

HABOON HASHI | IS THERE A  
WAY OUT?

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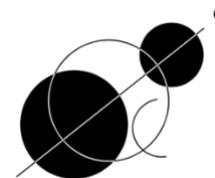
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PROLOGUE	3
CHAPTER 1 – A WAY OUT?	4
CHAPTER 2 – WHY DOESN'T EVERYONE BELIEVE IN GOD?	6
CHAPTER 3 – MONDAY AND FIVE DAYS TO DEADLINE.	8
CHAPTER 4 – THE PRAYER	10
CHAPTER 5 – TUESDAY AND FOUR DAYS UNTIL DEADLINE	12
CHAPTER 6 – THE PRIEST	14
CHAPTER 7 – WEDNESDAY AND THREE DAYS UNTIL DEADLINE	16
CHAPTER 8 – SEXUALITY	17
CHAPTER 9 – THURSDAY AND TWO DAYS UNTIL DEADLINE	20
CHAPTER 10 – DEPRESSION	22
CHAPTER 11 – FRIDAY AND ONE DAY UNTIL DEADLINE	25
CHAPTER 12 - DEADLINE	27
AFTERWORD – THE PERSON I AM TODAY	31



*Note to the reader: This version of the book is a translation from Norwegian. The author has translated it herself, so there might be some errors.*

# Prologue

*I am a person who chose to leave Islam. Not because I lacked freedom, or because I hated being a Muslim, but for the simple fact that I didn't believe in God. I never have, but I thought I had to because everyone around me did. I thought there was something wrong with me if I didn't, and that all I had to do was work harder and faith would come. But it didn't come. The only two scenarios of someone leaving Islam I had ever seen displayed for me in the media was either losing my family, the people around me and possibly being murdered or becoming a radical ex-Muslim who felt that Islam was the root of all evil and that atheism was the only way to freedom. My story ended up completely different, and I believe that the experience I had at 17 is worth telling. I want you to keep in mind, though that no story starts or ends the same. I'm simply trying to add another layer of nuance.*

# Chapter 1 – A way out?

My mother and I have always been close. She had me when she was very young. Her upbringing in Somalia is one that we, in Norway, only hear about on the news or see in movies: a childhood in a war-stricken country and forced into marriage at a young age. She had to start her life all over again in Norway in her twenties. She barely got used to the harsh winters before she became pregnant with me, and she lacked so much of the skills it takes to become integrated into the Norwegian society. In a way we grew up together in Norway.

My mother has always meant the world to me. She isn't just my mother, she's my best friend. She is always the first one I call when I've made a fool out of my elf, and the first one I go to when I'm upset. She has of course been important in every part of my

childhood as a parent, but as a teacher and a friend as well. And yet, I struggle to tell her that I don't believe in Allah and that I was queer. I was afraid that it would all be too much. I have always been a difficult child, and had my mother written this very book, it would be full of anecdotes proving just how difficult I was. Not only did I ask a million question about every little thing, but I was also impossible to satisfy. I demanded long explanations for everything and wouldn't settle for a one-line answer. I wasn't very fond of rules either, and I usually broke every rule my mother set up for me. Because I know how difficult I was as a child, I was afraid this would be the straw that broke the camel's back. It had always been my mother and I against the world. I was afraid that I would be left alone if I told her this.

I hid a lot from my mother. For four years I hadn't said anything about what I believe. For four years I avoided telling my mother who I had a crush on. Our conversations became superficial in a way they had never been before. A simple "hello" in the hallway before I locked myself in my bedroom. I felt very alone. I felt trapped in a prison of my own making.

I don't believe. It's a quite simple statement, but the road to full admission was steeped in self-hate and a self-inflicted mental torture. To leave the religion I was raised in felt like leaving a lot of my family's culture and traditions. Eid, gatherings in the mosque, the collective panic of finding out that our favorite sweets had gelatin in them, and the close bond that was formed from having the same world view. The admission was also more painful because of the negative representations of these kinds of stories in the media. I was afraid that my family would leave me, that all my friends would turn their backs to me and that I wouldn't have anyone left in my life. I was afraid of being abandoned, and to know that my views on God and religion was the reason I soon wouldn't have a family or friend. I was afraid of regretting my choice and not having anything to come back to. I am afraid of being completely alone in the world. It didn't help that the horrific scenarios of honor-killings played in the back of my mind. Even though I knew that this wouldn't happen to me. Despite the fear I decided to move forwards. I am 17 years old and have already fought this battle for a long time. I have tried to change my views, tried to fit in, and worked tirelessly to feel what everyone

around me felt about God. My psyche has become more and more damaged. I have to throw in the towel. I'm giving up.

"Hailie, I know you miss your mom and I know you miss your dad..." I'm sitting at my desk that I have placed in the kitchen and blasting Eminem. The large windows that lead out to small balcony are letting in so much sunlight that I can barely read the words on the screen. But I refuse to move and continue desperately looking for the right words. The door to the kitchen is locked. I need to be alone. It's been like this for a while. I lock myself in the kitchen, while my mom sits in the living room, wondering why I won't talk to her. I could've been in my room, but there isn't a lock there. I feel a need to be all alone. I'm making plans for the weekend. Plans I don't want my mom to know about, so the only solution is to lock myself in the kitchen. Eminem is there as support. "we fear how we feel inside". The aggression in his voice drives me towards something I don't know if I will be able to do. The thirteen-page document I have written is making me nauseous and dizzy, but I continue to write the speech I'm going to give to my mother on Saturday. I have decided to tell her that I don't believe in God.



## Chapter 2 – why doesn't everyone believe in God?

I don't remember much from my time in the mosque. Mostly because the only thing that pops into my mind when I think of that time is the immense insecurity and discomfort I felt. I started to go to the mosque regularly because of my self-hatred and obsession with being "pure". But the mosque became yet another arena in which I felt like the depth of my faith was being challenged. Every time the imam read from the Quran, the lump in my throat grew bigger. Every time I recited incorrectly and had to start over again, the tears would pierce my eyelids. Every time the imam moved on

from me to another student, even though I hadn't recited correctly, I read that as him giving up. Giving me up.

