



Growing Up Muslim

Muslim College Students in America Tell Their Life Stories

Edited by Andrew Garrod and Robert Kilkenney
Introduction by Eboo Patel

PART V

STRUGGLES WITH FAMILY

I was born in the city of Khartoum, Sudan, where I grew up among a mix of cultures and languages. Khartoum is a relatively modern city with a mix of buildings that contrast starkly with the traditional mud-brick houses that surround it. My family had been in Sudan for several generations. I attended an all-girls Catholic school (the only one in the city) because it had a rigorous education. Education mattered to my family, and I was one of the few girls that I formed my identity around. However, this all changed when my family moved to the United States, and my father started a business.

When I came to the United States, I enrolled in a private school. I was one of the few girls in my class, and the difference between what I had learned in Sudan and the reality of my new school was stark. Private racism is prevalent in the United States, and in my experience, many people still believe that people of African descent are inferior to Arabs. As a lower-middle-class girl, I was often the only one of my race in my school. As a lower-middle-class girl, I was often the only one of my race in my school. As a lower-middle-class girl, I was often the only one of my race in my school. My parents wanted me to go to high school, but there was no school in my area. They managed their

Tafaoul Abdelmagid A Child of Experience

I was born in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, where I grew up among my cousins, aunts, and uncles until the age of ten. Khartoum is a relatively modern city, with gaudy houses and soaring buildings that contrast starkly with the neighboring villages. Temperatures there reach one hundred degrees Fahrenheit for about eight months out of the year. My family had a very stable and comfortable life in Khartoum. I attended an all-girls Catholic private school (yes, in an Islamic country) because it had a rigorous curriculum and provided an excellent education. Education mattered very much to my parents, and I absolutely loved my school for the environment it provided me. It was there among the other girls that I formed my closest friendships and developed my personality. However, this all changed when my father was offered a visa to visit the United States, and my family made the decision to emigrate.

After living in the United States for a few years, I enrolled in a private Islamic high school, where I soon learned the difference between what religious institutions are ideally expected to accomplish and the reality of what actually occurs inside these schools. Ethnic racism is prevalent in North African and Middle Eastern countries, and in my experience, many people from those regions consider black Africans to be inferior to Arabs. Although this ethnic bias is implicit and unspoken, such prejudiced beliefs were present in the classrooms of my Islamic school. As a lower-middle-class Sudanese student, I was viewed as inferior by several of the school's teachers. I became disillusioned with the Islamic school, and during my freshman year I registered at the public high school. My parents initially rejected the idea of enrolling me in a public high school, but there was no other choice for me, other than being homeschooled. They managed their

anxiety by trying to find out every detail of my daily life at school. On my return home each day, I was required to give them a detailed report of what had taken place, whom I had spoken to, who spoke to me, whom I sat with during lunch, and so forth. They believed that I needed surveillance and protection from those around me, and even from myself.

As I continued my freshman year at the public high school, I was fearful and felt socially isolated from my classmates. They would talk about the way I looked and give me dirty glances, which made me feel I would never be able to fit in or breach that invisible barrier of communication. I know in retrospect the barrier was caused as much by the prejudice I projected onto my classmates as by their attitudes toward me. But even though I did not seem to belong there, I was determined to carve out a place for myself. At times I did not think I could possibly survive the first year of high school, but every time I earned an excellent grade in one of my courses, my lifeless self was revived.

As the end of freshman year approached, I began selecting challenging courses for my sophomore year. Many of those courses required teacher recommendations or permission, and that posed a great challenge for me. I respected all my teachers and had established decent relationships with them, but I discovered that some of them did not think I was capable of succeeding in advanced courses. My English teacher denied me the right to register for honors English in my sophomore year, claiming that I needed to improve my writing before taking such a challenging course, and my geometry teacher did not approve my selection of an upper-level math course. This discovery that some of the teachers doubted my intellect tore me apart. I talked to my guidance counselor and told her that, despite my teachers' refusal to give me the necessary recommendations, I would not change my selections. The guidance counselor supported my persistence and my desire to challenge myself, and she approved my course selections without the required recommendations. At that point I felt my freshman year had officially ended, and all I now aspired to do was prove my teachers wrong.

