

When you take a regular taxi, the taxi is all yours and no one else has to ride with you, unlike when you take a service taxi, which is shared with others and is much cheaper. On that day, I couldn't find myself a service taxi to take me home after waiting for over an hour, so I decided to take a regular taxi. Talking from the back seat to the driver, I told him he could let other people on board, so he could make some extra money, even though I was paying him full price and it might inconvenience me. He replied with grateful words of thanks. That was all.

My dad was too intelligent to presume I had anything to do with this driver, considering I was sitting in the back seat. I understood my dad's message well. He was trying to instill fear in me so that I wouldn't ever deviate from our cultural expectations. I was taught so much fear, that I began to fear my shadow. I wanted so badly to tell my dad he hurt my heart, but instead, I curled up in a ball and accepted defeat.

*M*y Religious Experience

We had just lost our grandma to old age, and the mood of the house was somewhat somber. While fasting during the month of *Ramadan* to support my dad during his fast, I decided for the first time in my life to pray five times a day – the Islamic way. Even though I had never seen my dad pray, I still knew he would love to see me be devout that way.

With the help of my younger brother, Shadi, I learned the prayer steps: a specific kind of washing, completely covering oneself, except the face and hands, then reciting the *Quranic* verses in a series of positions while facing in the direction of the *Kaaba* in *Mecca*. Everything I did to please my dad and God came out of sheer ignorance. I had no idea about what the *Kaaba* was and where *Mecca was*. I had never read the *Quran* or known anyone who had read it. A Muslim is simply born and therefore a believer in God and *Prophet Mubammad*.

Every time I prayed, like an angel wearing white from head to toe, I suppressed all of my free-thinking tendencies and age-appropriate feelings. I assured myself I would only wear the veil when I prayed at home but never when I went out. The *Hijab* was the most unattractive thing ever, especially for women who didn't have a gorgeous face to make up for it. Not fair. My brother would never be troubled with such a loss of identity or attractiveness in order to please God.

Despite it all, I still tried to welcome the idea of a higher being's existence. It was paradoxically comforting and overwhelming at the same time: comforting, because I felt "pure" making God happy, and overwhelming, because I felt like I was being watched by God every moment. There was a fear of making mistakes, especially since "He's all-powerful and all-knowing." I learned how specific God was about so many details related to His religion. Menstruation was considered impure, and that thought had made me anxious. What if I accidentally had my period while praying on the prayer rug – would God be disgusted by my sinful body standing on his rug?

*L*eaving Religion

My Christian mom didn't mind my sudden Islamic conviction. On the contrary, she was even supportive. She would spend her whole day during the month of *Ramadan* preparing for the *iftar*, the meal we ate in the evening after fasting all day. She always loved God. "The One and Only God is for Muslims, Christians and all people," she would say. My proud dad gave us *Imam Ali's* book to read, and my brother was taken with it immediately.

Soon, I started reading it too. It was a marvelous book, I thought, full of creative words and wisdom by *Imam Ali*. Then, I got to a section on "his courage" in the battles of *Prophet Mubammad's* time. The descriptive images of the