

# The Hijab Diaries

MARCH 2024

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Hanna was a beautiful Austrian girl living in a multicultural area in Vienna. She was a student in medicine and, during the summer break, took on a summer job as a Starbucks barista to pay the bills. Her family was an ancient one, respected and even famous in her town in Styria, but not too wealthy anymore, and having moved from a small countryside town to the capital, she was always shocked at the high living costs of Vienna. Luckily, she had landed that summer job.

One day, she was heading there, minding her own business, thinking about a tinder date she had scheduled for that evening. She had already her makeup on and a pretty black leather jacket on as she was planning to head there right after her shift ended. At some point, she was stopped by a man at a stand where Muslims encouraged local women to experience wearing a hijab. She was kinda curious to try it on, just to see how it felt and how she would look, but on the other side she didn't like it as she saw it as a symbol of oppression and associated it to a negative meaning, being influenced by the echoes of Islamophobia that pervaded her surroundings. The man was really insisting and had a certain natural magnetism. They discussed for a while, until Hanna eventually accepted. She also realised that saying yes was probably the quickest way to get back on her way to work instead of discussing. A couple of girls took some hijabs and invited her aside of the stand. "I hope this won't take long" - she told herself.

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She was asked to take off her leather jacket and the top under that, leaving her almost in underwear, and then they began covering up her blonde hair and styling the hijab. There was something mesmerising in the Arab women's gestures to style the headscarf and their whispers in Arabic. Hanna listened to their whispers, without understanding them.

The fabric was tightly wrapped around her head, making her worry that it would mess up her hair. "Fuck, not today! I want to look good for my date this evening!" - she thought, but it was too late to back off.

She put on her top again, but was told to keep the leather jacket away, as it wouldn't match the modest outfit. She felt embarrassed and almost ashamed as the Muslim women did the final touches for the Hijab around her head and adjusted it, noticing the disapproving looks she was getting from her fellow countrymen. "God, I hope none of my friends see me right now!" - she thought, ashamed.

"You're all set up! Do you want to see yourself?"

"S... sure!" - Hanna replied, a bit skeptical.

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Then she looked at herself in a mirror. Her heartbeat accelerated. She looked so different! To a first impression, she looked almost like any other Muslim girl around, as her blonde hair had disappeared under the headscarf and her facial features looked different in a hijab. They asked her how she was feeling, and, uncertain on what to say, she replied: "Hmm, I look beautiful but... different!". They took some pictures and then told her that given how good she looked, she could keep the hijab.

Not wanting to lose further time, as she was already late for her shift, she thanked them and left, planning to take the hijab off once turned around the corner. However, it was tightly wrapped around her head, so she struggled. She started to panic, but people were starting to stare even more, as a woman taking off her hijab was something unusual. She thought about going back to the stand but decided to keep it on until she reached the Starbucks. She counted down the minutes as people stared her a lot on the subway and on her way to the place. Once she got there, a colleague of her, Yusuf, a Turkish guy, spotted her. She felt a wave of embarrassment. Not him! She was hoping to find any other colleague but him.



The irony of her situation. They had argued before about politics and gender roles, now, donning a hijab, Hanna stood enveloped in the very symbol they had spiritedly discussed.

"Who would have said, Hanna! That is quite a change!" Hanna replied in a mix of embarrassment and urgency "I can explain - this is not... I've not become a Muslim!" - she said, lowering her gaze, and explained her situation. "And I don't like it for the record, so I'm going to take it off immediately. Enjoy this sight while it lasts!" - she added, with a smirk, noticing the disappointment on his face. She left for the changing room, where she tried taking the hijab off, first gently, then frantically pulling it, to no avail, if not chocking herself. With one last push, she mistakenly grabbed her shirt, tearing it. "Fuck!" - she screamed. Yusuf knocked on the door of the changing room. "Hanna, my shift is over, are you ready?" "I... It's not coming off. And now my clothes are a disaster." - she said, opening the door. "Oh, I see" - Yusuf commented, with a smirk "Hmm... You could wait for Amina to come over to help you after your shift is done" "In 6 hours?" - Hanna said, in tears. "I'm afraid so. You could borrow her dress in the meanwhile". With a defeated look, Hanna nodded. She had a similar body type as Amina, and the modest dress would go well with her hijab.