During the lessons in the mosque, a curtain would divide the room into two sections. On one side sat the imam, on the other there was us. So young we could barely be considered women, yet modestly separated from the man. The heavy blue blanket moved with the sudden gust of air from his movements. And every time the curtain moved, the mood in the room would change. Suddenly, it was quieter, more serious, and we realized, all at once, that something was done incorrectly. These subtle signals sent a clear message of disapproval. I can still feel the ache in my stomach.

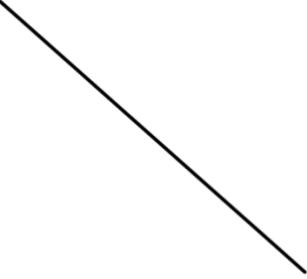
The imam was talking about people without faith. "if someone has never heard of Allah, do they get punished if they don't love Him?" someone in the class asked. Whispers spread across the rows behind me. "They can't possibly", someone replied. "Of course, not", someone else whispered. I felt my anxiety build. The imam cleared his throat and replied: "there is no one today that doesn't know of Islam or Allah. It is therefore an unnecessary question. Those who

don't believe today, chose not to." The room filled with a shameful silence. The girl who had asked the question apologized and sat down. I wanted to ask a question, but the tension in the room made me anxious. So even though the question was burning inside me, I didn't ask. "I'll look it up later" I thought and wrote it down in my notebook so I wouldn't forget.

As soon as I was home, I looked up "Why doesn't everyone believe in God? Islam", hoping for an answer that sat better with me than the non-answer from the imam. After a few clicks I stumbled over an article that explained that Allah chose to let some people remain non-believers. The article went on to explain that some people will never see "the light" because no matter how much they wanted to, because some people didn't deserve God's blessing. My anxiety grew, and I continued my search. Looking desperately for another explanation. Allah couldn't possibly have decided that I didn't deserve to believe when I hadn't done anything wrong, could he? My sins washed over me, and slowly but surely, I internalized that article. That night I cried myself to sleep.

Because I didn't feel like I could talk to my imam about my doubts, and the intense insecurity that was growing inside of me I turned to Google. There I found thousands of websites that all swore that they had the answer. Every website had tens of different Quran-quotes and excerpts from the hadiths. Many websites also had many of the same quotes and excerpts, which confused me. How could they interpret the same sentence so differently? One website would state that not believing in Allah was the biggest sin there is, whilst another would state that not believing wasn't enough in of itself to qualify as a sin. Both websites would use the same sources to argue their interpretations.

I didn't want to believe the more moderate sites. In a way I didn't want to be told that it was ok to be who I was. I wanted to be told that something was wrong and be given a solution. That way I would have a clear direction and goal, and something to work towards. The other option was to accept that I didn't believe, and that felt too overwhelming and daunting.



## Chapter 3 – Monday and five days to deadline.

I had chosen Saturday strategically. I couldn't stand the thought of another Monday wearing a hijab, going to Quran-lessons in the mosque and praying. I couldn't stand the thought that I would continue to do the ritualistic washing and pray until I got soars on my arms. I couldn't stand the thought that I would live a life that wasn't mine. I wanted to be free. I wanted the freedom I was constantly being told was out there. The kind of freedom that other Norwegians have, the freedom my friends and family find in the mosque. I've never felt that, and I desperately needed to. This life that I was partially born in and partially had created was never mine. It didn't suite me. I don't feel at home in it, and I can't stand the

thought of living this way for the rest of my life. At the same time my mind was wandering off to a different *solution*.

I'm sitting at the desk in my kitchen. We have large windows that cover an entire wall and lead out to a small balcony. We live on the third floor and the windows don't have curtains, so I full view of the all the buses and cars that drive by, the mothers on maternity leave who are rushing to get to their weekly coffee with friends, the stressed men in suits getting in and out of their small cars. My thoughts stretch over the balcony, and in a flash, I see myself jumping off it and falling to my death. "how would I do it?". The voice is so low it's almost like I'm whispering to keep it a secret, even from myself. I know it's not right. I know I can't do it – what am I thinking. "if I do it outside of our apartment, then the chances of my mother being the one to find me are slim. I don't want her to see me in that way." Even in my attempt to find a way that doesn't hurt my mother, I understand that the mere act is what is going to hurt her. But I'm hoping that if she doesn't find me, if she doesn't have that memory ingrained in her mind, she might be able to move on and live a normal life after. "maybe I should write a letter. Would that

help?” I wonder. I don’t even know what I would write in that letter. The whole point is that I don’t want my mother to know I don’t believe in Allah. How does it help to read about in a suicide letter? How does it help to have a dead daughter who doesn’t believe in Allah? “should I write one letter per person in my life, or a single one to all of them?” I feel tired and start heading over to my bedroom. “I can continue tomorrow”. I delete my search history even though I know my mother doesn’t know how to find it.

To tell her, and the rest of my family that I don’t believe in Allah, is not only shameful, but it feels like a betrayal. My mother gave up everything so that I could live the life I live today. She dealt with me and all my antics in the hopes that I would one day grow up to become a strong, good and productive human being. To leave Islam feels like turning my back on everything she’s done for me – like none of it mattered. Suicide became a real option. In my life, religion has only been about God. It has been the glue that connects me and everyone around me on a deeper level. It the understanding that we have certain common religious obligations towards one another that we would never dream of breaking – even if we disappointed each

other in other ways. The common belief in God, the common worldview, the traditions and rituals made our bond stronger than any family relation could. Therefore, any thought that meant leaving the religion felt like a breach of that commitment and a breach of the common understanding of what we meant to each other – that was something that I never thought I would be able to overcome.



## Chapter 4 – The Prayer

Life was easy when I was fifteen. The whole world was black and white. Grey areas were something politicians spoke about on TV to get away with lying. In my world there were no grey areas. My mother was everything. School was a waste of time. And I knew I was going to hell. This was the framework of my life. My entire reality was based on these three truths. Everything else was background noise.

