

Montage of Learning to Thrive

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Summer

I spent forever collecting little winged seeds into a bowl, stood at the top of my backyard hill, and waited for a breeze to rush over me. At the exact moment when the wind began to brush my hair over onto my shoulders I tossed the seeds into the air and watched as they came to life, spinning like little one-winged fairies through the air. Smiling into the brightness of the day, I run down the hill and begin to place each seed back into the bowl.

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With the unbeatable sweetness of napping, I was awake but my eyes were still closed. In that in-between state of consciousness I felt my hand tucked safely within my father's hand.

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Sitting with my arms wrapped around the handmade swing's handles of long, dark rope, I was immersed in a novel about a girl raised by dolphins. All of a sudden I heard a deer rushing through the woods next to me, just on the other side of a trickling creek. As she catches sight of me, she freezes and so do I. She stomps her foot three times. Why did she do that? Does she have a baby nearby that she needs to protect? I stand up. Why is she staring at me without blinking or breathing? I slowly back away from the creek, inching towards the big hill to my house. She stomps two more times. I turn and run up the hill.

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Whitney Houston's powerful voice rang out, teaching me that impossible things are happening everyday. My chin tucked into my hands to make it easy for my eyes to stare, mesmerized by the gold shimmer of my fairy godmother's dress. The VHS tape runs out, so I rush forward to press rewind. Flashing images of my favorite dreamworld pass in front of my eyes. A world where thin, black braids pinned into an elegant updo match flawlessly with a blue ball gown and glass slippers. A world where a black woman married a white man, had a Filipino baby, and nobody asked how.

Fall

I stood in front of the mirror. I've been doing that more and more lately. I stood and stared and wondered whether wearing a hijab makes my face look too round. Oh well! I skipped down the stairs, stuffed my binders into my backpack, and flopped it around onto my shoulders.

My mom left for work late that day to see me off on my first day of seventh grade. She waited for me, holding the door open. I hesitated at the threshold. "Are you nervous," she asked. Images of my friends seeing my hijab for the first time whipped through my mind. What will they think? Will they still like me like this?

I gazed out, looking at the bus stop waiting for me and the trees swayed slightly in the breeze and I did too. She put her hand on my shoulder. I didn't have the words to answer, so I looked up at her as I stepped out and started walking across our lawn. She called out to me, "Leyla!" I turned around to see her smiling as she said, "Hold that head up high, alright?" I returned her smile and said, "I'll try."

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Two weeks into seventh grade I came home, threw my backpack, hijab, and jacket onto the couch and headed straight to the refrigerator, scavenging for snacks. My mom walked in, paused while she read my mood, then asked me about my day. Now sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of cinnamon toast crunch, I told her about a new girl in my class that I connected to.

Her shoulders relaxed at the news - I had made a new friend. A few days ago I came home and told her that I no longer had any friends.

Those girls had hurt me in the past but this straw broke my back. On the first day of school, my mom's words echoed in my ears. "Hold that head up high." I stood up straight, pride lifting my head. Love lifting my head. They lifted their eyes to my head, but their eyes were filled with doubt, discomfort, fear. They weren't afraid of me, but they were afraid of being seen with me.

Winter

My sister tapped my shoulder with the early morning energy that only a morning person can fathom. I have never been a morning person.

I kept my eyes closed but she knew I was awake. She took my hand, opened it, and placed something icy cold into my palm. My eyes flew open and I could see that she was beaming. "Is this snow?" I asked her. She nodded and started laughing as I jumped out of bed and headed straight for the front door. I didn't even put shoes on, but threw the door open and lept outside. We had only ever visited America during the summer time, so this was the first time I'd seen snow since I was four years old. Looking at the front steps, I saw the tiny footprints which commemorated my little brother's first contact with real snow. He was now running in crazy zig zag circles on the driveway. I joined him immediately.

