



People often speak about the 'one special moment' that changed everything in their lives. For some, it's the moment when they were struck by a brainwave that led to a revolutionary invention which rocketed them to fame and fortune. For a professional sportsman, it's often the moment when they signed onto the team or scored the crucial goal. I am neither a sports star nor a genius inventor. I am merely an ordinary Muslimah, like most of you out there, and my life did not change in a 'single magical moment'. Instead, my entire life changed in a single Ramadhaan...

I remember the period with crystal clarity. I was 18 years old, the countdown for the dreaded final matric exams had commenced and Ramadhaan was around the corner. Although I put up a brave front, I would never admit it, but my world was in turmoil and I was, in general, miserable, confused, stressed out and even a little scared.

I was always considered intelligent and never had to work hard to produce good grades. As I progressed through the years in school, my above-average marks impressed both my teachers and family. While I was content to be the homely type and never entertained visions of varsity after school, they began to plot the course that my life would follow, taking it for granted that I would be complacent and would meekly 'do as I was told'. I remember Aunty Khairon declare, with her mehndi-dyed finger wagging under my nose, "You got brains, bachu (darling)! You a bright girl! Can't waste that potential frying puri patha in the kitchen!"

If Aunty Khairon wasn't pestering me, then her twin sister, Aunty Zaiboon, refused to get off my case. "What you'll do if your hubby divorces you, huh? You saw what happened to Nabeelah? Such a hari poiri (good girl) she was, and she had brains too, just like you! But she married young and now she's divorced! You want the same future?" Aunty Zaiboon was so emotional when speaking that her hands would wave about, causing her designer bangles to clash and almost drown out the sound of her voice. She wore so much of gold that she was a walking advert for a jewellery store. A popular theory was that the sunglasses she wore were to protect her eyes from the glare of the few golden kilos she attached to herself daily.

The only exception to the 'career craziness' was my mother. Quiet, humble, kind, always pleasant and smiling, never outspoken – these are some of the words that aptly describe my mother. She was the silent yet supportive pillar that I could always count on, and it was my mother alone who didn't pressurize me to pursue a career.

The pressure, as you can imagine, was immense, and it was only a matter of time before I buckled and gave in. Eventually, I ceased to resist and decided that it was simply easier to go with the flow. Now that I had a goal to achieve, I could no longer remain complacent with my grades, as decent as they were. I had to put in extra hours, with tuition and late night study groups, to ensure that I emerged ahead of the competition in a school of high achievers.

From that point on, although the world labeled me 'progressive', the reality was that I was heading downhill at an alarmingly rapid rate. When I looked into the mirror, I no longer saw the shy, modest girl who had taken after her burqa-clad hijaab-hidden mother. No! I was taking the school by storm. Wherever I went, I caused heads to turn – the boys' in admiration and the girls' in envy. I traded in weekly ta'leem for weekend parties, surmah before sleeping for sleepless nights in mascara, five-times salaah for five social media platforms, daily Quraan recitation for studying the latest fashion guides, and worst of all – my priceless Islamic Identity for the cheap role of a so-called 'liberated woman'.

I have to admit that I was not an entirely innocent brainwash-victim as I did not completely resist. I remember thinking to myself, under the onslaught of Auntie Zaiboon's campaign, "If they are so convinced that I will fail as a wife and end up a divorcee, then why are they so convinced that I will make a successful professional? If I can't be a good housewife to my husband, what makes them think that I can be a professional, attending to the demands of thousands?" All along, I knew that this was not who my Creator wanted me to be. But ... you know how it is, don't you? It's easier to go with the flow than go against the grain. Anyway, the idea of becoming an independent woman was now becoming an attractive one, and the voice of my feeble, crippled conscience was finally silenced.

With my new attitude and total makeover came a newfound popularity that made me the center of attention. In time to come, I not only got involved with boys but actually went through them faster than a flu-patient goes through tissues. I surprised even myself by partying like a rock star, and through it all, my naïve family failed to see beyond the 'innocent' angel who was apparently paving the path to her career success. Because I attended so many study groups, it was easy to slip off to a party or meet a boy under the pretense of studying. This life of sin,

however, began to take its toll.

The first time I did something REALLY bad, my conscience protested and complained, but the thrill of the sin soon suppressed that irritating voice in the back of my mind. After a while though, even the excitement of sin began to fade, leaving me hollow and miserable. No matter what I did, I felt ... empty, depleted and lost. I then became a 'sin junky'.

You see, a sin junky is exactly like a drug junky. When a person takes a drug for the first time, he experiences a 'high', an absolutely 'sublime' sensation. However, the next time he pops a pill, snorts a line or shoots up, it just doesn't match the first time. Eventually, he ups the dose or upgrades the drug, chasing his first high, not realizing that he is destroying his life, bit by bit.

A sin junky is exactly the same. You feel so miserable and empty, that you commit more sin, and worse sin, to try and experience the thrill again. Take it from me, I'd know – sin is sneaky and deceptive. It makes you feel amazing and fantastic – but only for the moment. Once the fun is over, the darkness re-envelopes and suffocates you until it forces you back for another fix.

I was by no means a fool. I was intelligent enough to know that I needed help. But help would only benefit me if I was willing to receive it.

One night, shortly before Ramadhaan, my eyes opened at 3am. Feeling thirsty, I crept out of my room and headed to the kitchen. As I passed the salaah room, I stopped dead in my tracks, hearing the sound of weeping. What was going on? Was someone hurt? My eyes strained through the darkness until I made out the form of my mother prostrate on her musalla in a remote corner of the room. I then heard her supplicate, "O my Allah! Please! I beg You! It's not too late! Inspire her to change her life! The pious daughter I once had is dead! You revive her, O Allah! I can't complain or cry to anyone but You! I know the damage she is doing to herself and I need her to wake up and change! Help her to come back to You, O Allah!"