Sophomore year of high school passed quickly, and every day of it further strengthened my determination to succeed, to escape by writing, reading, studying. I was becoming less and less tolerant of how much my parents distrusted me, but the more furious I became, the more I channeled my anger into my determination to achieve academically. It was during my sophomore year that I developed a peculiar propensity for writing. I found myself writing everywhere I went, at any time, whether at or outside of school. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Every word, even

for my English class essays, was written with fervent emotion, with tears, laughs, anguish, and joy. I realized that I wrote because it made me feel free of any burdens or constraints. I slowly made more friends, none of them Muslim, and started becoming much more receptive to their ideologies, beliefs, and cultural customs.

Surprisingly, at the end of my junior year I was elected vice president of the National Honor Society—something I had never thought possible. The closer senior year came, the more I found myself engrossed in a state of self-reflection and inner confrontation. Suddenly, my faith, principles, and the divergent views I was encountering became tangible subjects that I could discuss inwardly with myself. Somehow I had acquired the courage to confront myself in an internal dialogue that included questions about my beliefs and thoughts: What does it mean for some act to be right or wrong? What does my faith really mean to me? Where do I belong—at school, at home, or inside myself? Who am I? Through these dialogues, I developed the strength to face myself in front of an invisible mirror every time I did something that I knew would be considered culturally unconventional in the eyes of my parents.

I enjoyed every moment of my senior year because I realized that each day took me a step closer to a new beginning in a new place. I was looking forward to a new stage in my life, as things at home were not good. I was silent all the time, and that silence communicated my rebellion to my parents—I honestly didn't know how else to do it. It told my parents that I wanted to be independent, that I was angry and wanted to be away from home. Being silent provided both an escape and temporary relief from confrontations with my parents, but my reticence infuriated them even further. I did my homework in silence, studied in silence, and ate in silence. My silence provoked my parents' suspicion and anger, and rather than encouraging me to continue working hard at school, they began to rebuke me for spending too much time alone and for studying excessively. They repeated over and over that I had become an isolated individual, no longer their radiant, social daughter. "You've become Americanized," they would say, or, "You've changed for the worse." I felt frustrated because I was achieving the academic success they wanted, yet they were not satisfied.

My routine throughout my high-school years consisted of going to school, returning home, and doing homework every night and most weekend days. Doing homework was a way to evade my parents' interrogation and suffocating distrust. As long as I was studying, there was no need for them to question my actions or intentions, and they no longer

interrogated me as much because I spent all my time secluded in my little room, studying. Eventually their dissatisfaction and behavior no longer infuriated me and I was able to accept that that was just how they were and may always be. I had a goal, and everything else faded from view.

I began to develop a strong interest in science, especially when we studied anatomy and physiology. My sense of competence, confidence, and passion for learning was evident to my peers and teachers. I also developed strong friendships with a few non-Muslim girls I had known in middle school. I befriended them with a clear caveat in mind: they were my friends during the school day, but never outside the school walls. I knew that I would not be allowed to spend my leisure time with them because they were devout Christians, and I was not allowed to befriend any girl without my mother's approval. She had to meet every one of my potential friends so she could assess their behavior, character, and values. This made it difficult for me to find friends, as it instilled in me a kind of internal filter that prevented me from approaching anyone without first analyzing the person and their intentions. Nevertheless, in time I became closer to a group of girls I had known in middle school, most of whom were Russian or Hispanic immigrants.

None of my closest friends were U.S. citizens or Muslims. There were only two other girls in the school who were Muslim and wore veils, but I never got along with them—I just did not feel comfortable in their presence. Although these two girls were Muslim, they went out with friends all the time, cursed a lot, and even had male friends. They were definitely not the ideal Muslim girls my parents had hoped I would befriend. Everything these girls did at school contradicted what I had been taught about decent Islamic behavior and confirmed my parents' concerns. I felt safer and more comfortable around my Christian friends, who were either devout or otherwise virtuous. While we rarely discussed religion directly, from time to time they would ask me about the purpose of the veil, why I did not eat meat at school, or about my cultural customs in general. By the third year of high school, as some of these friendships grew deeper, I was even allowed to go to their houses—after my mother had completed her multiyear evaluation.

