from Our Stories Our Voices
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THE ONE WHO DEFINES ME

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I was ten years old the first time it happened.

Lacy, Dustin, and Kelly cornered me during recess, frowns etched across their foreheads, hands on their hips.

"We just wanted to know," Lacy asked. "Why did your uncle start a war?"

I blinked. My uncle worked at a computer firm in Maryland.

"You know," Lacy prompted. "The guy in Iraq. Saddam Hussein."

I can't remember much else about that day. I couldn't tell you if the sun was shining or if it was cloudy. I can't even remember what I mumbled in response. But I remember the way they stared at me, expecting an explanation and an apology. I was born in Miami, Florida. My parents immigrated from Pakistan

years before I was born and I had no idea who Saddam Hussein was, but that day it didn't seem to matter to them. I remember their glares. I remember the shame I felt.

That was my first time. It was not my last time.

"Does your family own a camel?"

"Do you bathe in sand?"

"Will your dad kill you if you don't listen to him?"

Questions like this followed me through middle school and well into high school, and they weren't just from students.

I was fifteen years old when the Oklahoma City bombing happened. The one where a terrorist blew up a federal building with a bomb. We watched the news in American History. My teacher paced red-faced in the front of the classroom until his eyes landed on me. He paused. He marched up to me.

"When we find out which country did this," he told me, "we will bomb them until there isn't a flower left blooming."

A few days later the terrorist was revealed to be a white American man named Timothy McVeigh. Class resumed without fanfare.

My parents grew up in Pakistan, where nearly everyone else was Muslim just like them. They personally had no experience growing up facing discrimination for one's faith, and because I did not want to put more burdens on their busy shoulders, I never told them what I went through. I also never confided in my friends, nervous they might hear the hateful words and suddenly see me in a new way.

When I graduated high school things improved. I was accepted to the University of Florida, a diverse school with forty thousand students. In this huge melting pot, I was no longer the only Muslim girl in school. There were many different people from all walks of life, including many American Muslims who uniquely understood the things I had gone through. While hateful comments were still made when I wrote op-eds for our college newspaper on matters of race and faith, with a strong support network, it was easier to deflect them.

Then came September 11, 2001.

I had just graduated. It was my third week as a teacher. Reeling from the images pouring out on the office television, I walked toward the lunchroom to get my students, wondering how I would manage to teach anything that day. A substitute teacher stopped me on my way. He gripped my hand in his and told me, "I want you to know, I am not angry with you." I was confused. He had substituted for me the week before, when I'd had a doctor's appointment. Just how badly did my students behave? I almost apologized but paused when his eyes welled up. "I spoke with my wife on the phone, and both she and I don't blame you at all for 9/11." I remember his hands on mine and the numbness that took over me. Someone felt the need to tell me they didn't blame me for the most heinous attack to take place on American soil in recent history. I realized that day not all hurtful comments intend to hurt.

In the months that followed I understood where that

substitute teacher's misguided well intentions came from. It began to feel like the whole country was my high school classroom, a teacher pointing their finger at me in accusation. A boy I'd met just a short while before 9/11 understood exactly how I felt. As a Pakistani American growing up in rural South Carolina, he had many of his own stories to share. There is power in sharing one's painful experiences and voicing them out loud. Even though the stain will always remain, talking helps you air out the hurt. It helps you feel understood and gives you the strength to keep on. I married that boy the following summer.

In the scheme of things, I didn't have it as bad as others I knew. My husband's best friend, who was attending college in the United States on a sports scholarship, went to Pakistan to visit his parents for winter break. When he arrived at the airport, officials told him his visa was revoked and he could never come back. He was one semester away from graduating. I know people who were deported. I have friends, American citizens, who are lawyers and doctors, who have been body-slammed and kicked off flights for appearing suspicious (code word for they had a beard or wore a head scarf). I know people, American citizens, detained and questioned for hours. I have had to stand next to my younger brother, a doctor, and watch as airport personnel enacted three layers of security because his very common name has been placed on a no-fly list.

All my life, as a child, as a teenager, and then as an adult,

discrimination was a part of how things were. It was like that annoying little pebble that might get into your shoe at the beach, the one you can't shake off, the one that scrapes and pinches at your heel, but you learn to live with it. That's what living with constant bigotry feels like for me.

But it wasn't all gloom and doom. After 9/11, President George W. Bush visited a mosque. He went out of his way to make a formal statement that the attack that happened was committed by people who warped their notions of Islam and that their actions did not in any way speak for the peaceful Muslims and Muslim countries he knew and respected. He assured Muslim Americans they were welcome and valued in this country. While many things happened during his administration that I disagree with profoundly, and Muslims did in fact experience a lot of difficulties and unspeakable situations during those years, I do now realize the value of the leader of my country taking a public stand for members of my faith.

The day after Barack Obama was elected president, I cried tears of joy at my law office with my colleagues. We couldn't believe it. We'd made history and elected the first Black US president. During his term he stopped NSEERS (a database created under George W. Bush that profiled and targeted Muslims) and tried to close down Guantanamo Bay. And while there were certainly many things to improve upon and work on, it felt like slowly we were moving past discrimination as a country; we were going to be greater than hate.