She adorned herself in Amina's attire, the silky fabric draping her form in unfamiliar modesty. She put on the long, silky skirt covering her legs to her ankles and the top part, with a really high neckline, covering all of her skin, leaving only her face and hands visible. Hanna took a quick look in the mirror. She felt like she was wearing a costume. Too bad Carnival was over. Blushing, she walked out of the changing room area and stood behind the desk. Hanna didn't like it but she couldn't leave, or she'd lose the job, and she really needed the money. She took a deep breath and began her long day. Customers treated her differently. Old men and women were quite judgmental at seeing a beautiful Austrian girl with no hint of foreign accent wearing such an outfit. A couple of Arab guys seriously asked her if she was married. She blushed and nodded, to get out of the sticky situation, even though she was implying she was married to a Muslim man. What a shame, her, a pure-blooded Austrian girl, marrying an Arab, Muslim man. What would her family say? She felt as if a little electric shock went through her body, her nipples hardening at the idea. Shit, what a messed-up thought, she told herself, scrolling it off. Finally, Amina arrived. "Wow, Hanna! You look beautiful" - she said with a giggle. "Yusuf told me everything, let me have a look." "It has been surreal today" - Hanna commented "Honestly, I don't know how do you Muslim girls live with this!" "Oh, come on! It's not so bad!" - Amina replied.



After a careful inspection of the hijab, she sighed "Just what I feared." "Hmm?" - asked Hanna, panicking. "It's an ancient knot that I'm not familiar with, few women use it nowadays." "Why don't we cut it away?" Hanna asked, her face beaming. "We could, but" - Amina paused - "it's so intertwined with your hair, we would certainly cut most of your hair too if we did. Hanna gulped. "Don't worry, though. I know the girls at the stand, they hang out at my mosque. In fact, if you hurry up you could catch them before they leave!" "I... I can't, I have a Tinder date soon" - Hanna replied, disheartened. Amina smiled "Well, if you don't want to show up at your date wearing a hijab, you'd better reschedule. It's going to be a different evening, I'm afraid." Hanna groaned. "By the way" - Amina continued, with a sweet tone "I'm afraid I need my outfit for the shift. But worry not, I took with me an abaya you could borrow." Hanna meekly let Amina disrobe her, apart from the hijab, and dress her in an elegant black abaya, decorated with yellow and brown floral motifs and complete with gloves. "I bought it in Saudi Arabia" - she explained, while styling an additional matching layer on top of her hijab. "It's perfect for a visit at the mosque!"

On the bus on her way to the mosque, she texted her date, making up an excuse. It felt surreal to type a message on the Tinder app while wearing black gloves matching her traditional Muslim outfit.



Amina told her that the gloves were mandatory for a visit to the mosque, and Hanna didn't want to forget them on the bus, or she might miss a chance to intercept the women at the mosque. "Done" - she thought as she pressed 'Send'. She finally had a moment to reflect, after a day that felt more like a movie than real life. She noticed that most men and women were not sitting close to her, preferring to stand instead. She groaned. She did this too, sometimes, avoiding to sit close to an immigrant. Now she was basically one of them. At the following stop, another Hijabi girl came in and sat next to her, smiling at her. She lowered her glance. She looked even more exotic wearing the elaborate abaya her colleague gave her. She closed her eyes and tried forgetting about the situation she was in, but even then, the unfamiliar feeling of the headscarf reminded her of the situation she was in. She could feel her hair itching under it "I bet it's getting all greasy under there! Shit, I should probably book an appointment at the hairdresser when this shit will be over".

When she finally arrived at the mosque, she was impressed by how large it was, with a garden and everything. "Fuck, and they used taxpayers' money for all of this!" After a while, she found the women's section and, for a stroke of luck, she found the girls she had seen earlier.