I had seen the news. I knew what happened to people who left their religions. I didn't want to be kicked out or have my friends and family turn their back on me. The more I realized that I couldn't change it, the more important it became to find a solution. One solution was to pray my way out the doubt. I was convinced that I

could pray myself "pure" from this. If I only prayed hard enough, if I only prayed often enough, if I sacrificed sleep and time for praying, the surely God would have to love me. He had to!

I unfolded the red prayer rug with the fringes. I laid it out across the floor again, for the twelfth time tonight. I had tried to get through this prayer eleven times before. The hijab was tight under my chin, and the dress I was wearing felt heavy on my body. My face was sour and the tears that had started to trickle down my face several tries ago burn on their way down my cheeks. I raised my hands to either side of my face with my palms facing me, before I lowered them slowly and folded them over my stomach. As I started the thoughts started pouring in again. I tried to focus on one fringe, stared intensely at it as I pushed the Quran verses out of my mouth, one after the other. The sun had long set by now. The only light in my small bedroom was coming from the apple on my MacBook. I moved my vision from the fringe to apple and tried to focus. "did you remember to pack for your trip tomorrow?". I recited louder. "you have midterms tomorrow, and you haven't studied yet." Even louder. "you know you don't believe in Allah!". I stopped. The tears

rushed down my face and I could feel my heart beating faster and harder. I stopped mid-prayer, but remained standing in the same position, hands folded over my stomach. My nails dug into my skin as I tried to hold back the tears. I couldn't. the tears pushed their way through. Every tear stung all the way down to the corner of my mouth. Could I continue praying? Did I have to wash again? Could I even wash again?

I walked carefully to the bathroom. The skin on my knuckles was cracked and bleeding, my nose was peeling, and my face felt like it was on fire. I was exhausted. Once in the bathroom I stood in front of the sink, rolled up the sleeves of my dress and started to wash again. I picked up the shower loofa and scrubbed my skin in scorching water. I completed the entire ritual and carefully rolled down the sleeves. My skin was swollen and red, but at least I was clean. Clean enough to pray. I went back to my bedroom and stood on the red prayer rug again. Finally, I managed to complete the prayer. Finally, I could sleep. I glanced at the clock. The shining red numbers stung my eyes. 03:57. "is this worth it?" I asked myself

before I rolled up the prayer rug, set my alarm for morning prayer and took off the dress I had prayed in and went to bed.

This was how prayer was for me for two years. Sometimes the prayers would take less time and be a quick and simple errand – but most often it would be a long drawn-out and painful experience that always ended in a feeling of hopelessness.



## Chapter 5 – Tuesday and four days until deadline

“Alhamdulillah, I’m fine. How are you?” I answer shortly. An aunt I have little contact with has called my mother. She asks how I am, and I respond the way I’m supposed to. “Thank God, everything is going well.” The words feel heavy in my mouth, I become increasingly uncomfortable, but my voice is luckily holding up. She continues to talk about her son who has started Quran-school in Palestine to become an imam. My mother nearly screams in absolute pride. “I’m so happy he has devoted his life to Allah” she responds. “So, he’s doing better?” my mother asks. This cousin had previously been involved in some bad crowds. He struggled a lot with school and never made it to the mosque. “Yes, Alhamdulillah.”

He has really turned his life around.” My mother asks if the school is public or private. “I’m not sure” my aunt replies. “It’s Mohamed and them who run the school, so I’m guessing it’s private.” I wonder if he is doing the same thing I’m doing – if he’s trying to pray himself clean, or if he’s already prayed himself so clean that he can now become a sheik. “he sat and read the Quran out loud to himself every day. Can you believe it? For hours, he would sit and there and pray, and today he’s studying to become an imam. My son!” she sighs contently over the phone and says nothing else until my mother congratulates him again and they hang up.

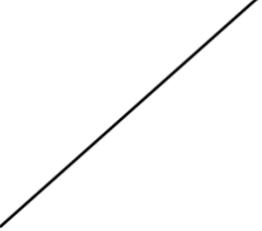
Later that night my mother asks me what I thought of what my aunt said. “I’m proud of him”, I respond. I see where she’s going with this and I try to find a way to switch the subject. “Do you think there’s a similar school for girls, Haboon? Would you want to go?” I look down at the floor in shame. I can feel the tears pushing, and the stinging in my eyelids. I close my eyes and try to push the tears back, but it stills burns under my eyelids. “I don’t know”, I respond softly. “what is it?” she asks. She can always tell when something’s wrong.

“nothing, I’m just stressed about the exams”” I scratch my eyebrows, lift my head and quickly leave the room to go study.

I feel the need to cry and scream but sat instead carefully down on the edge of the bed and breathe out slowly. I don’t know what to do anymore. Should I tell my mom the truth, or do I take this to the grave with me. What happens if I tell her? Will she throw me out? What if she doesn’t want to talk to ever again? Then I’ll be all alone in the world. I don’t know if I could bear the thought of living the rest of my life on my own, without being able to talk to my mother. But what if she doesn’t get mad? What if she doesn’t care? The last thought almost made me laugh. Of course, she would care. Of course, she wouldn’t take it lightly.

Even though my mother has never said anything about how religious I should or shouldn’t be, I took her reactions as pointers. Her pride of this aunt’s son became a sign for me that she could see something similar for me. This mixed with the shame I already felt about my sexual orientation and the lack of faith pushed me further into the spiral of shame. I saw no other way out than to become

even more religious, more rigid, and stricter with myself. The harder I worked on trying to believe and build up a façade of deep religiousness, the more devastated and hopeless I felt. This thought spiral built on itself and the hopelessness, depression and the panicked search for a way out led me, slowly but surely, into a self-destructive path. I assumed this path would extend throughout my life, and that the only way out was to be blessed with a faith. Who this blessing would come from and how, I didn’t know, but that it had to come one was crystal clear for me. I just had to convince myself, prove that I was good enough, and one day it would come.



