

## case study one

It was Grade 9. I had been in Canada three weeks. I was late for my first class because I couldn't figure out the schedule they had given me. And the building was so big that I had trouble finding the room. There were so many students, and none of them looked like me. I heard a bell ring and I didn't know what it was for. I was glad when the hallways started to empty, though, because everyone seemed to be staring at me. At first I tried smiling, but they were looking at me like I had a disease or something. I just started looking down at the ground in front of me. Now it has become a habit. When I found the class, everyone

was seated. All the students turned to stare at me when I came in. I walked toward an empty desk and a boy put his book bag on the chair to stop me from sitting there. I heard someone else say "What's that on her head? Is her turban falling off?" Everyone laughed. I found a seat at the back of the room, away from everyone else. I hate sitting at the back of the room.

Every class that day was just a variation of the same scene. By the end of the day I had figured out my schedule, and got to class ahead of time. It was almost worse, though, because as the rest of the students came in I was left sitting by myself at the front of the room. No one would sit near me. The teacher asked someone to move over, but it was such an ordeal that it just made things worse. I cried all the way home. I could not understand how people could be so cruel. They didn't even know me. I hadn't done anything to them. All I did was look different. I wear a hijab, so what? My skin is brown, so what?

Things didn't get much better over the year, but I was learning how to cope with it. I never spoke to anyone and I kept to myself. I was hoping that a new school year would be a new start. And then September 11 happened. Things got worse, way worse.

The day it happened, my brother walked home with me. There was one other brown-skinned person in our school and he lived in our apartment building. He was walking with us. A car slowed down beside us. It was filled with kids from our school. They were yelling, "Kill the terrorists!" and "Go home!" and calling us murderers. My brother went up to the car to

yell back and they spit on him. They started calling my brother "Osama." He was in fights every other day. They would gang up on him outside the school. Some students got suspended, but it would always just happen again. My brother quit school. He couldn't stand it. He says he hates Canadians.

Soon after, the school tried to help promote other cultures by having a multicultural day. We didn't have the money to spend on extra food, but my mom made

### Zeinah Abidali writes on her experiences in a Canadian high school

a traditional dish for me to bring in. As we were lining up at the table, one of the students yelled "Which one of these belongs to Zeinah — I don't want any Anthrax in my lunch." No one would touch it. I had to throw it out because I didn't want my Mom to see that they hadn't eaten it. I didn't want her to see how much they hated me.

Right now I am thinking about not wearing the hijab anymore. I don't know how to talk to my family about it, though. I am also thinking of transferring schools. I would like to move somewhere where there are more people like me so that I don't feel so alone. I just want to have friends and go to my classes. I see other kids together laughing and having fun, and I don't understand why I can't have a life like that. I am Canadian too. I am not so different. I am not the enemy. ✦