They remind speechless after seeing the blonde Austrian girl still wearing a hijab, now complete with an abaya, and visiting a mosque. "Assalamu alaikkum" - they erupted "Have you reverted to Islam?" "No, actually... I tried to take the headscarf off but it got stuck. And this dress... I borrowed from a friend because I ruined mine." As she spoke, she realised the story made very little sense. The girls commented that God is the best planner and that she should keep doors open.

Hanna nodded and listened to their advices for a while. Then, she insisted, asking them to free her from the hijab, as they were the only ones able to help her. They agreed, a bit disappointed that they had failed in their mission, and told her to follow them to a private area where women could undress. She couldn't take her hijab off in a public area in a Mosque, after all.

Before removing it, though, the girls tried on a few other outfits on Hanna, who was too tired to fight back. She tried on a beautiful North African outfit borrowed it from one of the girl's friends and had to admit she didn't look half bad. She was getting a peculiar taste in terms of modest clothing after a while.





Finally, the girls begged her to try on one last dress, an outfit one of the girls had brought from home for a special occasion. It took a while to disrobe her - keeping on the infamous hijab, of course, and dress her up again, but when they were done and Hanna could finally open her eyes, she immediately noticed this was different. It was a white outfit, with lots of lace and pearls. They had even given her elaborate earrings. Hanna gulped "Is it... a bridal dress?" "Yes" - the Muslim girls said, with a giggle. "You look so beautiful!" "You would make your husband a very happy man!" - they commented. "Great, the first time ever I see myself in a bridal dress, and it's a Muslim one! I'll never be able to erase this image from my memory now!" - she thought, speechless. As they meandered through an open courtyard within the mosque's expansive grounds, their presence caught the attention of the Imam himself. Hanna's heart raced as she instinctively lowered her gaze, trying to disappear into the folds of the exquisite dress. One of the girls apologised "Dear Imam, we got distracted and didn't notice this was a common space. We beg for your pardon." "I see we have a newcomer" - the Imam noted, his displeasure evident at the breach of decorum - "Yes, she's interested in Islam, and she wanted to try on a bridal dress because she is dreaming of finding a Muslim husband." "Is that so?" Caught off guard, Hanna scrambled for words, "I am curious, yes, but my knowledge is still quite limited, dear Imam," - Hanna replied, hating the girls for coming up with such a lie.



The girls, invigorated by Hanna's half admission, told the Imam about how she had tried on a hijab earlier that day and how her life had changed since, which wasn't even a lie.

The spiritual guide offered a warm smile and commented that indeed, God is the best planner. Then stared at Hanna and told her "I know you still have a lot to learn, but you can make your profession of faith already now. His infinite knowledge will guide you through your journey. Repeat after me: *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah*". Caught in the moment and not wanting to engage in a difficult conversation, she hesitantly echoed the declaration, her heart beating like crazy: "*La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammadur rasoolu Allah*".

It hit her that from that moment on, she was officially a Muslim woman. "I am literally a Muslim now, everything's gonna change for me, what am I doing?" - she thought. Her, Hanna, an Austrian Christian woman, was now a Muslim? She thought about the stories she had heard about the way those who rejected their Muslim faith were persecuted and nearly fainted, feeling trapped. She nearly lost her balance, a reaction that seemed to validate the spiritual leader's genuine optimism for her. "Let her rest" - he told the girls "She just had the biggest day of her life so far." He added, and left, leaving Hanna with the girls.



Overwhelmed themselves and unable to articulate their feelings, the girls assisted Hanna in changing out of the bridal gown and into the black abaya, recognizing that there was no longer any justification for her to dress otherwise, when Hanna started crying.

"Why did you let this happen to me? I'm so fucked! I can't possibly tell my family about converting and I can't keep pretending everything is normal, while dressing like this? What will everyone think? People will recognise me! I'm sorry, but I have to take back my words. I cannot commit to Islam."

In response, her friends began softly reciting a prayer. Hanna felt mesmerised again by their words. "Could there be some truth to their beliefs?" - she thought, before quickly dismissing the thought. After a few seconds, the girls stopped and began staring at her in awe. "What's happening?" - Hanna asked, confused. "Your eyes," one friend whispered in disbelief, "they've changed to brown."

Hanna felt a wave of dread. The emotions of that day made her mind shake. "That's not possible" - she said, reaching for her phone.