The closer I grew to my friends, the more I understood the core of who I was. Our commonalities brought us closer, and our differences helped me refine my perspective on life and to value my identity. At the same time, I continued to study as hard as I could because I wanted to achieve higher grades than all my classmates. I gained confidence and learned that I could succeed with hard work, diligence, and persistence. My academic

achievements and determination to earn the highest grades made me surprisingly popular among my classmates. I earned a reputation as a studious, friendly, yet conservative girl—one who respected herself and never allowed anyone to overstep her boundaries. In a sense, my grades defined me and allowed me to find my place among my classmates and friends. That lonely and unhappy freshman girl bloomed and became a popular student, respected friend, and, without knowing it, a girl who was feared by many boys for her serious demeanor. I cherished my new identity because it was one I had consciously carved into the minds of my fellow students.

At school I was outgoing, vocal, and even strong. I communicated my opinions openly, and I developed the strength to defend my opinions, even if it meant disagreeing with a teacher during a class discussion or with my own friends. Instead of my friends asking me about my religious tenets and customs all the time, I began to ask them about theirs. I wanted to understand why I was different and, surprisingly, I realized that the more I challenged my faith, the more faithful I became. Islam is not simply a religion but a way of life. Its essence is found in everyday things: how I eat, how I act, how I sleep, how I talk, even how I walk. Being able to ask my friends about their own beliefs and outlooks on different issues transformed the way I thought about everything and how I viewed myself. Rather than simply wondering, I asked; instead of feeling confused, I demanded explanations; and instead of being quiet all the time, I had a voice. Over time I formed enduring friendships that were based on both commonalities and a mature appreciation of differences. My friends knew that I did not drink and did not enjoy guy talk or staying out late at night, and they respected me for that. My different way of life did not turn them away.

My French teacher was my favorite. He advised me to apply to all the Ivy League schools and supported me throughout the college application process. He helped me write my personal essay and supplementary application, and never failed to remind me every day to send the required documentation to the colleges on time or to inform me of any scholarships he knew I would qualify for. There are some people who pass by silently in your life, and others who leave a permanent imprint on your heart. This teacher was certainly one of the latter, and I owe him my sincere gratitude and respect, not only as a teacher but as a father figure as well.

I knew that I had to go to college to experience the outside world and leave the bubble of my family life. The idea of attending a college in the United States seemed both menacing and important to my parents. They

knew that a college degree from a U.S. institution would open the doors of opportunity for me anywhere in the world, especially in Sudan. Yet at the same time, they feared that the current of U.S. culture and customs would engulf me or even steal me away from them. They undoubtedly feared that I would become like the majority of U.S. youth rather than remain the obedient, modest daughter they had raised. While I understood their fears, I also wanted my freedom. To ensure that they still had a say in my future, my parents made me apply to all the renowned women's colleges: Wellesley, Smith, Mount Holyoke. The mere fact that I had applied to these institutions alleviated their fears. In the end I was able, after much effort, to convince them to let me attend the coed Ivy League school where I was accepted.

The first day I arrived on campus, I felt that I had finally ruptured the bubble around me and entered a new world. I was both excited and terrified. During my freshman year, I was continually overwhelmed with work. I had to learn how to synthesize new ideas and actually apply the information I gathered in lectures, rather than simply regurgitate facts, as I had done to achieve success in high school. It may sound strange, but the more stressed I was, the more spiritual I became. I found myself praying more, and discussing religion more openly and assertively than ever with my non-Muslim friends. I became much more independent. I must say that I owe a lot of my newly invigorated spirituality to the network of Muslim sisters I met. I say "sisters" because of the way they treated me and the strong friendships we developed. We ate together, hung out together, prayed together, studied together—we really became one. I had not had any Muslim friends in high school because I had feared the cultural prejudices that could taint an attempt at friendship, but in college, the virtuous qualities I found in these girls transcended any personal differences. For the first time in my life, I found older sisters—true friends with whom I could identify as a Muslim woman.

