

My sister Celina

The hairdo



? 2000-2001 www.arttoday.com

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(Ramadhan 1424 – November 2001)

Sunni Waqf Book

<http://www.ummah.com/islam/taqwapalace/>



As usual, Celina was propped in front of the mirror, trying new ways of wearing her *hijab*. Since she was new to Islam, she had not yet mastered the art of pins and fabric folding.

I approached her from behind and smoothed a few folds made by the fabric around her ears. I said:

“See, this is how you are supposed to crest it. The area over your forefront should describe your jaws so that your head does not look too big and the veil is kept secured.”

She smiled, then looked desperately at my disheveled locks, teasing:

“I wish you would do something about this shrub of hair on your head!”

“Sister, each one her own gift. You are an artist as far as hairdos are concerned. I am a professional head dresser.”

I laughed while fixing her headgear so that her ponytail would not show therefore attracting attention.

“Now it is your turn to check my hair. Here is a comb.”

“That will be a pleasure, sis. O that I love the smell of your hair!”

She put her nose on the sleek curls and closed her eyes. The auburn firecrackers of my head were visible in her hazel eyes.

I said, amused:

“I have never seen anybody so much in love with the smell of henna.”

She opened her eyes quickly, a light flickering in them.

“That would be me.”

“You should try it sometime.”

She smiled with pleasure. Her headscarf had fallen over her shoulders gracefully. I could not stop thinking how very



beautiful she was with her small nose and her delicate skin. She looked so grown up while I still looked like an adolescent.

“Well,” she said, “too bad my hair is already red. That’s a pity you have to cover yours, sis, they look good.”

“Well, it is part of Islam to do our hair so it looks attractive and beautiful. But we still have to cover it in public.”

“Sis! I have personally always been amazed about this idea that the display of beauty must be private. So much for our vanity!”

She grimaced at me with her tiny nose.

“You are not going to believe me but now that you cover up outside, I notice things about you I never really paid attention to. I grow more appreciative of them.”

“Like what?”

“For instance, I cannot stop thinking what a lovely bride you are going to make.”

“Well! *Hussun* and I are only engaged, you know.’

“I bet I know that. You would not talk so much about him if you were already married.”

We smiled at each other.


“By the way, Sis, I wanted to talk to you about something that have been bothering me recently.”

“Go ahead. Shoot!”

“The other day, I met this lady who was the best friend of sister Jamila. She said that she was looking for somebody to teach her about Islam. I was surprised because I know she spent most of her time with Jamila, but she said that her friends were not very knowledgeable Muslims, that they were not able to answer her questions.”

“Did you ask her what she wanted to know? Maybe we can help.”

“I did.”



“So, what was it?”

“She asked me about personal hygiene, you know, what was advised in Islam concerning these matters. So, I began to explain that the Messenger of Allah (Peace and Blessing be upon him) never woke from sleeping at any time of day or night without cleaning his teeth with a *siwak* (a twig) before performing *wudoo* (the ritual ablutions) [Haadith reported in Abu Dawood, 1:46]”.

“Your choice was good, sis.”

“I also explained that eating onions, garlic or leeks was prohibited before entering a mosque because bad breath might disturb people from their prayers. I think in Islam we always have to think of others, don’t you think?” I nodded. She continued, “I also remembered that one day Prophet Muhammad (Peace and Blessing be upon him) peered into a vessel of water that was in his house and smoothed his beard

and his hair. Aisha, his wife, seeing him do that, asked him: ‘O Messenger of Allah, even you do this?’ He said, ‘Yes, when a man goes out to meet his brothers, let him prepare himself properly, for Allah is beautiful and loves beauty [Haadith Tafsir al-Qurtubi].’”

“Yes, that’s true. To neglect one’s appearance in the name of asceticism or humility is not part of Islam. The Noble Qur’an says: ‘Who has forbidden the beautiful [gifts] of Allah, which He has produced for His servants, and the things, cleans and pure, [which He has provided] for sustenance? [7:32]’ I did not know you were so knowledgeable on the subject. Congratulations to you, my sister.” And I bowed down slightly. She ignored me and said, grinning,

“I have been so obsessed about looking good, especially with *Hussun* around that I have checked everything on the subject.”



“Wow Celina! Sometimes I wonder if we are really twins.”

She laughed, holding me at arm length with an appreciative look. By now, she had finished combing my hair.

“You are right, ‘Allah loves to see the signs of His gifts on His servant [Haadith Tirmidhi].’”

“I certainly do not disapprove you taking care of your health. That’s good. However, remember that showing off is closer to sin.”

“Yep,” declared Celina a little vaguely. I looked at her suspiciously.