Activating the camera, she was confronted with the reflection of her eyes, now a deep shade of brown, a stark contrast to their usual green. "It's just the lighting," she attempted to reassure herself, though her conviction wavered. The girls dragged her to a changing room in the women area.

The light was stronger, but her eyes were still brown.

One of the girl finally began taking off her hijab, to allow her to see herself better. As her hair became loose, the girls erupted in a spontaneous scream, followed by more rounds of prayers. Instead of the blonde waves she had just a few hours before, luscious dark brown curls cascaded on her shoulders.

"No! No! This can't be!" - murmured Hanna in a mix of shock and contemplation.

"This can't be happening... I'm becoming one of you!" - Hanna added. She frantically tugged at her newly darkened locks, but they were undeniably her own. Her hair was dark brown up to its roots. Even her skin tone had darkened by a couple of shades, she noticed, matching with her darkened complexion.



It took her a few minutes to process what had happened to her. She had the warm complexion of Middle Eastern women, even though her facial structure remained the same. She was an arabised version of herself. People would barely recognise her now, no matter what she would wear. Her student ID looked nothing like her, as her driver's license did. Her life was drastically changed. "So, this is real? God wants me to embrace Islam?" - Hanna asked herself.

For the time being her first problem was going home. The thought of returning to her shared apartment in such a drastically changed form was overwhelming. In a mix of fear and urgency, she hastily draped a loose veil over her hair, not wanting to get stuck in it again but feeling a strange urge to cover her hair, and left the mosque in a hurry, eager to leave that place that seemed cursed for her.

Lost in her thoughts and physically drained, Hanna roamed without direction until the reality of her fatigue set in, steering her towards home despite her apprehension. The thought of her flatmate's reaction to her new appearance caused her heart to race with nervous anticipation, yet she recognized there was nowhere else to go.



Hanna stepped softly into the apartment she shared with Emma, another girl from Austria. She had hoped to slip into her room unnoticed, but Emma was in the kitchen. Her gaze fixed on the unfamiliar brunette in a black abaya, and asked her "Who are you? And how did you get into our apartment?"

Feeling a knot in her stomach, Hanna improvised, "I'm Yara, a distant cousin of Hanna's. She said she'd be out of town for a bit and that I could use her room while she's gone."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "That's strange. Hanna didn't mention that. A cousin, huh? I can see the resemblance. She never mentioned having Muslim family members, though."

Blushing, Hanna replied "She'll send you a message. Yeah, my mother is Hanna's aunt. She converted to Islam when she married, and since then, there's been a bit of distance between her and the rest of the family," she explained, hoping Emma would buy into her lie.

Emma nodded, understandingly, but then warned, "Just watch out for the landlady. She's not the most progressive person and might not be too happy about having a Muslim tenant." Hanna gulped. She was a second-class citizen now.



Hanna finally made it to her bedroom, where she finally disrobed from the traditional Muslim outfit she had been wearing all day long. With a sense of trepidation, she examined the transformation her body had undergone. A natural olive skin tone, different from a simple tan, had spread through her body, a stark contrast to its previous paleness. The changes didn't stop there; to match with her darker complexion, her pink nipples had darkened to brown and her previously blonde pubic hair had become black and curled. Apart from her face shape, she looked like a completely different person, and was hardly recognisable as her former self. How could she explain all of these changes. Overwhelmed, she sat on her bed, tears streaming down her face.

Her gaze drifted to the abaya draped over a chair, a stark reminder of her current situation. Was this attire her inevitable future? Did she belong in Muslim modest clothes from now on? She murmured her first prayer to Allah, begging for guidance and then, too tired to keep on thinking, she finally fell asleep.

When she woke up, the unfamiliar feeling of her long wavy black hair surrounding her face, she realised it had not just been a nightmare.



