Does my head look big in this?

RANDA ABDEL-FATTAH
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It hit me when I was power-walking on the treadmill at home, watching ‘Friends’ rerun for only about the ninetieth time. It’s that scene when Jennifer Aniston is dressed in a hideous bridesmaid’s dress at her ex’s wedding. Everyone’s making fun of her and she just wants to run away and hide, but then she suddenly gets the guts to jump on stage and sing some song called ‘Copa Cabana’, whatever that means. I’m telling you, this rush of absolute power and conviction surged through me. I pressed the emergency stop button on the treadmill and stood in my Adidas shorts and Winnie the Pooh T-shirt, utterly captivated by the scene. It was like stepping out of one room, closing the door behind me, and stepping into another. One minute it was the last thing on my mind. The next minute this courage flowed through me and it just felt unbelievably right.
I was ready to wear the hijab.

That’s right, Rachel from ‘Friends’ inspired me. The sheikhs will be holding emergency conferences.

That was at four-thirty yesterday afternoon. It’s now three-twenty in the morning and I’m lying in bed trying to figure out if I’m really ready to go ahead with my decision as I watch a guy on television try to persuade me that for forty-nine dollars and ninety-nine cents I can buy a can opener that will also slice a watermelon and probably pluck my eyebrows.

I can’t sleep from stressing about whether I’ve got the guts to do it. To wear the hijab, the head scarf, full-time. ‘Full-timers’ are what my Muslim friends and I call girls who wear the hijab all the time, which basically means wearing it whenever you’re in the presence of males who aren’t immediate family. ‘Part-timers’ like me wear the hijab as part of our school uniform at an Islamic school or when we go to the mosque or maybe even when we’re having a bad hair day.

I’ve got four days left of my school holidays. Four days to decide whether I’m going to actually start only my third term at McCleans Grammar School as a full-timer. You should know that right now the thought of stepping into my home-room with the hijab on is making my nostril hair stand on edge.

At this stage you should probably also know that my name is Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim. You can thank my father, paternal grandfather, and paternal greatgrandfather for that one. The teachers labelled me slow in preschool because I was the last child to learn how to spell her name.
My dad’s a doctor and my mum’s a dentist. Two major nerds who fell in love during their hibernations in Monash University medical library. They were both born in Bethlehem, but there are fifty-two years of Australian citizenship between them.

My dad’s name is Mohamed. He drives a metallic red convertible because he’s under the misguided delusion that he’s still young and cool. He fails to remember that he’s on the Advanced Hair Program and has Italian opera or Palestinian folk songs blasting from his car stereo system. My mum’s name is Jamila, which means beautiful in Arabic. She’s loud and energetic, loves to laugh, and is neurotically clean. I’m talking about the type who Spray and Wipes doorknobs and dusts extension cords. Who actually has a spotless laundry (even the cupboard under the sink) and folds back toilet-paper rolls into a pretty triangle even when we don’t have guests. What did I tell you? Neurotic.

Apart from our daily clashes over the state of my bedroom and the million and one insane chores she puts my dad and I up to (he has to get up onto the ladder and wipe the nonexistent dust off the lightbulbs every month, without fail), I’m afraid I can’t say (and I really am quite embarrassed about this) that we have the typical mother/teenage daughter hate/hate relationship. We actually do the whole bonding-at-the-shops-together thing and I can talk to her about personal stuff and gang up on my dad with her. I suppose our relationship detracts from the whole point of my being a teenager but at least in my defence I can say there are always ways to provoke her into an argument (ie: leave microscopic crumbs on the kitchen bench, a towel on the bathroom floor, a fly screen open).
This allows me to let off some steam and have a go at blaming my mum for every problem confronting me in my life. After all, it’s a rule: every teenager should have the chance to say ‘you’re ruining my life’ to their mother at least four times a week.

As for my dad, I just need to hint that I’m experiencing ‘cramps’ or a ‘girl problem’ and I can get my way. To illustrate: Dad says I shouldn’t watch ‘Sex and the City’ because it corrupts my mind. I respond, in a weary I-need-sympathy tone of voice, that I have bad cramps and would he mind getting me a Panadol as I am incapable of moving from the couch. He forgets about the program and goes to talk to my mother. This buys me some time to see whether Samantha picks up the mailman. See, you just need to develop a system to manage parents.