Most of the Muslim friends I made as a college freshman were seniors, so by the end of my freshman year I needed to say good-bye to many of them. Making new friendships outside that strong inner circle seemed impossible. However, I knew that those friends had enabled me to become a stronger, more knowledgeable Muslim girl. They had fortified my spirit and mind through discussions on the role of women in Islam, gender relationships, social roles, independence, professional careers, academia, and our dreams, hopes, and desires. We talked about everything and anything without social constraints or fear, and with a sincere consciousness of God and Islamic teachings. Knowing them also enabled me to become daring

enough to form friendships with non-Muslims as well as girls of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. For once in my life, I was able to feel comfortable being who I am—a Muslim girl—among people who had entirely different views from those I embraced and who came from entirely different backgrounds: white Americans, Mexicans, Russians, Kenyans, Latinas, Nigerians, Somalis, Pakistanis. I no longer feared being labeled as an outlier; in fact, I actually wanted to be known as someone different, not just because I am Muslim but because I am me. I wanted my friends to see me distinctly, and not as just another Muslim girl in a crowd. Through these friendships, I found my inner voice, and rather than simply practicing my religion, I had become an active participant and representative of my faith. I did my best to act, walk, speak, and simply appear like a true, strong Muslim woman. Rather than just letting people see that I wore the veil, I made it a goal for them to understand why. Rather than simply saying that I am Muslim, I allowed my friends to understand what Islam truly is.

Throughout my life, one simple word had fulfilled how I defined myself: Muslim. I am Sudanese by nationality and culture, Arab by language, but above all, I am Muslim. Being Muslim meant that I believed and testified that “there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His Prophet and Messenger.” I neither cared nor knew about any sects, divisions, or political complications associated with certain Islamic countries. All I knew was that I was Muslim. However, all that changed the day I had a conversation with someone who made me realize that I was ignorant about many aspects of Islam. I had known this person well for a few years, but we had never discussed religion before.

Many people think that Muslims preach about religion all the time, especially Muslim girls, since we wear the veil as an obvious symbol of devotion, but this is not necessarily true. Actually, religion is a topic I typically avoid with my friends, especially my non-Muslim friends. It's not that I'm ashamed to discuss it, but I want to avoid pressuring my friends in any way. Islam is not a religion ruled by an austere set of codes; the real Islam is practiced in the way you interact with others. One day, this person decided to open a rather controversial topic with me: the way the veil is worn. He claimed that he had many close female Muslim friends, some who wore the veil and others who did not. Those who wore the veil, he said, usually wore it with their hair exposed in the front while the back was covered. He alleged that some even revealed their necks. He then asked me quite bluntly, “Why do you wear your veil so tightly in the front?” I replied that each person simply interprets religion in their own way. Unconvinced by my answer, he asked me to prove to him that the veil

had to cover the hair and neck completely. I was aware of a verse in the Quran that explicitly states that a Muslim woman should expose only her hands and face. I knew the verse in Arabic, but I could not paraphrase it in English because casual translation of the Quran is not allowed in Islam, and I had not memorized the verse in question from a Quran translated into English. I explained this to him, but he was not convinced. He said very simply, "I don't get it. My other Muslim friend wears her veil half-way, and when I asked her to explain why, she immediately recited a verse in English and took out a translation of the Quran and showed it to me. Looks like you can't do that! See, you can't even prove yourself right!!" That was it: I didn't know how to communicate my knowledge to him, or perhaps I had no true knowledge of my own religion. His blunt censure slashed my heart. I was silent and paralyzed by my shame, and I wished that the earth would open up and swallow me. I couldn't even express anger. I could not blame him because he was right; I was unable to defend my position.

I will never forget his most pointed question: "What's your sect?" I asked, "What do you mean by sect?" He said, "Are you Sunni or Shia?" I knew of these two prominent sects in Islam, but in my eyes, all were Muslim in the eyes of God and under the testimony of Islam, regardless of differences. I replied naively, "I'm Sunni, I guess." "Oh, OK! That's why!!" he replied. "That's why what?!" I asked. "That's why you're so strict. You see, my female friend is Shia, and she's very receptive. She interprets the Quran with flexibility and seems more devoted than you. At least more open-minded! Sunnis are conservative and narrow-minded." He articulated these words with a certainty that terrified me. Is that what other students thought of me?! I couldn't help pondering his words.