Feeling isolated and in need of support, but too embarrassed to reach out to her old friends, Hanna called her colleague Amina for help and guidance. "How did it go? Did they manage to untangle the hijab?" "Er, yes, but... It's a long story. Could you come here? Don't freak out when you see me, I have... changed." When Amina arrived at the address, Hanna opened her the door. The long, wavy dark hair, the brown eyes and olive skin looked nothing like her friend. "Hanna?" Amina gasped, her eyes widening at the sight before her. "Yes, it's me. I looked like this when I took off the Hijab! I don't really know what to do!" Hanna confessed, her story spilling forth in a torrent of emotions. Amina, though initially shocked, stepped into her role with grace. "Oh dear sister, what happened to you is a proof of the power of the almighty! This is the push you needed. After your conversion, you were afraid of people's judgment, now you won't bother anymore because your own family would struggle to recognise you." "But... This was an accident, I didn't do this willingly!" - Hanna protested. Amina, however, stood her ground. "Hanna, you are a Muslim now, and this is not something you should take lightly, you don't want to disappoint the Almighty. I know it's a lot to take, take your time to adjust to all of this." - Amina added, with a reassuring smile.

Hanna reflected a lot on her situation after Amina left, and came to the conclusion that she would not easily relinquish her way of living, no matter what.



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Determined to reclaim her life and original appearance, Hanna went to a hairdresser to have her hair cut, bleached blonde and straightened to resume her former look. Though her new hair clashed with her tan and brown eyes, giving off a somewhat artificial vibe, she thought she looked good even as a bottle blonde. She toyed with the idea of wearing green contact lenses to reclaim her old eye color but ultimately decided against it. Abandoning the traditional attire for the Western clothing she had always felt comfortable in, Hanna took steps to redefine her identity. To sidestep the inevitable questions and preserve her new identity, she distanced herself from her family and resumed her daily life.

Hanna dove back into her social life with vigor, embracing her freedom to party, drink, and dress without constraints. She even proceeded with the date she had planned, stepping into this new chapter with confidence. "So, I have to tell you that I have recently converted to Islam, but I'm a very secular Muslim" - she told her date with offering an awkward but sincere smile. This compromise with herself, and perhaps with God, allowed her to be honest about her conversion while maintaining a lifestyle that resonated with her personal beliefs.



"Oh... I didn't see that coming. But, are you Austrian, right?"

Hanna quickly shifted the conversation to her heritage, grateful for the chance to steer away from the sensitive topic of her conversion. "That's surprising, I know. But yes, I'm from here," she shared, eager to change subject.

Her date, puzzled, replied: "Hmm, weird, I would have guessed you had some foreign origins, looking so exotic".

"Exotic? I'm blonde and..." Hanna's voice trailed off as she caught a glimpse of her reflection, her hair now a deep shade of brown and her skin a noticeable bronze. "Not this again," she thought to herself, a wave of anxiety washing over her. Despite her rising panic, she maintained a semblance of calm. "No, you're right. My father is from Tunisia, making me half Austrian. Hanna Ayari, that's me" she quickly fabricated, hoping to deflect further scrutiny and to placate the divine curse. Weirdly enough, she now recalled spending holidays at her father's place in Tunis, the struggle of not belonging anywhere. Freaking out, she tried to think about her dad, and the picture of an Arab man popped up in her face. Her mum marrying him had been a big shock to her family, so she recalled feeling more connected to her father's side. "Are my memories being rewritten as well?" she wondered, panic setting in.



"Oh, I see. You could have easily passed as fully Arab to me."

Hanna's brown hair darkened to a darker shade and took on a curly texture, returning to its natural look. Her attire subtly shifted from a glamorous halter dress to a simple, elegant white crop top. Hanna hesitated before responding, "I'm sorry, I'm a compulsive liar. There's no reason for me to be ashamed of my background. I'm actually a second-generation immigrant; my family hails from Tunisia. However, having been raised here, I've always felt more aligned with the Austrian lifestyle, you know?" - wondering how easily she came up with that story. Now her memories included growing up in an Arabic-speaking family and struggling to adjust to the local culture. "No, this is so wrong, I grew up somewhere in Austria, I was raised Christian" - yet, she could only recall visits to the mosque, Eid Mubarak celebrations and other Muslim experiences.

"Is that so? I wouldn't have guessed, especially considering how you hardly touched your beer!" he observed with a hint of curiosity. At his words, Hanna suddenly found the aroma of alcohol repelling, wrong on a visceral level. "What's happening to me?" - she asked herself "Is it because it's haram?"