I was shaken to my very core. This short du'aa, tinged with my mother's tears, had struck a chord within me, forcing me to confront what I had become. My thirst forgotten, I silently snuck up the stairs and slipped into bed but could not sleep. My mother's du'aa continued to ring in my mind, too loud to ignore. Finally, after much tossing and turning, I drifted off into a troubled

sleep.

The next day, I arrived home after class and entered amidst the madness of the 'savory crusade'. For the past week, Aunts Zaiboon and Khairoon had come, every day, to prepare their Ramadhaan savories. The pressure of Ramadhaan's imminent arrival stoked their fiery tempers, and their raised voices drove my father to seek the sanctuary of the golf course. I wasn't in the mood to face my wehlan (rolling-pin)-wielding aunties either, so I took advantage of the ready-made distraction (they were debating the pros and cons of upright vs chest freezers) and silently escaped to my room.

I made wudhu and performed Zuhr Salaah, amazed at the long-lost peace I enjoyed in these few, simple actions. As I made the final salaam and stood, I spotted my mother in my doorway, carrying a plate of freshly baked pies. As our eyes met, my gaze dropped to the floor in guilt as I remembered the du'aa she'd made for me. My mother entered with a smile, placed the plate on my bed and gestured for me to join her. As I sat, I raised my gaze to her face and saw only love and compassion, giving me the courage to do what I should've done a long, long time ago.

"Mum..." I began, hesitantly. "Jee?" she replied. "I ... I ..." This single pronoun was all that I could choke out as my emotions overcame me and I began to sob, tears streaming down my cheeks. My mother immediately shifted closer and hugged me, patting my back and making those senseless yet comforting shushing sounds that are hardwired into every mother and child's brain. I continued sobbing into her shoulder as I struggled to get my feelings under control. Finally, I blew my nose, wiped my face, sat up and squared my shoulders. I was ready.

I confided in my mother and managed to describe the serious mess that I was in without being specific on the details. After hearing me out, she said, "Bachu (darling), we all mess up in life. But admitting it and making an effort to clean the mess takes courage. I'm proud of you for taking this step." Not wasting a moment, she immediately phoned her uncle, a senior 'aalim who was accepted and respected by not only the community but also other 'Ulama. I was on the verge of seeking guidance through the limitless supply of Youtube clips when my mother shook her head at me in disapproval. "If you are recovering from a major heart attack, will you consult a cardiologist or Youtube? Our souls are even more important than our hearts as they take us beyond this world to the next. We can't entrust our Deen to random Youtube scholars, as entertaining and popular as they may be. We have to go to the specialist."

Moulana was very helpful and gave us practical and simple advice. As the upcoming

Ramadhaan coincided with the school holidays, he stressed the importance of my following a strict program in this month to get my life back on track. And so, without further ado, I launched myself headlong into the Ramadhaan that healed, cleansed and saved me.

To undo the damage that I had wreaked on myself over the past year and a half, I needed to completely cut off from everything that could tempt me to evil. I switched off my phone and disconnected the Wi-Fi. No Whatsapp, no Facebook, no Instagram, no e-mail, no nothing. "If it's urgent, they can always contact me on the house phone," I reasoned. I chalked out a program to recite five paras of the Quraan Majeed daily and asked my mother to 'be on my case' in case I became lazy. We made ta'leem for 30min daily, as a family, and would all sit around the dastarkhaan at the time of iftaar, engaged in our individual du'aas.

As far as possible, I avoided leaving home, and would sit with my mother and listen, over the receiver, to the programs delivered by her uncle in the masjid. With every day that passed, I found myself feeling more and more at peace as I perceived the darkness being dispelled from my soul. I found an indescribable sweetness in reciting the Quraan Majeed and wondered, in amazement, as to how a person could ever turn to drugs in the presence of the Quraan Majeed.

Most of all, I engaged in abundant, excessive du'aa. I would sit in isolation and pour my heart out to Allah Ta'ala, admitting my wrongs and sins. I would speak to Him and say, "O Allah! You gave me so much! We have no shortage of money, beauty or intelligence, yet I used Your very bounties to trample Your commands and to anger and displease You! O Allah! Only You are so merciful that despite my ingratitude, You still inspired me to repent and are still willing to forgive me. O Allah! I beg You to forgive me, and I beg You to save me from falling into sin again!" When I would wipe my hands over my face at the conclusion of my du'aa, whether it was at the time of Tahajjud or after salaah, I would perceive an exquisite sensation and would feel confident that Allah Ta'ala had accepted my du'aa.

By the end of Ramadhaan, I was a different person. I was a girl who after being on the brink of destruction, had gained salvation, and was thus determined to never stray from the path of righteousness again. I had restored my relationship with Allah Ta'ala and with Him on my side, I feared none – not even Aunts Khairon and Zaiboon. I made my decision, a decision which I have never for a second regretted – I would not pursue a career.

My life changed in a single Ramadhaan and yours can too. It takes determination and the support of those around you, but it can be done. I know that every tear I shed in taubah

(repentance) helped to extinguish the fire of punishment that I had ignited and fuelled with my life of sin. Ramadhaan afforded me the opportunity to emerge from the darkness to the light. Ramadhaan is not merely a month of haleem and naan, it is the gateway to discovering the You that Allah Ta'ala wants you to be.

May Allah Ta'ala allow you to benefit from Ramadhaan as I did, aameen.