Did I mention my mum’s obsessed with diets? (Or, as she calls it, ‘achieving the healthy lifestyle’.) My lunch box in primary school was filled with 97% fat-free yoghurt bars and containers of oil-free tabouleh. Oil-free tabouleh is basically wheat with parsley. Gross. I suspect she had me intravenously drinking wheatgrass juice when I was a foetus. My mum’s been trying to lose ten kilos for the past ten years. My dad gets dragged through every phase: the Eight-Day Banana Diet, the Soup Diet, the Low-Carb Diet, the High-Carb Diet; she even made him go to her Weight Watchers meetings. After one attendance my dad swore he would never return. Apparently the discussion topic was ‘How to cope with partners who jeopardise your weight loss efforts’. I’ve been told my mum was quite the avid participator.

At the moment it’s walking around the block after dinner with my dad. She’s been trying to get me to join them but there’s
fat chance I’m going to be seen with two middle-aged power-walkers in matching fluorescent parachute tracksuits puffing along Riversdale Road.

We live in Camberwell, one of Melbourne’s trendy suburbs. Beautiful tree-lined streets, Federation homes, manicured front lawns and winding driveways. We moved here last year because my dad started working at a clinic in a nearby suburb, and my mum wanted to live a little closer to the city. Before that we lived in Donvale, a very leafy, hilly suburb with lots of acreages and owls hooting at night. There were a lot more Aussies with ethnic backgrounds there, so being a Muslim family wasn’t such a big deal. In Donvale our street was a cocktail. There were the Chongs, the Papadopoulouses, the Wilsons, the Slaviks, the Xiangs and us, the Abdel-Hakims. Mrs Chongs’ cat had it made. The fat guts used to dine off scraps from backyard to backyard every week. She must have thought she was living on Brunswick Street for all the variety of food she got.

Our street in Camberwell is different. We’ve got the Taylors, the Johns and Mrs Vaselli. Wouldn’t have a clue who the rest are. Everybody pretty much keeps to themselves.

I’m an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian. That means I was born an Aussie and whacked with some bloody confusing identity hyphens. I’m in Year Eleven and in four days’ time I’ll be entering my first day of term three at McCleans. If you ask me, my Jennifer Aniston experience couldn’t have come at a worse time. I mean, it’s hard enough being an Arab Muslim at a new school with your hair tumbling down your shoulders. Shawling up is just plain psychotic.
CHAPTER TWO

I’m terrified. But at the same time I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam is bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I’m strong enough to wear a badge of my faith. I believe it will make me feel so close to God. Because it’s damn hard to walk around with people staring at your ‘nappy head’ and not feel kind of pleased with yourself – if you manage to get through the stares and comments with your head held high. That’s when this warm feeling buzzes through you and you smile to yourself, knowing God’s watching you, knowing that he knows you’re trying to be strong to please Him. Like you’re both in on a private joke and something special and warm and extraordinary is happening and nobody in the world knows about it because it’s your own experience, your own personal friendship with your Creator. I guess when I’m not wearing the hijab I feel like I’m missing out. I feel cheated out of that special bond.
I’m ready for the next step, I’m sure of that. But I’m still nervous. Agh! There are a million different voices in my head scaring me off.

But why should I be scared? As I do my all-time best thinking through lists, I think I should set this one out as follows:

1. The Religious/Scriptures/Sacred stuff: I believe in Allah/God’s commandments contained in the Koran. God says men and women should act and dress modestly. The way I see it, I’d rather follow God’s fashion dictates than some solarium-tanned ugly old fart in Milan who’s getting by on a pretty self-serving theory of less is more when it comes to female dress.
2. Okay, cool, I’ve got modesty covered.
3. Now the next thing, and it’s really very simple, is that while I’m not going to abandon my fashion sense – you better believe I’d never give up my Portmans and Sportsgirls shopping sprees – I’m sick of obsessing about my body, what guys are going to think about my cleavage and calves and shoulder to hip ratio, and for the love of everything that is good and holy I am really sick of worrying what people are going to think if I put on a kilo or have a pimple. I mean, home room on Monday morning can be such a stress attack. There’s one girl, Tia Tamos, the resident Year Eleven bitch, who has a field day if you have a pimple. You might as well call a funeral parlour because she makes it seem like you’d be better off dead than walk around with a zit. And some of the guys have this disgusting Monday morning habit of
talking about the pornos they watched on the weekend loud enough so us girls can hear. They’re the biggest bloody stirrers. According to them, fat chicks should be deported, girls should starve and implants should be a civic duty. Then we all get into this massive fight about respecting girls for their minds not their bra sizes. Well that basically has them sharing around an asthma pump because they lose their breath laughing.