"I'm actually not much of a drinker," she said with a light laugh, her smile softening the confession. "It's a bit of a clash with my Muslim upbringing. Though, I suppose I've always been a bit more lenient when it comes to fashion."

"Well, I wouldn't say so! was rather taken aback when you arrived for our date wearing a hijab!"

"A hijab?" Hanna repeated, confusion creasing her forehead. "But... this outfit was quite revealing... Oh." Her words faded as she glanced down, witnessing her clothes morphing into silk, transforming into a flowing headscarf that elegantly settled around her shoulders, leaving only her dark curls visible. Of course, she would never leave home without covering her hair.

With this sudden shift, Hanna understood she was now bound by the traditional norms of modesty inherent to her faith. The option of choice was no longer hers, prompting a wave of panic as she mentally sought forgiveness for any lapse in her observance.



"You're right. In fact, it was a mistake for me to go on a date with someone outside of my faith. I think it's best if I leave now."

Different faith? But we connected through a Muslim dating app," he replied, surprised.

"We did?" Her astonishment grew as the man before her seemed to transform into a young middle Eastern man with a neat black beard.

"Yes, my dear. I admit, I was taken aback when you suggested meeting at a bar, yet I see now you're dressed and conduct yourself with the modesty befitting a Muslim woman."

She felt intimidated by him. "I must have misunderstood what this place was, sorry. My German isn't perfect; I've only been here for a few years." - she bite her tongue after saying that, wondering where it came from. As she said it though, her mind blurred and thoughts in Arabic started replacing those in her native German.

"I understand, adjusting here is a challenge for me too, despite the years. It's unfortunate I speak Turkish and you Arabic, but we'll overcome this"



Hanna watched in astonishment as the beer transformed into a cup of tea in front of her eyes. As she reached to take a sip, she realized her attire had also transformed: the dress's sleeves had elongated, now covering her hands with silky gloves, and her previously simple headscarf had evolved into a full niqab, concealing her mouth and nose.

Her date chuckled at the sight. "Habibi, there was no need for a niqab; I'm not that traditional!"

Feeling a mix of embarrassment and confusion, Hanna responded, "I'm sorry, I just wanted to make sure I appeared modest. Truth be told, I'm not very accustomed to dating," she added shyly, her gaze lowered. God, why were *all men* so intimidating all of a sudden?

His laughter lightened the mood further. "I could guess as much! I'd bet you've never even been kissed by a man."

At his words, Hanna's mind raced, but for some reason, she found no trace of her past romantic encounters. In her brown vagina, her hymen reformed, restoring her as a virgin. She averted her eyes, a flush of embarrassment warming her cheeks beneath the fabric of the niqab. "Indeed, I'm saving myself for marriage".



As the evening wound to a close, Hanna—now Layla—found herself entwined in a whirlwind of emotions. Her transformation had been both abrupt and profound, altering not just her appearance but her identity and leaving her with a Middle Eastern appearance, altered memories, damaged language skills. She couldn't even keep her shitty job at the Starbucks, now that spoke heavily accented German with a limited vocabulary. The man across from her, Emir, had become a beacon of light in what felt like an unwarranted punishment. His words, filled with sincerity and warmth, offered a glimmer of hope in her turbulent sea of feelings. "Layla, I really like you. You have a pure soul, you are modest and pretty. I will talk about my family about you, but I'm sure they will have no objections," Emir's voice was gentle, his gaze kind. It was this kindness that pierced through Layla's armor of anger and sadness over the loss of her former self.

They walked both home, Emir accompanying her back home to make her feel safer - these days there was so much hatred towards visibly Muslim women. The walk back home was quiet, a comfortable silence enveloping them. Layla's mind was a battleground of emotions. Anger simmered beneath the surface, anger at the inexplicable change that had ripped her away from who she was. Sadness too, for the loss of her identity, for the Hanna she could no longer claim to be.