After that day, I became more alert to how my fellow students interacted with me. I found myself suddenly "reading between the lines," trying to interpret every smile, every smirk, every glance, at times even every conversation I had with other students. In an attempt to understand why certain students had a misconstrued idea of Sunnis and Shias, I registered for an introduction to Islam course. I wanted to see what it was that these students learned, and to develop a deeper understanding of how they perceived me. Of course, I was the only Muslim student registered in that course. The first day I entered the classroom, heads turned and whispers rippled throughout the room. Their reaction was expected; after all, it was strange to have a Muslim student wearing a hijab in a course that supposedly discussed the basics of her own religion. However, by the end of that semester, I had gained a better understanding of why certain students

misjudged Muslims. What we read in textbooks and articles focused only on Shia Islam, not on Islam as an encompassing religion. This reality shocked me, but at the same time it allowed me to present students with a live example of a Sunni Muslim who attended that same class. I educated myself in many aspects of Islam and realized that the more knowledge I shared with others in discussions, the better they understood Islam—and me. This course allowed me to learn more about who I am as a hijabi Muslim girl through my classmates' reflecting glass.

The controversial issue of how the hijab is worn and whether or not it is obligatory, as stated in the Quran, inevitably surfaced during many class discussions. The fact that I was a Muslim girl in the classroom never dissuaded students from making valid comparisons between me and other Muslim girls on campus. I appreciated their avid interest in learning, but at times their questions enlivened my fear of being characterized as narrow-minded. Most questions about the hijab were in fact posed by male students, and in such discussions the conversation often evolved into a different topic: gender relationships in Islam. Most wanted to know how it was possible for a hijabi Muslim girl to express her sexuality when she is forbidden to expose her physical beauty to any man until after marriage. My male classmates respected me and never overstepped my boundaries, and through their interactions with me they learned that I was not just a Muslim classmate but also a friend and a sister. I was able to help them see that, while I revere my religion and the hijab I don, I am also a woman who displays a unique form of beauty. A woman is a woman, whether she wears a miniskirt or is fully clothed with a veil on her head. But there was one topic I often evaded whenever possible in class—marriage.

For most Sudanese girls my age, marriage is a must. It represents the beginning of a new life and the end of girlhood. It's also an end to the days of being lonely. To most girls in Sudanese culture, marriage is the door to another world, the realization of romantic fantasies and the bliss of being with the "right one." However, if that's the enchanting dream that marriage offers, then something is wrong with me, because I have truly never thought about marriage. In high school I would hear my friends talk about all the details of their dream weddings, but those ideas were alien to me. I felt like I was a stranger to the entire concept of marriage. It was enough that I was unlike many girls my age already. I hated makeup—all that disgusting powder, vivid lipstick, and vulgar blush. (No one was ever able to convince me that having bright-red cheeks was attractive!) I despised wearing high heels and never mastered the art of walking in them. Being natural was my adage: God created me as a beautiful person inside

and out, so if you don't like what you see, turn around! That was just me, and I'm still that person today, even in college, where girls are supposed to mature into womanhood and adapt to its strange conventions.

From early childhood on, I remember the emphasis that was always placed on becoming a desirable wife. That was every Sudanese mother's dream for her daughter, and at some age, that dream became the daughter's too. It was as if there was nothing else to do in life! I never agreed with any of those beliefs, and I genuinely thought that coming to the United States would mean an end to that narrow definition of being a woman. But that was not the case. I was able to focus on my high-school studies and avoid the entire topic; nevertheless, day after day my mother would bring up the name of a marriage prospect: "He's very respectful, very religious, he can support a family, very educated and open-minded. Oh, and I heard that he comes from a renowned family..." Every time she spoke of a prospect, she made it seem like he was the ONE, the most exceptional of all men. I never really understood how the process of marriage functioned in Sudan until my mother explained it to me when I was sixteen years old. At that time I was a junior in high school and had been living in the United States for about seven years. That was also the year my mother started bringing up these marriage prospects. My response was ALWAYS the same: "No, Mama, I'm still too young and I'm not thinking of getting married now!" While she never forced the idea on me, she also did not ever close the window entirely.

While in college I got more and more marriage proposals. Strangely, I never knew where they came from. When I reached the age of nineteen, I truly became aware of the significance of marriage and its role in my culture and religion. My mother got married when she was only eighteen years old, and she had me, her first child, at the age of nineteen. I could never understand the reality of that, even when I was nineteen years old myself. My mother never exerted any pressure on me or urged me to get married early, but what she did do was emphasize over and over again the need for me to give the topic serious thought, especially since I was getting older; for Sudanese women, age is the factor that determines marriage. In my culture, the older you get, the more unlikely you are to be chosen as a wife. My culture never exalts or even alludes to a woman's right to make her own decision—whether in choosing her partner, when to get married, or even if she wants to get married at all. The entire concept of marriage and its social role seems to have been constructed by the patriarchal ideology of my culture, which I believe is contrary to Islamic teachings.