## Chapter 6 – The Priest

I woke up one morning to pray. As usual it was difficult. I was distracted and couldn't focus on what I was reciting. I stopped the prayer, washed, and started from the top. Again, all of my sins came flooding in, and again I stopped the prayer, washed and started again. I did this another four times before I was able to finish the prayer without getting distracted. I finished, folded the prayer rug and felt the sudden urge to just lie in bed and cry wash over me. But I got ready, ate a quick breakfast and went to school.

My sins got heavier and heavier for me to bear. All the times I had talked behind someone's back. The times I had stolen from a store or yelled at my mother haunted me in my dream. In the span of two months I had nightmares every night. Every night it was the same

nightmare, but instead of getting less terrifying, my fear intensified everything time I had the nightmare. I was confused. I had come to a point where I became superstitious without faith. I was scared of what was going to happen to me if I didn't believe, but the fear also made it harder *not* to believe. If I wasn't scared of Allah, what was I so scared of? I imagined that these dreams were coming from God himself, and that he was punishing me for all the thoughts I'd had, and that this was proof that I didn't deserve blessing. But I had no clear idea of what God's blessing entailed. I knew that I didn't believe in heaven and hell, but I was still afraid of being sent to hell.

I decided rather impulsively to go to a church and talk to a priest. I didn't feel like I could talk to my imam or my friends about my concerns, but I still had a need to talk to someone with religious authority. I needed a religious person to tell me that I was still worthy. That there was still hope. So, I went to a catholic church and asked if I could confess my sins. I expected to be in a room with a divide between me and the priest like we see in the movies, but instead we sat in a room just like any other room and spoke face to face. I told him all of my sins, and about all that I had carried around

for years. He looked at me with worry in eyes and the look on his face made my stomach turn. He asked me why I didn't feel worthy, and I referred to an article I had read about people who didn't believe in God. He looked down at his shoes and took a long breath before he spoke: "I am not very familiar with Islam and can therefore not quote directly from the Quran. But I doubt that God choses certain people and lets them live in eternal damnation at whim. From what you have told me today, there's nothing that makes you less worthy. On the contrary, you show a great deal of self-awareness and humility, something which all religions agree are good qualities for humanity to have. I think you should stop thinking about this article, and instead focus on your relationship to your religion and to seek advice from the leaders of your mosque." His voice was calm and direct, but it still wasn't comforting. He asked me to repeat a prayer and sent me on my way. On my way home I decided that I wouldn't talk to anyone about this.

## Chapter 7 – Wednesday and three days until deadline

“Abby, you’re going to be late!” My mom shouts from the living room. She always uses this nickname for me. I don’t remember when it started. I’m sitting at the edge of my bed, trying to build up enough courage to let her know that I am not going to the mosque today – or ever. “Abby! Let’s go!” I stand up carefully. I don’t have my hijab or abaya on. I haven’t packed my Quran or the homework I was supposed to do yesterday. I’m wearing sweatpants and a hoodie with my hair standing up and in all directions. I am nowhere near presentable for the mosque or the world in general. It’s Wednesday evening and usually I get ready for the mosque during this time, but today I have decided that I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go and

act like I care for several hours. I don’t want to go to the mosque or wear a hijab today. I don’t want to do any of it. So, I step carefully out of my room and walk towards the living room and get ready to face my mother. “I’m not going today” I half-whisper. My voice is calm, but shaky. I clear my throat in hopes of making it less shaky. It doesn’t help. “What do you mean? Of course, you’re going.” I take a deep breath and get ready to stand up to her. I push the words out and get ready for her to yell at me. “No, I’m not going.” I take a break. Let the words hang in the space between us. I see her face change, but I can’t tell if she’s angry or confused. I feel scared and I can feel my pulse rising. “Why not?” she asks quietly. I can feel my stomach turning, I take a step backwards and look up at her. “I... ehm...the imam has cancelled the class because his wife isn’t feeling well.” I look at her, and I can tell she doesn’t believe me, but I also know she isn’t going to make a big deal about it. She trusts me. I have never given her a reason not to. I usually go to the mosque every weekend. “Oh, I didn’t know that. Fine, but you have study for your exams then.” I breathe out carefully, nod quickly and hurry back into my room. On Saturday I will tell her the truth.



## Chapter 8 – Sexuality

There was a time I thought “gay” was something only men could be. I didn’t realize that women could also be queer. There was a time where I thought the only people who could be gay were feminine men. I had never heard the word be used towards women, nor had I heard anyone talk about a woman’s clothing as being too masculine or feminine. I assumed the whole topic only regarded men and so I ignored the whole concept for many years before it suddenly became a reality in my own life. I had never planned to fall for anyone – much less a girl. I hadn’t even known that I could. So, when I suddenly fell head over heels for a girl, I couldn’t admit that this was in fact real.

The snow melts under our shoes and left a starshaped footprint. The only evidence of our presence. For two years it had been like this. Thousands of kilometers with starshaped footprints and quiet giggles followed by a suffocating silence. Two fourteen-year olds wandering in the snow.

I remember the knot in my stomach every time a stranger walked past us. I was scared they would take a second look at us; I was scared of what they might think, scared of what they might say. The same prickly pain in the pit of my stomach would appear when I would come home from our long walks and my mother would ask where I’d been or who I’d been with. Every time someone asked about you, I would lie on impulse. I didn’t know what I was hiding, but I felt an urge to lie. We weren’t doing anything wrong? We were just talking walks. Walks that would last an eternity. Walks I would long for when I was stuck I school. Sometimes we would hold hands, but it was only when you became very excited about something. Every time you got excited it was as if your entire body was pulsating and the result would be an explosion of sound and movements. Hands, arms and legs everywhere. Every time you would lose your

balance, I would laugh loudly at you and help you up. Every movement, every mood, every conversation became a routine, but there was still something exciting about it all. Like it was the first time every time. The teacher who hated you, but who only wanted to push you to do better. The guy in class with the ugly pink hat and the same long red t-shirt who always walked by you whispering “dyke” so that no one else could hear. The lunch lady who let you take food from the canteen even though she knew you could never pay. We had gone over it all, but you were equally as angry, irritated and upset every time – and every time I fell for you all over again.