Entering her apartment, the solitude of the space enveloped her. The mirror in the hallway greeted her with the reflection of a woman she was still learning to recognize. Layla stood there for a moment, studying the unfamiliar features that now composed her identity. How much longer she could disguise her true identity and live there, especially now that she looked full Arab? That night, as Layla prepared for bed, she whispered a prayer into the darkness—a prayer for guidance, for strength, and for the courage to embrace the life that lay before her.

The following morning, she faced the practical realities of her transformation. Her wardrobe was now a glaring mismatch with her current identity. Her dresses now represented a version of herself she could no longer claim, and the only modest outfits she owned were the niqab she had found herself wearing and a couple hijab dresses she had bought before deciding to refer to her old look. They were not enough anymore, moreover she had gotten some imprinting about wearing a face-covering outfit like a niqab, rather than a plain hijab, and wanted to buy some more ones. She tried on a few outfits in a Muslim women's clothing shop, finding an unexpected beauty in the folds of the niqab. The niqab, once a symbol of a life she never imagined, now felt like a shield of honor, accordingly to the teachings of the Quran. 'This... it just perfect' - she told herself, admiring her reflection.



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Layla began wearing a niqab every time she left the house, for fear of divine anger and because she genuinely liked the feeling of protection and modesty she got out of it, even if it made her practically unemployable. Anyway, a man would soon have to provide for her - she told herself, with a smile. She had deeply interiorised a sense of modest clothing and now, in the presence of strangers, she instinctively lowered her gaze, embodying the principles she had embraced. Anything else would have been haram.

Amidst the tumult of her emotions, there was now a growing sense of gratitude. Gratitude for having found peace in Islam, gratitude for having crossed paths with Emir, a man whose presence brought her a semblance of safety and understanding in a world that now seemed entirely foreign. His acceptance and reassurance were the lifelines that kept her afloat in the stormy seas of her transformation. She would now patiently wait for his family to approve their union.

As for her family, she found out she had one too. In the morning, resolute to accept her new life, she called her mum's number as she found it on her phone, and conversed in fluent Tunisian Arabic, that now came natural to her. It felt surreal.



She visited her parents the following day, feeling anxious and strangely excited on her way there. When she finally stood before her family, the moment was surreal. The couple before her, weathered by the sun and the trials of a life filled with labor, mirrored the figures from her memories. Yet, through Layla's eyes, which had seen the world from a different perspective not so long ago, they looked like a couple of old immigrants with a Middle Eastern background. They were her parents, embodying the warmth and love she remembered, but seen through a lens that was inherently altered. Curiously, they were more secular than Layla herself was now, and were a little concerned that her stubborn adherence to the strictest regulations on modest clothing would prevent her from integrating better within the Austrian society. They still loved her nevertheless and told her they would always support her no matter what.

Her parents' acceptance of Emir was immediate and wholehearted, confirming the open-heartedness and warmth she had always known them for. Their approval was not just of Emir as a person but of the happiness and sense of belonging he brought into Layla's life. They saw in Emir the qualities they valued—kindness, respect, and a deep care for their daughter.



One day, walking in Vienna, Layla found herself in an unexpected reunion with Amina. "Amina, it's me, Hanna" - she said. Amina's eyes widened with confusion, searching the face before her for a flicker of recognition. "Hanna, is that really you?" she asked, her voice tinged with disbelief. The woman who stood before her bore little resemblance to the friend she remembered.

With a gentle, reassuring smile, Layla replied "Well, I'm Layla now actually". She shared the story of her change, recounting the date that had set everything in motion—the night she had flaunted her bleached blonde hair and dressed without modesty. That night had led to her being punished in a way she'd never imagined, transforming her into a Tunisian woman in body and spirit, losing her fluency in her native German, her facial features, her identity. As she spoke, her words seamlessly switched into Tunisian Arabic, a language that now came to her much more naturally than German. Yet, as she detailed the changes, there was no hint of regret in her voice. "It was a small price to pay to find peace and happiness! I am a deeply religious Muslim woman now," Layla shared with pride, her journey into faith having reshaped her from the inside out. "And soon, I'll be a beautiful Muslim wife to a wonderful man!" Her eyes sparkled with happiness, her conviction clear.

Layla was here to stay.