“I hope you are not planning on wearing ten different outfits for your marriage ceremony?”

“I do not deny I have thought of it, sis. But no, that’s really sick!”

“Well, I would not say that much. It has been done before.”

“No, no way,” she pouted. “Anyway, I do not have the means. Maybe if I had some funds...” Then she added, teasingly. “of course, marriage only happens once in a lifetime.”

“O yes? And what about those poor women folks who will be your guests and cannot afford such extravagances? Imagine the jealousy. Yes, showing off is always closer to sin, especially in a century where so many things are stirring our desires at best. But you were talking about this friend of sister Jamila. What were you saying about her?”

Celina explained, resuming her tale,

“Yea, her. Well, you will never imagine what happened next.”

“What?”

She spun me around twice to see my face and began working on my head again. As Celina was creating a complicated



coiffure, she was pulling locks from my hair, there, sliding her delicate fingers between them and twisting them slowly. It looked enchanting. She continued her story,

“So, I was all engrossed in my explanations. See, I felt so proud to be able to teach about Islam, I, who had just entered its fold! At least I was talking about something I knew a little about; I did not feel so ignorant.”

“So, what happened?”

“Well, we decided to meet again. I would bring her books about hygiene and we would have some kind of gathering with other sisters. But suddenly she looked quite reluctant. Soon after, she asked me if I was Arab and I answered no, but it did not matter where we were from as long as we could help each other. I talked about you. I said that I would seek your help if needed, that you knew a lot about religion; she did not have to feel concerned about that. ‘I appreciate your efforts,’ she said

at last, ‘but see, I would like somebody who can translate Arabic to me. It is not that I do not trust you.’

There are books that have been translated by the best scholars in the world, I explained, I have them with me if you want. ‘I do not think so,’ she said as softly as she could.

Believe me, it took me all my patience not to yell at her, but I thought better of it. I had done the best I could, I did not mind if she had prejudices.”

“What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she thought that I was not qualified.”

“I don’t think so. I have always thought about these new converts. I mean many Americans become Muslims but leave it after a few years.”

“Really? That’s weird.”



“Yes. First I thought maybe we were not kind to them, maybe they did not find somebody to sort of adopt them and help them on the way.”

“This is possible.”

“Then I thought about it more and I came to the conclusion that some of them really do not want to be helped. See, Americans are very proud; many do not accept help from anybody because they are afraid that they would appear soft. But how do they expect to understand Islam on their own, without guidance?”

“I feel bad for them.”

“Me too. Not only that, many think that if you are not Arab, especially if you reverted to Islam yourself, you are worthless to them. What a shame when you think that most scholars in this country are reverts to Islam. Furthermore, most Arabs who immigrate to this country really learned about Islam here. They

take their little knowledge of Islam all for granted while the people who revert to Islam are so eager to learn about it that they constantly try to learn more about it. How many Arab women who cover their face now used to go bare headed in their own country? You would be surprised. So, you see, sis, you should not feel concerned about her. She was not enough smart to see that you really would do anything you could to help. Maybe she also thinks most Muslims are Arabs.”

“She would be so wrong, sis! As sad as it sounds, I think you are right. People count on Arab people for support; they look up to them as models. But some of them are really not very knowledgeable, sis.”

“O yes, some are! They are the people who have studied Islam at school. Some of the women here, in our community, are so knowledgeable, they are teachers in their country, minor teachers of Islam, but still they are *uztazah*.”



“Masha Allah!”

“AlHamdullillah! Allah be praised.”

“So what can I do about my little adventure? It still haunts me, you know. I still feel bad about it.”

“It is only your pride that is hurt, Celina. Why don’t you give her a book about the subject she is concerned about. No matter what she says! She might even rethink the whole thing later on. Remember, no one who has an atom’s-weight of pride in his heart will enter Paradise. This is true for your looks as well as for your relationships with others.”

“Hum,” she reflected. “So, what if a man likes his clothes and shoes to look good? Is it counted as pride?”

I smiled in answer, “No, our Prophet (Peace and blessing be upon him) said, ‘Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride means denying the truth and looking down on other people [Hadith Muslim].’ Looking down on people might lead you to

say bad words to them. Beautiful speech is also part of Islam, actually it is part of your hygiene.”

“Ah? And what hygiene would that be?”

“The hygiene of the tongue.”

“Sure thing,” she finally said, inspired, “... sure thing.”

And we smiled at each other as she finished tucking at my hair.

“Now, she said, “the final touch.”

I looked at her inquisitively.

“Your head scarf!” she exclaimed in explanation.

And we smiled at each other with understanding.