“Why are we never at yours?” you asked. We had talked about this before, and just like with everything else you brought the subject up every now and then. “Why are we never at yours?” I asked back. I knew none of us would enjoy being at your house. But usually you would stop asking when I pointed this out. You don’t want to be at my house anyways, but I would like to be at yours. Besides, you’ve met my mother, but I have never met yours.” This was new territory. You would always let it go after the first remark, but today you kept asking. I took a long breath to calm the nerves that were steadily

growing. I didn’t really know why I couldn’t be at my house. I didn’t know why I was even keeping you a secret from my mother either. I let your hand go to hide the fact that my palms were now sweating. “It’s no fun at my house. There’s nothing to do there.” I looked down at the ground, at the snow we hadn’t stepped on yet. I zoomed in and felt like I could see each and every snowflake. One on top of another. “We don’t do anything when we’re out either. We just go on the same walks we’ve always gone on” you had a point, but I enjoyed these walks. They were a break from my life at home. A break from prayers and the fast, from the mosque and the Quran. “I like going on walks. I thought you did too.” “Yes, but I don’t know... I’m a little tired of it.” I didn’t know what to respond so I didn’t say anything. Hoped that you would fill the silence like you always did. “I know you haven’t told your mother about me, but we could just say that we’re friends?” I could feel the nerves rising again. I didn’t know what to say, and I didn’t understand why I was getting so nervous, but I couldn’t look at you. “I can tell her about you tomorrow. I have a big test tomorrow, so I think I have to go home now.” I panicked and didn’t know what I was even saying. Your face was filled with

confusion, but you let me go anyways. “That’s fine. Text me when you’ve talked to her.” Ok.”

When I got home, I rushed to the bathroom and locked myself in. I couldn’t bear to talk to my mother. I didn’t have it in me to lie to her again about where or who I had been with. I sat down on the bathroom floor and turned on the faucet. “What’s going to happen now?” I asked myself. I couldn’t tell my mom about you, and I didn’t want to take you home with me and pretend that you were a friend. But if I didn’t, I was afraid you wouldn’t want to see me again. The situation felt impossible and I couldn’t see what the right solution was. I wanted to cut you off and drop all contact in the hopes of not having to deal with the entire situation, but I knew I didn’t want that either. “Haboon, are you okay?” My mother was on the other side of the bathroom. I could hear the hesitation in her voice. I knew that she understood that I wasn’t washing my face or showering, but I couldn’t get myself to go out there. “Yeah, I’m just removing my makeup.”

The next morning, I ignored you at school. I answered shortly when you greeted me in the hallways. I didn’t answer your texts, and I said

no when you asked if I wanted to go on another walk. I cut you off slowly, but surely. Not because I wanted to, but because it was easier to cut you out than to face the truth.

This relationship had an enormous impact on my life despite its abrupt ending. The abrupt ending was in fact was started a never-ending spiral of thoughts and feelings within me, and once the thoughts started it was impossible to make them end. In my confusion and fear I cut you out completely because it was easier than having to look inwards and try to break apart the vulnerable aspects and the “truths” I had been told my entire life. But the truth was that I was and still am queer. The truth was that I was in love with you, but I was too afraid to take you home with me because I was afraid, I was going to be mocked in the same ways that the feminine men had been. I was afraid of being rejected by those I loved, and at the time I wasn’t willing to risk it all for our relationship. It was easier to ignore the entire situation. To close it up and move on with my life as if it had never happened. The only problem is that once you realize a truth about yourself, it becomes impossible to go on as normal.

## Chapter 9 – Thursday and two days until deadline

“Can you walk me home? I’m afraid of the dark”, Sara asks. She laughs at herself a little, but I know that she really means it. We start walking together towards her bus, and before I can react, I hear myself say “I don’t think I want to live anymore”. I’m caught off guard by my own confession, and suddenly I feel afraid of what she’s going to say. I’m hoping she doesn’t get angry or upset. She stops and looks at me. “you have to”, she responds. And as she is saying it, I realize that she’s not saying it out of love or concern. “it’s haram to commit suicide, you know that.” I nod dutifully and I vow to never bring it up again. After all, there’s no come back to that. It is haram to commit suicide, even though that seems to be the least of my

problems at the moment. And yet, I don’t fight her on it and keep walking her home. Next to Sara’s house, there’s a playground. “Come let’s swing”, she exclaims. I follow along with knots in my stomach.

the sand grains are collecting around my toes as I push them into the sandcastle we’ve built. Me and Sara are both swinging slowly back and forth. It’s a summer night in the middle of July and the air is thick and humid. It’s actually so warm that neither of us are wearing jackets or shoes. “What are you going to do?” Sara hesitantly. I look at her and realize that she’s crying. “I don’t know.” I respond quietly and pretend that I don’t see the tears streaming down her face. I’ve never been good at consoling people, and I feel especially awkward now that the tears are due to me. I realize that this is the first time I’ve brought up any sort of thought to Sara that is remotely dark or related to my doubts about life, and I start thinking that perhaps it wasn’t the brightest idea to spring this on her like this. “I just don’t know if there’s any point in continuing life when I’m just lying.” I continue. I hope she will understand. I hope that what I’m saying is making sense, even though I understand that

we are so far apart on this topic. “you could try talking to an imam” she says, completely unaware of the years of spent reading the Quran, all the nights spent praying, all the Google-searches, all the swelling and rashes I’ve given myself in the hopes of finding another solution. “you know that wouldn’t help anyways. I know I don’t want to be a part of the mosque or Islam any longer. I just don’t know how to go about it without making a big fuss.” Sara sighs. Several minutes go by without her saying anything and in the meantime, I can feel the distance between us growing. I can almost see the playground stretch out in between us. “then you should do whatever you feel is right, but there will be trouble either way. You know that, right? What are you going to tell your mother?” I feel relieved that she isn’t trying to convince me as I’m sure a lot of people would have, but the relief is cut short; “are you going to wait until you leave high school or are you going to tell everyone now?” I let the question hang in the air and get off the swing. I stand for a bit in the sand and dig my toes into the sand almost as a way to ground myself. The air is no longer thick, and the wind is picking up speed. The sun has begun to rise again, and the busses are driving by one after the other. “I think I have to go home now.” I almost whisper.

