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A MUSLIM GIRL WITH THE SAS

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CHAPTER ONE

NORTHERN BEGINNINGS

MY FATHER DIED three days after New Year in January 2011. I'd received a call from Pakistan in the early hours of the morning. I thought I'd be hysterical, have a breakdown or at least be sad. Instead, I put the phone down and went out to do my weekly shopping at the local supermarket.

I couldn't figure out exactly what I was feeling until I got back, and then I realised what it was: regret. Regret that I'd never told him who I really was or what I had become. Would he have been proud that I'd followed in his footsteps, or disappointed that I'd not fulfilled the daughter role? But none of this mattered any more as I would never know.

My father's death brought back flickers of my childhood. Dad came over to England in the 1960s, as a veteran of the British Indian Army and a soldier for the Pakistani Army during the 1947 partition. He was fourteen when he joined the army. He made his friends there and then watched them be killed one by one. He hardly spoke of his time in the military, other than the lethal roles given to soldiers during the war of Pakistan's Independence, where they had to stuff grenades into the smocks of their buddy soldiers selected to be thrown under a tank of four enemy soldiers.

My three brothers were born in Pakistan and they came over with Mum once Dad could afford reasonable accommodation to raise a family with money earned from his job in the cotton factory. Then my sister and I were born here. I was the youngest of five.

I grew up in a two-up two-down, accommodating seven of us. The front room was south facing and had the sun coming through all day, but it was only ever opened for guests, mainly men. It smelt of plastic and the only noise came from kids playing out on the front street. The three-piece sofa set looked like it had hardly been sat on, the coffee table was covered in an embroidered white tablecloth in case it got dusty and the black and white television sat in the corner of the room was never switched on in case it broke.

The women who visited would sit in the back room with their kids. It was dark with broken furniture and conveniently situated next to the kitchen so it smelt of curry all the time. We didn't have to worry about spilling anything on the carpet or being slapped if we scribbled on the walls. The window looked out onto the backyard, which was always shady and only ever used to hang washing out.

Bath time for me was in the kitchen sink; even beyond the baby stage, owing to my physical stature. Mum would fill it up then lift my small body up and sit me on the draining board to scrub me with soap. On the few occasions she fell ill, Dad took over. He would get impatient with the soap slipping off my bony legs and arms and squirt washing-up liquid over me instead.

The sleeping arrangements were a little complicated. My three brothers shared one room and my parents shared the other with my sister and me. There were two beds in my parents' room: my sister and mum slept together, and I slept with my dad.

When I was five, Dad changed shifts in the factory to nights. Up until then I had taken his presence for granted.

'Where's Dad?' I'd ask, as soon as I'd get home from school. Then I'd go upstairs and notice the main bedroom door closed and his snores coming through.

His new routine left a big hole in my life; after school, he was no longer due back from work but upstairs asleep. And when I woke up in the morning, he was still out at work.

I would see his mysterious figure floating around the house on a Sunday. Occasionally I heard my parents have their differences in the kitchen. My dad was quietly spoken and Mum would respond with big drama. I would listen behind the door and silently cheer Dad on. He was always right.

Islam was never forced upon us, but it naturally became part of our lives growing up. It was something to respect, like our parents. Sometimes a religious figure would visit the house wearing a big hat with a title of Hajji or Hafiz. On these occasions, all hell broke loose. Mum would run around the house like a headless chicken tidying up, then cook up a special biryani crammed with meat in a big pan and serve it up in her best crockery to the guest. Then she would stand to one side of the small kitchen table (wearing her headscarf extra tight) and watch Dad and the guest eat, waiting on them.

‘Islam is very important for children, especially growing up in this country,’ the big hat would say, pointing a finger in the air.

‘We agree,’ Mum would pipe up from behind.

However, the big hat was not interested in Mum’s opinion. He would stare at Dad until he got the acknowledgment he needed. This would sometimes take a while, as Dad was a controlled man and didn’t feel the need to rush to tell people his thoughts.

‘A good education and work ethic is just as important,’ he’d finally point out.

‘No, no...’ the big hat would bite back, booming his voice to remind my parents who had the authority around here. ‘Islam gives a child everything. This is where they will get education and work.’

Dad would just go along with it; sometimes eating quickly so Mum would serve up the chai and the guest would leave. He wasn’t interested in religious debates. His priority was to buy a bigger house one day and have his own business; he had ambitions that these religious figureheads didn’t understand.

When these visits occurred, I would have to stay upstairs in the bedroom with my sister until the guest left. Just witnessing my mum’s behaviour made their presence a daunting one. Little did I know at the time that one of these figures would later become my imam.

I was six when my mum made me attend mosque after school. The closest to our house was a Bangladeshi one, situated above a parade of dilapidated shops on a busy road, with a dimly lit narrow staircase leading up

to the prayer room. It had green woodchip wallpaper and smelt of stale curry. The room was laid out with rows of low benches; girls sat on one side and boys on the other.

I hated it. The kids would take the mick out of me because I was Pakistani. They spoke in their own language so I couldn't understand them. The war between Pakistan and Bangladesh was long since over, but their parents still carried it in their hearts and these kids had picked up on that. My mum couldn't see this.

'We all come from the same piece of cloth,' she would say.

To her the war was about a bunch of men on both sides of the border with big egos. The war had only lasted nine months, but it was brutal. This was never explained to me, though, and it left me bemused at why the other kids in the mosque hated me so much.