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My outfit was brand new from Kohls. My sisters took me there the day before my birthday so that I would feel as confident as ever at my birthday party. I ran around the house, to the mirror to check my hair, to the living room to adjust the decorations, back to the mirror to make sure my outfit still looked okay, to the kitchen to rearrange the appetizers and desserts.

My family must have exchanged worried looks as I continued to prepare long after guests were supposed to start arriving. Thirty minutes, forty minutes, an hour goes by. I knew that nobody was coming so I stood by the window where I had long since stopped looking for my friends' cars.

My mom came up behind me and gave me a long hug. My sisters and brother surrounded me with love as we ate the party snacks and watched my favorite movies and welcomed in my twelfth year of life just as I was meant to - eating cake with peaches and whipped cream beside the people who will always show up.

Spring

I got my first period on a Thursday in April. My dad came downstairs and asked me if I wanted to pray 'Asr with him. "I can't," I said. "How come?" Many of my friends hid their periods from their parents. They'd say that periods are something to deal with and not talk about. But we are not them.

I replied, "I got my period today, so I don't have to pray." He nodded his head and said, "That's good." A little taken aback, I asked him, "Why is that good?" He smiled and said, "Because! It means that you're growing up and that God allowed you to be healthy. That's a beautiful thing." Then he turned and walked back upstairs. I sat back in my chair, exhaled, and smiled.

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I exited the train and moments later it accelerated passed me, the rush of wind blowing my jacket and scarf forward. A wave of strangers walked with me, across the length of the cement train platform and down toward the bus stop.

As we waited in a line to board the bus, I heard an angry muttering growing closer, so I turned to look just as he approached. He pushed passed the other people in line and slowed his arrogant gait, looking directly at me as he backed away toward the end of the line.

I saw his wispy, white beard and icy, blue eyes beneath a baseball cap. I stared back at him, keeping my face void of any emotion as my chest tightened. His face was splotched with unnatural redness and his voice dripped with malice.

"Fucking Muslim. I should've brought my gun." He spoke the words with quiet intensity. Then he turned and walked away.

The strangers I stood with faced forward with their mouths in hard lines. All except for one woman who turned back and looked at me. Our eyes met but I couldn't identify the expression on her face. It seemed to be somewhere between pity and guilt, but my mind raced passed her useless, action-less emotions.

The next day at work I was filled with anxiety. My coworker Katrina caught me staring grimly at nothing one too many times and pressed me to tell her what was

going on. She listened quietly, but with dramatic, classically-Katrina facial expressions and headshaking.

After I'd finished talking, she placed her hand over mine and asked, "Do you have pepper-spray?"

She rifled around for a moment, muttering about her purse being an endless pit, then emerged victorious with a small black tube topped with a red lever. Presenting it to me, she resisted my attempts to turn down her offer, insisting that she could easily get another and that I needed it more than she did at that moment. We hugged.

Briefly, she showed me how to twist the red lever to lock or unlock the nozzle. When the red piece was pulled to the side, I could push down on it to release the pepper-spray. With the little can tucked into my palm, a sensation of strength and capability rushed into me that I prayed would last.

I left work that night, and walked faster than I ever had. The dark path I had walked down countless times seemed impossibly dangerous, and my eyes darted to each street corner, keeping an eye on every stranger that passed by while I waited for the train.

When the time came to leave the security of the brightly lit train car and walk to the bus station where it had happened, I pulled my shoulders back and took a deep breath. The platform wasn't as crowded as the previous night, but I strode ahead with the same force. Though I knew that the chances of seeing that man again were slim to none, I had been shaken into a new awareness of the world around me. I was determined to be strong in that world.

Holding the canister of pepper-spray in my pea coat pocket, I twisted the nozzle open and closed repeatedly, feeling the *click* with my thumb. It clicked once with each step and each heartbeat. *Open. Closed. Open. Closed.* As I walked, the train flashed passed me. *Open. Closed. Open.* My skirt and hijab blew forward in the slipstream. *Closed. Open. Closed.* I arrived at the bus stop. *Open.*