Exhausted, scared and confused I go home and decide that I have to set a plan for how I’m going to tell my mother about all of this.

## Chapter 10 – Depression



I was twelve the first time I sought help, but I quickly gave up because I didn't have the language to explain what I was feeling. I was never told what depression was. There was never a school nurse who came and explained to the class. Nor did any teacher or doctor ever mention it. It wasn't until I got my own computer that I found out about mental illnesses and after several months of surfing the web looking for an explanation of what I had been feeling for all of these years that I realized that the constant nightmares, the ache in my heart and the constant desire to cry was more serious than just teenage angst. After hours of research, self-diagnosing and crippling fear, I finally brought it up to my mother. But my mother was raised in a culture where mental health never was a topic, and in worst

case was a punishment from God. So, when I brought the ache in my heart, she interpreted that as there being something physically wrong with my heart.

We got called in to the tired old doctor's office. In the office there were two chairs along the wall—one for my mother and one for me. I sat in the chair closest to the doctor and gave my jacket to my mother. She sat down, sighed and folded up my little pink jacket. The walls were stained a yellowish color. There were posters on every wall. It all felt overwhelming. As if I was being suffocated by information I couldn't understand. My mother and the doctor went over personal information, and I noted the doctor's strict voice. His name was Kevin. that reminded me of a classmate named Kevin, and in my naivete I didn't realize that that was something that you should think quietly and not say out loud, so I continued and told the doctor about Kevin's erasers and how he would lick them to get them to work better. The doctor smiled politely and moved his attention back to the computer. "is he mad at me?" I asked my mother in Somali. She looked confused and responded calmly "no, he's just busy." This preoccupation with whether or not adults were

angry with me was all consuming at the time. I was constantly worried that someone was angry with me about something. I stopped talking and looked down at me feet dangling and hovering over the floor to distract myself from the ache in my heart that was getting increasingly more painful as the minutes passed.

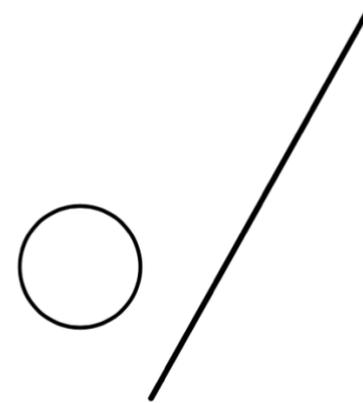
After a while the doctor asked why I was there, and before I could say anything my mother answered in her broken Norwegian with some English sprinkled in. “Her heart hurts” she said. Kevin stopped and looked at me and asked how long I had been feeling this – in English. “For about three weeks” my mother responded in English. “Haboon, does your heart hurt?” I stopped dangling my feet and realized that I had to look up at him. But the posters were right behind his head and I was already nauseous. “no” I responded impulsively. I didn’t know why I was lying. My heart was aching as I watched his face contort. I only knew that I had to get out of this room, sooner rather than later. “Can we go?” I asked my mother in Somali. “no, you have to tell the doctor where it hurts” she responded in Norwegian. I felt betrayed by the language switch. I felt that her responding in Norwegian was a way of “outing” me to

the doctor, Kevin, that I wanted to leave. I looked her in the eyes and hoped that she would understand my desperation. And as if she was a mind reader, she got up, apologized to Kevin and said that we were late for something else. We were out of the door before Kevin had a chance to respond.

Out on the street there were suddenly a lot of people. The busses zoomed by, one after the other and tall people with backpacks and women with strollers covered every inch as far as my eye could see. I became overwhelmed again but followed after my mother and put on my jacket. “are you okay?” she asked. “yes. My heart just didn’t hurt anymore, so I wanted to go home and watch TV.” She was walking faster than usual, and I had to jog a bit to keep up with her. “mom, can we have pizza today?” she stopped and turned to me and fixed my jacket and my scarf. “Haboon, I have to work, but if you want, I can buy one for you now and you can eat it later?” mom was working late again. She worked in a restaurant. I had never been there before, and didn’t know where it was, but she always came home very late. We started walking again, and again it was hard to keep up. “ok. Kan Josef sleep over? I don’t like sleeping alone.” “yes,

of course” she responded with a lighter voice. “just make sure to ask his grandfather”.

If I could change one thing, I would have stayed in that doctor’s room and tried to explain to the doctor what I was feeling. Maybe that would have saved me many, many years of confusion and shame.



## Chapter 11 – Friday and one day until deadline



The smell of my mother's coffee and cigarettes are seeping into my room through the window in the living room. I still haven't turned off the alarm, and the booming noise is overwhelming. It's 7am, and I'm about to get up and get ready for school. I walk towards the bathroom to shower and brush my teeth before it hits: I have to stay home tonight. I need time to plan what I'm going to say, and how I'm going to this. I wait for my mother to leave for work before I run back to my room, pull out a notebook and the computer to search up information online. I look up people who have left Islam, and quickly learn that there's a term for it – murtad fitri – someone who's born with Muslim parents, but who's decided to leave the religion. There, black on white, it was. "Murtad fitri". I whisper the

words to myself and feel a wave of sadness wash over me. Even though the thought of the word scared me, I caught myself whispering it to myself several times in a row. I can feel the word sticking to me and before I can even realize it, I have internalized the word to be a part of my identity. I am scared, but in many ways this fear feels different than the one I carry every day. This is a more subtle, calmer fear. The kind of fear you feel before a test or exam. It is a fear filled with tension and expectation. I keep searching the web for forums and blogs where people share their experiences. They tell stories of threats, kidnapping and murder attempts. Of the many stories I read, most of them had to flee for their lives. I can feel my nerves. What if this happens to me? In a way I know this isn't my reality, but what if?

