my upbringing. It wasn't just that I struggled to break out of the mental limitation of how far I could go, but the feeling even surfaced in little everyday concessions like letting someone else take the last seat because I was second-rate and thus not worthy of sitting in it. Or letting kids cut me in the lunch line in the cafeteria, not just because I didn't feel I deserved to speak up, but also because they were loud and cocky and I was crippled by the fear of the ridicule I'd suffer if I did speak up and say, *Hello, I'm here. I am a person, too.*

In fifth grade, we had a science project called Project Earth, in which we collated 1,000 pages of assignments we did through-

out the year into one big binder to submit for a final grade. It was the biggest project any of our nine- and ten-year-old selves had ever done. Of course, it was out of 1,000 points, and the lucky few fifth graders who scored 1,000 out of 1,000—if there were any—were spoken of throughout the halls like urban legends for years after they left for middle school. But there was more: The kids who scored the coveted 100 percent were given the authority to decide the order that our classmates would be launching the makeshift rockets we built in science class for the school-wide outdoor watching party at the end of the year. Every year, the entire elementary school poured onto the playground for the day, faculty et al, and we got to watch the fifth graders launch their pretty, handmade, and hand-painted rockets one by one. Sometimes they shot into neighbors' properties and were gone forever, other times there was failure to launch, and the rest of the time we would run to find where the beautiful creations had landed, yards away. But each year, it was our great send-off for the fifth graders, much to the delight of the rest of the school.

Lo and behold, I and two other students opened our graded binders to be greeted by the mythical "1,000" in red Sharpie with a circle around it. In the weeks that followed, we would meet up and sort the deck of index cards with our classmates' names written on them, deciding the order in which everyone would launch the rockets that we had excitedly been working on for months.

This is where that inferiority complex kicked in. We had decided that the three of us would go closer to the beginning so we wouldn't have to wait so long. I offered to go second. Now, why did I choose No. 2 instead of No. 1? It might be easy to hypothesize why. Maybe I was too nervous to be the first to go. Maybe

someone else needed to warm up the audience before my turn. Maybe the thought of being the first to go was a lot of pressure; what with the chance of my rocket not launching. But I posit that my offer to go second was an intentional repression of my inner eagerness, the dulling of a girl of color's ambition, and a manifestation of the way I viewed myself. Something inside me told me that first place was not an option for me. It was reserved for somebody else. It was like it was some sort of expectation ingrained in me that second was the highest I could go. There had to be someone before me, someone above me.

For the first rocket launch, one of the other students selected a girl in our class named Roxanne. She was a beautiful girl, somehow always with sun-kissed beachy hair, blue eyes like the ocean, and perfectly tanned skin—yes, even at ten years old. She somehow possessed this supernatural confidence that made her the coolest girl in our class every year. She was my first best friend in school, and our moms would bring us together for countless pool parties and movie dates throughout our childhood. Until, in typical schoolgirl fashion, I somehow became shunned and the outcast among the rest of the girls in my grade, and she replaced me with a cooler companion. She was the same girl who, only a couple of years earlier, in third grade, had gone up and down our morning line as we were waiting for the bell to ring our school day into session. She stared into the faces of each one of our classmates, going down the line, saying, "No, no, no, no . . ." until she landed on me: "Yes! You have it!" I wasn't sure whether to be excited or scared, so I asked her what it was that I had, and she responded, "You have a unibrow." That was the first time I was introduced to that undesirable feature that I unknowingly possessed, and I went home that day crying to my mom that I had a unibrow. Thus began

my lifelong insecurity with my body hair. It's cool, though: Bushy brows are a thing now, apparently.

I think my science teacher, Mrs. Rabii, sensed that I was holding myself back. When she came to check on the completion of the index card deck the day before Rocket Day, she asked, "Who's going first?" saw Roxanne's name, and asked if none of us wanted to be first instead. I met her with silence. But that was the first moment that I ever imagined myself being first; the fact that it was offered to me like it was just as much of a right due to me as it was my peers opened my mind to picturing myself first. Being second was a cap I had placed on myself that I had never encountered, identified, or been aware of before. I stayed silent in that moment, but after I went home, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

I want to be first, I told myself. That was it—I had to be first. I planned to wake up early the next morning so that I could get to class first and change the order of the index cards. Even though I set my alarm, I couldn't sleep that night. I lay wide awake, in a sweat, watching the clock creep closer and closer to Rocket Day. When it hit an early-morning hour that was acceptable to appear in school, I booked it. But, when I got there, the stack of index cards was already in the hands of the other 1,000-point students, who were looking over the arrangement one more time before we went out onto the playground. Mrs. Rabii came over and noticed some type of unsettled nerve in me, because she turned and, almost nonchalantly, asked me, "Do you want to be first?"

"Yes," I said. And without hesitation, without so much as looking up, she grabbed my index card, moved it to the front of the stack, closed the box on the cards, and that was that.

That's all it took. I needed to decide that I wanted to be first. That I could be first. That I, too, deserved to be first.