4. At this point, I should say that this is no longer a list and that I am well and truly writing an essay.

I can’t imagine what my class will say if I walk in with it on. Oh boy does this give the walking-into-class-naked dream another dimension. Except in my case, I’m not walking in naked. I’m walking in fully covered and yet I’m still breaking out into a sweat. They’re all going to freak out and I’m going to go through school officially labelled the biggest loser of all time.

Come to think of it, though, it’s not like I’m not used to being the odd one out. I attended a Catholic primary school because we lived too far away from an Islamic school and my parents didn’t have the time to travel the distance twice a day. Plus, all that ‘love thy neighbour’, ‘respect your parents’ and ‘cleanliness is next to Godliness’ stuff was basically what I would have been taught in R.E. in an Islamic school anyway. I went from Prep to Grade Six as the only Muslim kid at St Mary Immaculate where we had to sing the Lord’s Prayer and declare salvation through Jesus every morning at assembly. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. If you’re Catholic, by all means sing as loudly as you want. When I was in
primary school, different coloured socks were enough difference to legitimise a good tease. So when you’re a non-pork eating, Eid-celebrating Mossie (as in taunting nickname for Muslim, not mosquito) with an unpronounceable surname and a mum who picks you up from school wearing a hijab and Gucci sunnies, and drives a car with an ‘Islam means peace’ bumper sticker, a quiet existence is impossible.

*Hey Amal, why does a sneeze sound like a letter in the Arabic language?*

*Hey Amal, want a cheese and bacon chip?*

*Hey Amal, do you have a camel as a pet?*

*Hey Amal, did you notice the sub teacher called you ‘Anal’ at rollcall this morning?*

Forget sanity if you’re the only one with a pass to sit in the back of church during service. Well, not every time. I remember the time I attended confession. I was in Grade Four. I was standing with my class in a queue to take the Eucharist. Wasn’t supposed to be in line but I didn’t feel like sitting like a loner in a back pew till the end of the service. We took turns as Brother Andrew offered us the Eucharist. I wanted to try the holy bread. I took a taste and spat the rest into my hands. I don’t know what I was expecting. Tip Top slice? I slipped the chewed-up remains in my jacket pocket and made my way to the line outside the confession box.

Mrs Piogarni was too busy telling Chris Barkley off for asking Brother Andrew if the bread was Helgas to notice a Muslim kid standing in line for confession. When it was my turn I walked into the confessional and sat down on the bench.
The slide opened and I heard a gentle, kind voice. ‘What is your confession, my child?’

I was stuffed. The priest would declare me a heretic, my parents would call me a traitor and Mrs Piogarni would give me detention. That back pew with the ‘Lucy luvs George’ and ‘Jesus woz here’ inscriptions was suddenly tempting. I had no idea what to say. I mean, what does a Muslim confess to a priest? I could only think of one thing. That every time Chris Barkley called me a wog, or teased me about my mum’s nappy head, I made a silent prayer asking God to drop a tree on his stupid head.

The priest asked me again: ‘What is your confession, my child?’

‘I’m Muslim,’ I whispered.

‘Five Hail Marys and five of the Lord’s Prayer.’

That was my first and last participation in a church service.

Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t one of those children who had a mixed-up, ‘syndrome’ childhood. Yeah, sure, it didn’t matter how much my parents told me to feel proud of my identity, there was always somebody in the playground to tell the wogs to go home. But as it turns out, I was pathetic at sport and obsessed with boy bands featured in Dolly magazine, so there were plenty of other ways to make me feel like an idiot. I learned how to suppress my Muslimness, and I pretty much got on with having a fun and religiously anonymous primary school life.

School from Year Seven to Year Ten was Hidaya – The Guidance – Islamic College. Where they indoctrinate students and teach them how to form Muslim ghettos, where they train with
Al-Qaeda for school camp and sing overseas national anthems. Not.

I can’t stop thinking about Hidaya and I feel sick with longing for my friends and teachers. Sick with longing for a school where you learnt what every other student in any other Melbourne school learnt but you could also pray and fast and wear a hijab and get on with being a teenager without having to answer questions or defend yourself against news headlines. Where you sang ‘Advance Australia Fair’ every morning at assembly and got detention if you didn’t take it seriously. Where you could deal with puberty and the teenage angst thing and have your crushes and go through your diets without having to do all that while being a prefix to terrorism, extremism, radicalism, any ism.

At Hidaya the hijab was part of the uniform. But I used to take it off as soon as I stepped outside the school gates because man oh man do you need guts to hop on public transport with it on. At the end of the school day the trains would be absolutely chock-a-block with schoolkids. I could stay wearing it if I hopped on with a group of Hidaya students because I wouldn’t feel so exposed. But the problem was that I had to change trains to get home and there was no way I had the courage to go the distance alone with it on.