I keep searching and start to think over what I might need if I do get kicked out. A place to sleep, some clothes and hygiene products and my passport are the first things I think of. I pack a small bag, not too big in case my mother finds it, with things I think I'm going to need. Then I call NAV (welfare office in Norway). I explain the situation briefly and ask if there's any place I could sleep in case my mother

kicks me out. They tell me to wait and see and get in touch if anything happens. I then call the child protective services instead. I understand that I have to be much more detailed in my explanation. I need them to understand the severity. Child protective service is my only option to ensure some help if I might need it, and it's important that they understand that. A young woman picks up the phone when I call. I tell her everything. I go through my entire story, I tell her about Islam, about why I don't believe anymore, about the lack of faith and how it has affected me. I tell her that I am scared I won't have anywhere to sleep when I tell my mother, and that I have nowhere to go. It's evident in her voice that she is concerned for me. She takes me seriously and gives a phone number that she tells me to call immediately if something happens. I thank her for the help, note down the information in an old notebook that also gets packed in my little bag and then I wait. Wait for my mother to come home, wait for the right moment. Now that the plan is laid, I feel calmer. I feel prepared and ready in a different way than before. Now I know that I can get help if anything happens, and the security makes me feel safer. I breathe out and calm myself and get ready for tomorrow.

It's 11pm and I am trying to sleep. I've written a script for what I'm going to say and packed my belongings. The only thing left is to actually tell my mother.

## Chapter 12- Deadline

The day is here, and contrary to the chaos I thought I would feel, I feel calm. A kind of inner piece I've never known, but that is now spreading throughout my entire body. I stay in bed much longer than usual and just take it all in. Today is the last day I'll ever live this live. The last day I'm uncomfortable in my own body and life. Today is the end of a four year long inner war, and it all comes down to one conversation. Everything is dependent on this one conversation. The trajectory of my life will be decided in that moment. And yet I'm calm. I'm not excited, I'm not dreading it – I'm simply calm. Outside, the sun is starting to rise but the wind is the only thing I notice. I can hear banging of windows and walls and the sound of its breeze. It's still early and my mother hasn't woken up yet. I move slowly out of bed and head towards the bathroom. I want to see myself in a hijab

and ayaba one last time. I want to say goodbye to the person in the mirror. I put them on and walk quietly to the mirror. I stare at myself for so long I can't even recognize myself. My body is tense in the beginning, but after a while I realize that these clothes will no longer be a part of my life and thus no longer a part of me. The thought calms me down. In fact, I relax so much that I cry tears of joy. I take the clothes off, fold them back up and place them in the back of my closet, knowing full well that I'm never going to take them out again.

My mother wakes up later than expected. She pulls herself slowly into the bathroom then on to the kitchen for her daily coffee. "Good morning" she says as she walks by. I can barely muster up a reply before she asks me if I have prayed. "No, not yet" I respond calmly. I almost whisper the words because I'm afraid she'll hear my voice and sense that something is wrong. Can she see it on me? Can she tell that this is the day? Is she expecting it? Suddenly I feel a twinge of guilt. What if she has no idea? What if this is all too much? Should I wait and do it slowly over several conversation? No. I'm doing it today. "are you hungry?" mom is standing with half of her body in the fridge. I'm so nauseas that I can't even imagine eating, but if I

say no she'll know that something is wrong. "Yes, what are you making?" I ask. "I was thinking of making anjeela with tea, do you want some?" "yes, that sounds good."

The rest of the morning goes as usual. I avoid all of my mother's questions on why I haven't prayed yet, and as usual she doesn't dig. She knows me too well to dig into something I clearly don't want to talk about.

I've decided that this is the moment. In the middle of dinner and tv-watching. I can't go on like this the rest of the day without having told her. "mom, can we talk?" and per our tradition this is a way of me asking her if she can turn off the TV and pay attention. She understands immediately that it's serious because when she turns around to face me, I have tears in my eyes. It takes a long time before I say anything at all. The silence stretches out between us. Eventually I compose myself enough, but I can't find the right words. The moment isn't as elegant as I had hoped, because before I can react, I blurt out "I'm not a Muslim". Mom looks at me, confused and scared. It's clear she doesn't understand what I mean, and I feel

the urge to explain. "I don't believe in Allah. I have tried for many years to build my Iman, my faith, but it hasn't worked and I'm tired of being tired all the time." She remains silent, still with the same confused look with fear in her eyes. "why don't you believe in Allah?" she asks with such a calm voice that it almost scares me. "I don't know. I just never have. Do you remember when I went to sheikh Mohammed's classes? I never believed what the others were saying and was constantly asking questions until I eventually was kicked out of the class." "I remember that, Haboon, but I just thought you were curious and talkative." She becomes quiet again and the distance between grows. I try to find the words to bring us closer. I'm thinking and thinking, but I can't come up with any words that'll bring us closer. What can I say to soothe the situation? What can I say to make her understand that I haven't changed? Eventually I can't take the silence anymore and I say: "I'm sorry." I get up carefully and leave the living room. That night me and my mother don't speak at all.

Next week starts and we still aren't talking. I'm both proud of myself and terrified. Have I made the wrong decision? Should I have

waited? Should I not have said anything? Several days pass before I bring up the subject again, but after having told my friends it becomes easier to talk to my mother as well. To me the news felt more real when it also existed outside of my home. As if the “publicness” of it all gave me comfort in knowing that it was real, I had actually told people – finally.

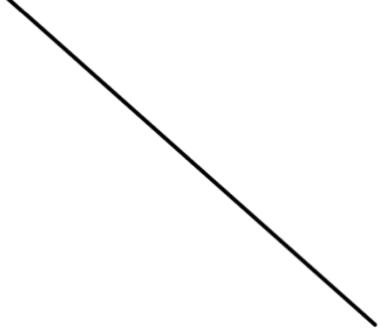
“can we walk” I ask my mother as she walks in the door. She doesn’t even get time to take off her coat and shoes. She becomes more serious and I realize that this is more difficult for her than I had assumed. All this time I had worried about how she would react, and I had never considered that she would be sad. I was afraid she was going to be disappointed or angry, but it didn’t cross my mind that she would feel hurt. “when did you decide?” she asks. “I never decided. I wanted to be a Muslim. I tried really hard and went to great lengths to find faith, but eventually I had to admit to myself that I couldn’t.” “why didn’t you tell me?” and as soon as she asks the question, I realize what this was all about. She was hurt and said that I had shared this with her. She was hurt that I had walked around with this secret for years, not telling her despite the fact that