The Bangladeshi imam spoke to me in Urdu so we could communicate. Originally, the language was pushed by Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, as the product of Islamic culture across Pakistan, but failed because the majority of Pakistanis spoke Punjabi. Nowadays, Urdu is the language used in Indian movies to reach a wider audience of Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

My imam was an old chap, bent over with a hump

on his back, a wiry grey beard and eyes that watered all the time. He wore a long white tunic that looked like it had never seen an iron, and baggy trousers. He sat cross-legged on the floor between the boys and girls, a stack of canes behind him, watching us like a hawk. We kept our heads down, reading aloud and filling the room with noise.

'Louder,' he would chant. 'So Allah can hear you and forgive you.'

My hand would reach up and pull my headscarf over my forehead, to cover any hair that might be showing. It was my first experience of wearing a scarf and it made me feel grown up.

Every so often, the imam would turn around to his stack of canes and choose one with his bony fingers. The short, thick ones were used on the hand and the long, thin ones were for both hands and feet, which he could strike at a distance.

Occasionally I experienced the long thin cane for spending too long on the toilet when I had constipation. The toilet was the backyard shed; a hole in the ground, no lighting, and stank to high heaven. I would hold my breath and squat down, clutching the hem of my trousers so that they wouldn't become soiled. When I got out, there was a queue of angry Bangladeshi kids snaking back to the building. By the time I

walked back up the stairs to the prayer room, I knew I was in trouble.

Slowly, I stepped forward towards the imam and stopped a few feet away from him, holding my hand out. I knew the drill; I'd seen other kids do it when they were in trouble, but that didn't stop my heart from pounding.

'You know why you are getting this,' the imam would say. Then he would tap the end of the cane in the centre of my palm to ensure a good shot, then raise it to the ceiling and strike down, full force.

The first strike of the cane set my skin on fire. Tears streamed down my face but no sound came out of my mouth, as it would only earn me an extra one. The second strike numbed me. Every kid in the room was staring at me; some smirking, some trying to look sorry, and some amazed at my stupidity. The pain and broken skin would soon go away but the humiliation stayed. I couldn't tell anyone at home; challenging an imam's actions was unheard of, especially in my mum's world.

To make matters more challenging, we had to learn the Koran in Arabic, the holy language, which meant we didn't understand the words. I couldn't understand the logic behind why it was done this way. I would get through it much faster if it were translated in English – and there was the added benefit that I would understand what I was reading.

I wanted to leave but there was no shortcut. My parents wouldn't allow me to leave until I finished reading the whole Koran in Arabic.

'You are not a full Muslim until it's completed,' Mum's blanket expression would be.

'What was that supposed to mean?' I wanted to retort. 'I don't understand what a Muslim is because I don't understand what I'm reading!'

The months dragged, the girls in my group moved on to join the bigger girls and receive a copy of the Koran, while I still stayed at the beginners' area struggling with the alphabet booklet.

My daily routine started well in the mornings with school, which I enjoyed, but by 3 p.m. my heart palpitations kicked in and I started to dread the evening at mosque. I would get home from primary school, eat a butter sandwich Mum had made from the scarce ingredients in the fridge, grab my scarf and booklet and off I'd go.

I couldn't speak to my siblings about it, especially my sister. She was ten and the golden girl, recently awarded a prayer mat by the imam at the same mosque for winning a religious competition. Mum was cooing to everyone about it and, to my dismay, this created a benchmark for me.

I despised my sister's intelligence, religious articulation

and all the attention she got from Dad because of the good school reports she was getting. The older we got, the more she blossomed, while I remained small, dark and skinny, which was regarded as unattractive in the Pakistani community. I was sick of being in her shadow, but had a feeling this was just the start.

My brothers were teenagers by now and occasionally took me out to play. It pleased Mum no end that they showed an interest in their little sister and encouraged me to get some fresh air.

They'd park their home-made go-kart at the top of a big hill and put me inside, then give it a big push. Mouth open, eyes bulging, I flew down. As the cold wind hit my face, I screamed the Lord's Prayer recited at school assembly, which then morphed into a couple of letters of the Arabic alphabet: 'Our father in heaven ... lead us not into temptation ... Bismillah ... Allaaaaaaah Wakhbar!'

Somehow I'd survive, after I'd hit a bollard and went crashing at an angle.

Another game my brothers played with me was called 'bundling me up in a sleeping bag', which was usually played when Mum and Dad were out. At first, I used to panic in the dark confined space, as the air became thin and I was unable to breathe. The smell of cheesy feet and my voice echoing in my ears

became all too much. However, over time, I learnt to remain calm, take only snippets of air until one of my brothers untied the knot and allowed my lungs to fill up with oxygen. Soon I got sick of them and wanted to play on my own.

The caning at the mosque was getting me down. It became a regular occurrence, not giving my skin enough time to heal. Kids sat away from me in case they were tarnished with the same brush by the imam, forming a big floor space around me.

It began to affect my schooling. No longer did I find school fun. I would stand on my own at playtime waiting for the bell to go so I could go back in. Sometimes I would see my sister on the other side of the courtyard where the primary school pupils played, surrounded by a gang of girls. Quickly I would hide behind a wall, watching her discreetly. I didn't want her to see my flaws or tell my parents that I couldn't do what came so naturally to her.

After school, I would wait for her so we could go home together, but she was always preoccupied with her friends. Quietly I followed behind until we reached the top of our street, where the girls left us and I would have my sister all to myself for the three-minute walk down to the house.

One day as I walked across the croft to mosque I