You would think that living in the United States would allow me to detach myself completely from those conventions and to live my life as I decide. But no, year after year passes and the proposals keep coming. This past summer I received my first serious proposal, one that I could not reject out of hand. I was doing an internship at a clinic for the treatment of pulmonary diseases, hoping to enhance my application to medical school. My youngest maternal aunt had just gotten married and was headed to London for her honeymoon—where she was to meet her husband in person for the very first time. In Sudanese culture, such an arrangement is not unusual. Two weeks into her honeymoon, my aunt started talking to my mother about a guy who happened to be her husband's closest friend. My aunt explained to my mother that this "friend," who was only a few years older than me, was in search of a wife from a decent and respectable family. She said that he happened to see me in one of the photos in her album, which I found rather disturbing and disrespectful, and after many inquiries he insisted on meeting me.

My mother prefaced all this with a long introduction, even though I am sure my aunt got right to the point when discussing it with her. After all, she had to make me sense the urgency of the matter before delivering the shock: "You're getting married!!!" My mother didn't announce it in quite that way, of course, but the message was clear, and she insisted that I give him a chance and not be so antagonistic toward the idea of marriage. It was bad enough that I was out of school for a few months; I now also had to face this revolutionary possibility. I say "revolutionary" because, for the very first time in my life, I did actually begin to think about the idea of marriage. I felt that my parents were truly serious about the matter and I could tell how much they were in favor of allowing the possibility to develop. I felt that I was at a crossroads in my life, one where I had to choose not only which path to follow but also whether I wanted to follow that path alone or with a companion. The thought of being with someone for the rest of my life never really penetrated my mind until that time. I always thought of myself as a student and wanted to be a student for a very long time. The medical field demands focused effort, time, and, quite literally, a life dedicated to the study of the profession. I knew when I entered college that my choice to pursue a medical career would mean making sacrifices, possibly including marriage, family, a personal life—even the simple privilege of being viewed as a woman with human needs.

I have always believed that men are aggressive, callous, insular, and judgmental. This impression is a product of my life experiences. I have

never known a happy couple who simply loved each other and lived their life to reflect that love. I have never witnessed a love story in which a man loved a woman for who she was, and not for his image of the “ideal” companion. Not once in my short life have I heard of a real-life “Romeo and Juliet” type of story, where true love has been the weapon through which a man or a woman defended his or her love against the world, against cultural constraints—a love that formed its own unique reality. All I have seen are images that destroy love, that kill its meaning, its purpose, and its blessings. I have heard of so many instances of divorce, of verbal and physical abuse, of injustice, oppression, women being thrown out in the streets by their husbands, of adultery and the impossibility of finding a faithful man, not to mention the exploitation of women by all means, most of all emotionally. God knows how many times I’ve witnessed women crying before me because their husbands abandoned them or humiliated them for no apparent reason. I was there, even as a child, when my own female relatives spoke of how their husbands treated them like disposable possessions they could disown at will. Pangs of anxiety beset my heart every time I heard stories of the many sacrifices women made for men who proved to be their clandestine enemies—ungrateful, heartless, and selfish. I did not dare envision myself as another of the many such mistreated women in my culture. I did not want to become a mirror image of my mother, my aunts, or my other female relatives. I did not want to become another victim of a generation of voiceless and oppressed women. All that I truly wanted was to be me and to be accepted as an independent, receptive, yet also modest woman. All I wanted was to find a man who would love me for who I am, to live a life of love that God approves of and blesses.

I was expected to talk to this prospective husband, so I started communicating with him over the phone and online from time to time. Every step I took was, of course, with my mother’s permission. The relationship developed steadily, although quite frankly I didn’t perceive myself as committed to a relationship. I continued to be nonchalant about the entire thing until he started mentioning the idea of our wearing rings and having a wedding. A wedding?! What?!! Hearing of his desire to get engaged filled me with confusion, disbelief, joy, and doubt. Through all of these conflicting feelings, the overriding one was of fear. I was frightened of my destiny, scared of deciding to be with him and then realizing at some future time that we weren’t right for each other, yet also fearful of losing this opportunity.