I supposedly told her everything. It wasn’t about whether or not I was religious, but about the bond and trust between us. “I was afraid you would be angry.” Suddenly I’m no longer afraid, I’m just sad. Sad that I hadn’t given her the trust she deserved. Sad that I underestimated her. “I would have never lied to you, you know that. I just don’t understand why you lied for so long. I never pressured you to do anything. When you started all of this, I thought you just wanted to be more practicing, but if you didn’t, you could’ve just said so. It would’ve been fine either way.” In a way I feel more shameful now than ever. I’ve spent so many years, so much time and effort wrapping myself and my life in a shame that turned out to be unnecessary. I also feel angry with myself. How many years have I wasted? How long has my mental health suffered for nothing? Why did I try so hard when I knew it wasn’t going to work in the end? “I’m sorry. I should’ve told you. I was just scared.” I answer back with all the questions whirling in my head. She moves closer to me and gives me a hug. “it’s fine Haboon, but you don’t have to hide this kind of thing from me. I don’t care what you call yourself or what path you chose in life, as long as you remain a good person.” I can feel the tears pushing up against my eyelids. They’re impossible to

hold back, so I don't. I let them flow freely. In that moment I decide to tell her something else. "can I tell you something else?" "of course," she responds. "I like girls too." My pulse rises again, and my face feels hot. "what do you mean "too"?" "I mean I like both girls and boys". "when did you figure that out?" I think back and realize I don't know the exact time. "I don't know, I've just always known". "if that's how you feel Haboon, then that's how you feel. It's fine."

It didn't go how I expected, it surpassed all my expectations. I wasn't prepared that it would go so well, and the result made me ashamed of myself. Ashamed that I had underestimated my mother. Ashamed that I had forced myself into a mental prison for nothing. Ashamed that I had allowed myself to be so influenced by everything I read and heard. Ashamed that I had lost faith in my friends, family and most of all my mother. I was ashamed, but at the same time overjoyed and relieved. Now I be who I was, freely. Now I could start living the life I had always imagined for myself. Now I was free to be free.





## Afterword – The person I am today

The time after my confession turned out to be mostly what I had imagined. I was prepared for critique and slander. I was prepared for people disagreeing or not understanding my choice. The first days after people around me found out, my phone became unmanageable with all the calls from people I knew and didn't know. Their methods varied, some were more aggressive than others, but I stood my ground. It was not an option to even consider going back on my choice. I had made my choice, and I was sticking by it. I had spent years getting to this point and I was not going to allow anyone be a part of that decision or make me ashamed for it. So, I continued

to stand my ground, time after time. I didn't hide away; I didn't disappear quietly – I lived my life out in the open. I was honest in that I didn't believe in Allah and I didn't hide the fact that I was now engaging in haram activities. It was no longer relevant for me what was and wasn't haram. I became stubborn during this. I refused any discussion with an imam or any congregation about my choice. That time had passed, and I was finally free. But, in all honesty, to this day I can still feel a twinge of shame the few times me and my mother talk about how hard my choice was for her.

One of the things I realized after this whole process was that everyone's reaction didn't have anything to do with me. People's critique was, in fact, not about me. People I had never met, people who barely knew my name and people who didn't care about me threw around opinions about me and how I should live my life. Their attempts at characterizing me as a bad person was simply an effort to reinforce their belief that they were better than "someone like me". By creating a fictitious distinction between me and them they could put themselves on a pedestal. To me this was all irrelevant because my choice had nothing to do with anyone but myself. I

made this decision solely for myself, my freedom, my future and my mental health. I wanted and deserved a life in which I felt free. I deserve a life that motivates me, that enriches me, that pushes me forward and makes me fulfilled. I deserve an existence where I'm not constantly hiding – and today I am proud to say that I have achieved just that.

After I told my mother everything, I finally felt free. Finally, I could be myself. Finally, I had my mother and the bond we'd always shared back. Even so, life stops for no man and neither does the challenges. My mother, although very accepting, was still struggling with the shock. She needed time to heal and to digest everything I had told her. While I had been living with this secret for so long, my mother had only just found out. So even though I was beyond ready to be reunited and live happily ever after, my mother needed time to go inwards and reflect. This felt like a rejection to me. The silence in our apartment lasted for many months. It was thick, and there were many afternoons where I would dread going home because of this silence.

I expected to be shunned by everyone I ever cared about, and instead most of them huddled around me and held me tighter. I didn't experience any of the hardships that I was expecting and had read about. My story is one of many scenarios. We often read about the horrific scenarios that serve as horror-stories for those of us who struggle with this. I do believe that their story is important, and I also believe that it is important to bring forth stories like mine. No situation has only one outcome.

Today I am the person I dreamt to be when I was younger. I remember clearly looking at myself in the mirror and not recognizing the person staring back at me. My reflection was as confused and shocked as I was. When I was covered with a hijab and a long-sleeved dress that covered both my ankles I would often times look at myself and ask, "how are you?". I often thought about who I wanted to be. I had a dream version of my mirror-reflection. I wanted to have my big curly out for everyone to see. I wanted to be covered in tattoos and wear tight fitting t-shirts and tight jeans. I wanted to be open with my sexuality. I wanted to be honest with myself and the world. I wanted to look at myself in the mirror and

think of my reflection as who I truly was. I didn't want to be confused by who was looking back at me.

If I'm being honest, I don't know where I wound the strength to finally pull myself away from everything, I was afraid of and confess everything to my mother. I don't know because I don't think it was strength that led me to that conversation. It was exhaustion. I was exhausted with myself. I was exhausted by who I was pretending to be, the person I was in the mirror, the person everyone thought I was and the person I was becoming. I was exhausted of the lies, the upkeep of a persona I didn't even like and the building of a future I didn't see myself in. exhaustion is sometimes more powerful a tool than strength, and I believe that exhaustion led me to that conversation that afternoon.