When I first started at Hidaya, in Year Seven, I hated wearing the hijab. I found it itchy and I absolutely despised wearing it during sport. I was such a prize-winning whinge in those first few weeks. I also thought it looked daggy on me and in the first two weeks I was always styling my fringe and letting it out at the front so that everybody knew I had nice hair. Talk about being a love-me-do. But then I got to know the other kids and it no longer felt awkward.
I got used to it and I met girls who were wearing it full-time outside of school, like, *voluntarily*, and I started to really respect their courage. I was even a bit jealous because there I would be ripping it off as soon as I was off school property and there they would be, calmly and proudly stepping onto a train filled with students from schools all over without no much as a hint of fear or doubt. They looked so at peace with their identity and everybody got to know and respect them on their own terms.

I hate the fact that I had to leave Hidaya. But it only goes up to Year Ten because it doesn’t have enough funding to offer Year Eleven and Year Twelve. My best friends, Leila Okulgen and Yasmeen Khan, moved on to a public high school close to Coburg, where they lived. I begged my parents to let me go with them but Mum and Dad insisted that I go to a private school. I tried everything. At first I sucked up to them big time, making them coffee after dinner, offering to set the table before Mum had a chance to ask me, letting them watch SBS documentaries when I wanted to watch ‘Big Brother’. That didn’t work. So I turned political, ranting and raving about them *perpetuating the snobby bourgeoisie power trip of our educational system which forges aristocratic divisions between social classes* (I got that from an SBS documentary). Talk about having no compassion or social conscience. They just laughed at me and gave me a pile of literature about the school. What a puke job that was. I mean how excited would you feel reading a school mission statement which had ‘moulding students characters in the image of the school’s traditions and values’ as their top priority? Gag.
The more I think about my parents’ sadistic decision to send me to McCleans, the more I start to wonder whether I harbour severe masochistic tendencies. I can’t believe I’m actually contemplating wearing the hijab to a snotty grammar school where you’re seriously doomed to the noncool list if you’re one issue behind on the latest Cleo fashion. I mean, hello, wake up and smell the frappaccino, what am I doing being all holy and stuff when I know I’ve got more chance of getting away with a Kelly Osborne look than I do covering my hair?

I can’t sleep. What will Adam say?

*Adam? Who gives a crap about Adam?*

Not me. Uh-uh. Nope.

*He’ll probably laugh.*

Hey, that’s not fair. He’s not like that.

I should have auditioned for *Lord of the Rings*. I’m really making heads turn as a Gollum tonight.

Allah, please let me fall asleep now. Otherwise I’ll wake up with a Qantas baggage belt under my eyes, and seeing as I left my concealer at Yasmeen’s last week there’s no way foundation is going to fix this one.
Randa Abdel-Fattah is twenty-five, and has her own identity hyphens to contend with (Australian-born-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian-choc-a-holic). For years Randa has been active in the inter-faith community. She is also a member of a number of Palestinian human rights campaigns, the Australian Arabic council and various Australian Muslim women networks.

Randa grew up in Melbourne but now lives in Sydney where she works as a lawyer. She loves travelling to Egypt and Palestine and being spoilt by her relatives. She also loves reading, watching romantic comedies, her husband’s sense of humour, getting a seat on the train, and any movie starring Colin Firth.

Randa is currently working on her second novel.
The slide opened and I heard a gentle, kind voice: ‘What is your confession, my child?’

I was stuffed. The Priest would declare me a heretic; my parents would call me a traitor…

The Priest asked me again: ‘What is your confession, my child?’

‘I’m Muslim.’ I whispered.

Welcome to my world. I’m Amal Abdel-Hakim, a seventeen-year-old Australian-Palestinian-Muslim still trying to come to grips with my various identity hyphens.

It’s hard enough being cool as a teenager when being one issue behind the latest Cosmo is enough to disqualify you from the in-group. Try wearing a veil on your head and practising the ‘bum’s up’ position at lunchtime and you know you’re in for a tough time at school.

Luckily my friends support me, although they’ve got a few troubles of their own. Simone, blonde, gorgeous and overweight - she’s got serious image issues, and Leila’s really intelligent but her parents are more interested in her getting a marriage certificate than her high school certificate!

And I thought I had problems…

Available August 2005
0330421859 - Young Adult - Pan Macmillan Australia
B-format paperback - $16.95

IMPORTANT
This is an advance reading sampler. Any material quoted from the book should be checked against the finished book or with the publisher. Publication date and price are provisional and may change.