At college, where the topic of relationships and marriage came up often, I tended to discuss my expectations for my “knight in shining armor” in

general terms. However, when I realized that many of my Muslim friends were actually getting engaged and forming families, I began to be very specific about what I expected from my future companion and what kind of relationship I actually wanted. It all came down to three simple yet impossible expectations. First, I wanted a man who fears God in everything he does, because by fearing God in all his actions, he will undoubtedly treat me not only as a wife but as a friend. Second, I sought a man who would treat the women in his family decently. Of course, being reared in a patriarchal culture has contaminated my outlook on men, but I tried to remain realistic. Third, I hoped to find a man who would love me for who I am—and I really mean that. I didn't want a man who would try to fit me into *his* image of the ideal partner. I wanted a man who could recognize me for who I was, with all of my attributes and imperfections, and accept me the way I truly was. I wanted a man who would respect my dreams and aspirations and support me throughout my long journey (both through medical school and afterward), who would fully understand my needs or attempt to do so.

So I knew what qualities I was looking for, but now the question before me was whether this suitor would be the right one. Could he truly meet my expectations and accept me and my impulsiveness, my childish ways and independence and determination? Although he seemed like a promising match in some ways, I sensed in him the usual cultural contagion. He projected the image of a modern, progressive, yet God-fearing man, but in reality his thinking reflected the usual mentality of Arab men. He was utterly possessive, which by my standards translated into me becoming his piece of property. I can understand the jealousy a man feels for the woman he loves, but not possessive jealousy. This guy wanted me to tell him where I was going, and for how long, and with whom, while I wanted trust and an understanding of our mutual individuality. I realize that many of the ideas I express may seem radical to other Muslim women, even to my mother sometimes, but I am only voicing the demands of many girls my age. We are looking for a healthy relationship, but also one in which God is at the center, not just an added benefit. So, in the end, I turned him down. He called me "disrespectful" for being so blunt in my refusal and for not explaining why I didn't want to marry him (I can't blame him). I wasn't going to take chances with my matrimonial life, and being blunt was better than being unjust, both to myself and to him. At least that's what I said to myself to justify my actions. As for my family, let's just say that the displeasure of my refusal still lingers. They may never be happy with my choice of a husband, but they can never force me to marry a man I do not want.

Having lived through an unofficial "engagement," I now know one thing for sure: I want to marry a convert to Islam. That idea may give my mother a heart attack, but I know I will never relinquish my will to do so. My reason is that I see conversion as a proclamation that one has understood the essence of Islam, an essence that is unsullied by cultural ideologies, social customs, or materialistic compromises. A convert would be a man who is intrinsically Muslim, not just overtly or superficially a Muslim. Marrying a convert would enable me to practice Islam as it is, not as society and culture want it to be, and to live happily and, most importantly, peacefully alongside a man who believes that Islam is a religion of moderation and rationality, not radicalism. I am looking for a convert because I believe that it is more likely for a converted man to have experienced both the religious and the nonreligious aspects of life. He will allow me to practice my profession as a Muslim female doctor without the constraints of what my culture demands. He would be able to, God willing, comprehend the true Islam that the Prophet (peace be upon him) delivered, rather than abiding by the adulterated version of Islam that patriarchy imposes in the world today. Most important, he will be able to express to me the following: "I love you for who you are, not who I want you to be, and I want to be with you because we're destined for each other, not because our culture declared that we are convenient for each other." He will embody the authentic ideals of Islam, and we will grow together and along the journey. We will learn from one another until we become one.

I have developed into a mature woman who knows what she wants, and I am determined to pursue a life in which I fulfill all my dreams. I may not know what God's plan holds for me, but that's exactly the point; not knowing is a blessing because it allows us humans to thrust our burdens, pains, and troubles on God and to have unwavering faith in His ability to dispose of all our affairs. As to my marriage and whom I'll be with, I ask those who read my story to pray for me and wish me luck. Life is full of surprises, and I am ready to receive them. Whichever direction I choose will be a reflection of God's will. I also know that my experiences, no matter how trivial compared to those of other women, will come in handy someday and fortify me as a Muslim woman.

