

I started to commute home alone when I was in the seventh grade. It was a boost of confidence at the time, and I looked high and mighty sporting my black and white floral backpack. My uniform was always freshly ironed, my scarf was neatly pinned down. It felt *cool* to take the train and walk on my own.

On my journey, I would pass by busy adult after adult rushing towards work. Some would pass right by me, but some would linger a moment and stare. *I don't mean to be different. I just want to be like every other kid.* Their stares would burn through me day after day. I wore the same uniform like the girl next to me, but she didn't wear the pinned cotton scarf on her head.

Eventually, my lone walks became more lively when my younger sister joined me. I worked hard to get her into The Young Women Leadership School. It was worth it. Now, I was not the only one walking with a graceful scarf on her head. We were different, but we were different *together*.

The hijab was created to protect the beauty of women. It is a protection from the lustful gaze of men walking by, and a guard from the envious glares from other women. It was not, however, a sheet created to nitpick a Muslim woman out of a crowd.

One day on a busy after school hour, I rushed my sister to a different train station to check for a job opening. I told her to wait downstairs so I could quickly check the flyer for more information. As I turned back toward her, I noticed a man talking to her. She looked offended and shocked by what was saying, her normally smiling face quivering. Without hesitation, I flew down the stairs not caring about the high possibility of falling. I ushered her away quickly, and threw questions at her while examining if she still had every bone attached to every socket. "He told me to blow up some tops," she sobbed. Then I remembered the date. *9/11*. The very date that threw every Muslim woman who wore the hijab in to a hot, seething spotlight. Stared at like animals in a circus freak show.

The hijab is worn by choice to feel closer to one's faith. It was not made to hide contraptions. It is not worn to be scrutinized by the public. The hijab is a warrior's gift, an armor that defines strength. After that fateful day, almost every women nearly lost their jobs, relationships and a little bit of life. They had to choose on whether or not if the hijab was worth the social pain. A warrior without armor is *exposed, vulnerable, and stripped.h*

I didn't want to walk to school anymore, but I also didn't want to let them bring me down. I still have my armor. I still kept my shield. And I am still fighting this battle. When you see me walking down the street, or in the subway, you see a girl in a hijab and you know the belief I'm affiliated with. But you have to also understand that girl is just another human.

Wearing the hijab is the first characteristic someone else sees. But it's not everything. Like any other teen, I have tons of passions. I am into martial arts, reading and visual arts. Art is

something that I fell into so long ago. It's the idea of building something with arbitrary materials. In art class, I speak with a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. Beneath the neatly folded and pinned hijab, is a different face. Art has allowed this warrior a language that that speaks on it's own, without assumptions or stereotypes. It's the language spoken from my soul.