Fast-forward to November 8, 2016, the day the United States of America elected a man endorsed by the KKK, whose primary campaign promise was to ban Muslims from the country. I cried once again following the election, but this time my tears were anything but joyful. I watched as he laid out an executive order to ban Muslims. As a US citizen, this ban would not affect me, but the message he was sending was clear: We don't like Muslims. We don't want Muslims. My existence was something they had to grin and bear, for now.

The election shook my understanding of my community. I knew there were misconceptions and prejudice, yes, but to elect a man so openly and vehemently against my existence? I wondered: Who were my neighbors? My colleagues? My community? I paused at the produce aisle at the grocery store. Did the man who restocked the cabbages and smiled at my children also vote for a man who wished to erase my family?

The weekend following the election, I went to a book festival in Charleston, South Carolina, with my family. On Friday, en route to the festival, we stopped at a halfway point, a fast-food restaurant in a small town, to get a bite to eat. All the customers—I wish I was kidding—every single one, turned to us and glared. A teenager began taking pictures of us and sharing with her friends. I wondered if I was imagining things until my husband abruptly suggested we take our food to go. Stepping into the parking lot, we saw the cars and understood. Each one had a bumper sticker supporting the new president. Several had

Confederate flags flying from their windows. Their glares made the message clear: we didn't belong there.

That Saturday a group of men in line at a club chanted "Make American Great Again" as I walked past them. I saw a truck making rounds every hour with a Confederate flag the size of a table flying from its truck bed as the driver screamed out *"America!"* as though it belonged only to him. In line to get dinner later that evening at an authors-only event at the festival, a fellow author insulted me and my husband and then told us she could speak to us any way she wanted now that Donald Trump was president.

I grew up with bigotry. I was used to being painted the Other, but until now it was something that was usually subtle, that happened quietly behind closed doors, computer screens, or when people thought no one was listening. I had not received this kind of open vitriol since I was a child. Now it seemed bigots were given a blank check to unleash their hatred as they saw fit as openly as they wished.

The Sunday following the election I spent time with my family and walked through the historic city of Charleston. My mother-in-law, who lived nearby, joined us. She's a proud Muslim woman who also happens to wear hijab, a headscarf. I noticed the silent stares along the walkways. I saw cars slow down, the passengers turning to watch her walk past. I saw people stealing glances at her in the stores. Not all the looks were malicious. Most were curious. In that moment I realized some of these people may never

have seen a visibly Muslim woman before. It is easier to consider us inhuman when you have not ever seen us beyond the scary headlines and the rhetoric of the leader of the country. If all they knew were scary images of oppressed women with overbearing men watching over, what did they make of my mother-in-law in a pink headscarf tickling my children and deciding which bath soaps she wanted to buy from the little boutique in the corner of the city? I asked my mother-in-law if she felt uncomfortable by the constant looks. If she wondered if they were looking at her curiously or with hate in their hearts. She looked up at me puzzled by the question. "No," she told me. "That's their business. Not mine."

Life has a way of presenting you with the same lessons over and over again until you finally get it. That weekend was an important weekend for me because I finally learned something that the universe had been trying to teach me for a long time and showed me in my mother-in-law. The lesson was simple: though the rhetoric against my humanity has ramped up, the rhetoric has always been there and it does not and should not define my humanity. No matter how loudly someone says I don't matter and no matter how much conviction they put into those words, or try to blame me for things that are not in my control, their feelings are not based in reality; they are based in bigotry and they are wrong.

I wish I'd known this lesson as a teen. That I am not defined by what others think of me. I define myself. I am a unique individual among a group of 1.7 billion Muslims around the

globe. While I admire many Muslims, such as the late and great Muhammad Ali, basketball all-star Shaquille O'Neal, and the pop singer Zayn Malik (oh yes, he's Muslim too) they are not me and I am not them. They cannot speak for me, nor can I speak for them. And that is the same of any other person who says they are Muslim and do anything, whether it is good or bad.

I am Aisha. I like doodling and chocolate. I like baking and pedicures. I get grumpy when I'm hungry, and I like hiking even though I'm slow at it and everyone always leaves me behind. I adore my KitchenAid mixer more than anyone ever should, and I find peace when I press my head to the ground and pray. I am a fully actualized human being no matter what people say about me.

This doesn't mean the things people say don't hurt. They do. I would be lying if I said reading an article lambasting the entire Muslim faith, and by consequence me, doesn't twist at my heart. I've learned to accept that feeling too. It shows me that my heart still beats. It shows me I still care about things, and it drives me to make things better. Having a tender spot is not anything to be ashamed of, but now I also don't let it soak into me. I feel the sting and I move on. I will not allow those who hate to live rent-free in my head, and I take that hate and I rechannel it into working to create good in the world.

As difficult as things are, I take time to enjoy my life and appreciate my blessings and also take my responsibility as a citizen more seriously than I ever have before. I call my

representatives. I write them. I reach out to my friends who are hurting and scared and hold their hands. I write books featuring Muslim characters, who resemble less the stereotypes the media and television has put out for years and more the people I grew up loving and knowing. There is only one way to change the world, and that is by each of us doing what we can, using our strengths and our gifts to help make the world the world we want to see.

Muslims are part of the fabric of our country. I am part of the fabric of this country. I owe no one any apologies or explanations for who I am. While things will get difficult in the years to come, it is this I know to hold tight to: we define ourselves, we do not let the bigotry of others define us, and we work hard to create the world we want.

If we keep doing this, we will get through this. You. And me.