I am no longer a product solely of my rearing and culture but of experience as well. I was not born the woman I am; I have *become* an independent, determined, strong, and proud Muslim woman. While my time in the United States as a young Muslim woman has thrilled me and granted me countless privileges, I realize that it has not defined me. My identity lies solely and firmly in two essential facts; I am the daughter of my mother, and the child of experience.

Epilogue: Life Goes On

So much has occurred between the time I wrote this essay and my graduation from college. After refusing to marry the suitor my parents presented, I decided that I needed a long hiatus from relationships. I felt unprepared, inexperienced, and certainly reluctant to commit myself to a man. However, I fell in love with an Italian American social worker whom my mother and I had met before I entered college. Although he was a devout Christian at the time, he expressed an avid interest in Islam as a religion and way of life. The fact that he was a Christian made me close my heart to him, even when he relentlessly tried to get closer to me. After all, it was impossible for me to fall in love with a Christian, never mind to marry him!!! So for me he was simply NOT an option.

I didn't know back then that just a few months later that same man would reappear in my life as a devout new convert to Islam. After several conversations with my mother, he openly confessed that he had always thought about me and asked for her permission to speak to me on the phone. My mother didn't entirely approve of this situation, but she grew weary of trying to convince me to get married. He was handsome, cultured, and wealthy, and a convert whom my mother actually respected. I could not shelve that match as unpromising; I believed that shared religious and moral values were the criteria that transcended any cultural or ethnic differences.

Our relationship slowly developed and matured over time, and a few months into it I began to see the true colors of my knight. To my shock, he was chauvinistic, insular, and insecure. What he wanted was a dependent, demure, and selfless partner. My independence appalled him, and my career-oriented mentality and strong will affronted him. To him I was always either too strong-willed or too stubborn, too sociable or too individualistic. I felt that what he truly wanted was a Mother Teresa figure (whom I highly admire but can never match), not a Muslim version of a seemingly Westernized feminist. With all those red flags, I ended my relationship with him, even though we had planned to become officially engaged just a month later.

It took some time to forget him, but I eventually met other men who proved to me that finding the "right one" does not necessarily depend on nationality or conversion to Islam but on a person's innate character. I met Muslim men—men who were willing to convert to Islam for my sake, and others who had recently converted. I returned to Sudan just a few days after my graduation from college, and just three weeks later I got engaged to one of the suitors (a young Sudanese man) who proposed to me. He was just a few years older than me, and he lived and studied in Germany. That

engagement didn't last very long, when it became clear he was just not the right fit for me. Of course other men proposed, and I found myself in a rocking boat, unable to decide whether I wanted to sink into marital life or just keep rocking until the right prospect came along.

Well, I did not stay on that boat for very long because right after I ended my engagement, the man I had first rejected in my story, whom my parents had arranged for me to marry, proposed to me—again. It turned out that he had never stopped loving me, even after I had refused him. He prayed for two years that God would destine me to become his wife. I was totally baffled by the fact that a man would pursue me to that extent, and to be honest, I secretly felt flattered. I decided that God must have caused him to resurface in my life for a good reason, so why not give him a chance? However, this time I actually approached the relationship with an open heart, without cultural prejudgments or unrealistic personal expectations. Less than a month from the time we began speaking again, we became happily married.

I realize that my story may seem strange and baffling at times, but in the end, if I had to choose between going back in time to live a different life or to relive mine, I would choose the latter. I wouldn't change a single thing because I know that God put me through trials to test my strength and to bless me with what I deserve at the end. My fairy tale is nothing like *Cinderella* or *Sleeping Beauty*, but more like that of the princess in *Brave*. I never sat and waited for Prince Charming to come and carry me away on his white horse, nor did I spend sleepless nights wondering when my knight in shining armor would appear. I came to view marriage and relationships in general with practicality, yet I never lost sight of my expectations. My acceptance of my husband was not a surrender to my family's demands or to a sense of despair in finding the right one. No! I agreed to marry this man because I felt that he was right for me, but more important because he wanted me to always remain myself. God helped me find a delicate balance between my parents' demands and my own expectations. So, to all you Muslim girls out there, never give up, because the beginning of a new chapter in your life may be just around the corner. But for now, keep chasing life a little.

Tafaoul is still married to the man she rejected at the beginning of her story; he has become her beloved husband and best friend. They now live in the UK, where Tafaoul is pursuing her medical studies.