

A Not-So-Bad Bully

"I really don't want to go to school today." Staying home wasn't the ideal way to start the first day of high school, but Nargus hadn't slept at all last night, and this morning everything seemed to be going horrifically wrong. She had to rush in the shower because her brother Navid was impatiently banging on the door. She spilled grape juice on her school uniform, and now she couldn't get her hijab, the head scarf she wore whenever she left the house, to look right. Plus, what she really wanted was to be in Boston still, where her friends were and where she had grown up. But her father had gotten a professorship at the university in Saratoga Springs, so the family had to relocate to upstate New York. Although they had only moved into their new condominium two weeks before, Nargus was already begging her father to move back to Boston.

"America is supposed to be the melting pot of the world because of the racial, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity of the country," she'd attempted to persuade him in her most academic and elegant tone. "There were countless different cultures and religions in our old neighborhood, but in Saratoga Springs everyone is the same!"

"Well, my darling, there is diversity in Saratoga Springs, but it's different, so you just have to look harder to find it. Plus, the schools are superior, and I want to provide you with the best opportunity possible. Now, go get your brother before both of you are late on the first day of school."

As Nargus climbed into her father's car, she was reminded about the other thing she didn't like about her new neighborhood--everything was so spread out. In their old neighborhood, she and her brother could walk to school, stroll to the convenience store, and ride the bus to the shopping mall on the weekends. But in the suburbs, everyone drove cars. If you walked anywhere, people thought you were homeless, and if you rode the bus people thought you were crazy.

Her father pulled in behind the procession of cars dropping children off at the school entrance. "Okay, best of luck," he said, gazing back at Nargus and her brother through the rear-view mirror.

Nargus rolled her eyes as she closed the door behind her. She and Navid walked towards the main entrance of the school; she could sense the eyes of the other kids staring at her. She walked past a group of girls; one murmured something to the other, who turned to look. "People are so quick to stereotype. It's like they've never seen someone with a head scarf before," her brother muttered.

"They're probably thinking, 'Oh my gosh, terrorists,'" Nargus joked.

As they entered the main entrance, they passed three boys sitting outside along the railing. One called out, "Hey, I saw you two on TV. Everyone look! It's Saddam Hussein and his wife!" In disbelief, Nargus and her brother turned in the direction of the boys, who were exploding with laughter.

For a moment, a feeling of rage overcame both Nargus and her brother. The three boys continued to laugh. "Why on Earth would someone say such a thing?" Nargus thought to herself. After all, her family wasn't even from Iraq. Both of her parents had been born in east Africa and had immigrated to the U.S. over 15 years before, after her mother had become pregnant with Navid. Nargus had been born and raised in Boston; she had lived in the U.S. her entire life.

Navid returned the boy's insult, "Hey, idiots. Not all Muslims are from Iraq."

"Well, you all look the same to me," replied another one of the boys, causing the other two to break into laughter again. "Just go back to your own country!"

"This is my country," Nargus protested. "I was born here!"

Nargus found herself seething inside. What really frustrated her was that the group of boys had insulted them without provocation. Was it because she wore a hijab around her head? Nargus knew that there were probably more similarities than differences between her and the boys. After all, she enjoyed hanging out with her friends, playing video games, and listening to music. Of course, there were some things that people on TV seemed to do, such as drink alcohol, that she and others from her religion could not, as they are forbidden by the Koran - but other than that, Nargus considered herself to be an average American.

She shook her head in disgust. "These boys see people dressed like me on TV being called terrorists, and they think we are all the same." She wanted to challenge their stereotypes; she wanted to be accepted for being different, not to be hated for it.

Then fearful thoughts started to come to mind. What if she and Navid encountered this kind of treatment everyday? What if the boys got into a brawl? What if the school administration suspended her for wearing her hijab, like they did to that Muslim 6th grader in Oklahoma? What if she never made any friends in this school? What if she spent the next four years of high school without any friends but her brother?

"C'mon, Nargus. Let's go," said Navid, pulling on her arm. They approached room 23A, which was Nargus' first period class. "Forget those guys," he said. "They're stupid."

"Yeah. Hey, I'll look for you at lunch," she turned to enter her classroom. According to her schedule, first period was "Honors U.S. History" and from the decorations in the room it was clear she was in the right place: a large map of the U.S. hung on the back wall, posters of each U.S. president bordered the chalkboard, and posters of past student

projects hung along the back wall. Two students sitting in the back row spoke quietly to each other, their notebooks open and neatly organized. They smiled at her, so she returned the gesture and sat down in the front row.

The teacher approached. "Hello. I'm Mr. Barker." The first thing Nargus noticed was that his navy blue slacks were already heavily stained with chalk even though school hadn't started yet. It was as if he had been teaching all morning and had used his pants for a rag. Above his beltline rested his enormous belly, which appeared to be on the verge of bursting through the buttons of his shirt. His head looked ridiculously small compared to his large frame. But it was difficult to get a good look at her teacher's face as a thick handlebar mustache and thick wide-rimmed glasses mostly obscured it. Mr. Barker looked like an overstuffed Muppet of Theodore Roosevelt, whose poster hung along the wall.

He stopped by her desk and met her eyes. "I saw what went on out there," he said, "and if you want me to step in, I'd be happy to do so."

Nargus thought for a moment about the lectures she'd heard over the dinner table about the importance of sticking up for oneself. She thought about how many hurtful comments her teacher had probably heard over his lifetime based on nothing more substantial than outward appearance. Her decision was easy.

She smiled at her teacher but shook her head. "I'm Nargus, and it's a pleasure to meet you," she said. "I appreciate your offer, but I can handle it." She was grateful when Mr. Barker merely nodded as a dozen more students trickled in. A few stragglers rushed in as the bell rang.

The last student in the door looked vaguely familiar. Nargus groaned to herself as he sat in the chair against the wall, facing her. "Of all the people who could sit next to me, what's the chance that it would be one of those bullies?" she thought to herself. She couldn't think of a more unfortunate situation than to have to sit next to a boy who had said such hateful things to her just moments before. She wondered if he chose to sit next to her out of revenge or spite. Before she could make up her mind, her teacher's voice broke the silence.

"Okay class, I'm Mr. Barker. Before I begin, I'd like to introduce the concept of community. Does everyone know the definition of community?" At the students' nods of assent, he continued. "Excellent. I'd like you to greet the person next to you and introduce yourself. Get to know each other, because this will be our little community for the rest of the semester."

"This is absurd. I'm expected to establish a community with that racist?" Nargus couldn't believe her bad luck. She glanced at the boy, who looked just as dumbfounded as she felt. Nargus thought of turning her back on the boy, but the image of her father and

Mr. Barker floated in front of her eyes. She inhaled a deep breath and with as much emotion as she could muster at that moment, she extended her arm to shake hands. "Hi. I'm Nargus."

"I'm Doug," the boy muttered, his voice barely over a whisper. He gave her a fairly weak handshake and looked like he wanted his desk to swallow him whole.

Seeing her opportunity, Nargus decided to push ahead. "You know," she said, tapping the boy's desk with her finger to emphasize each point, "the things you were saying outside were absurdly ignorant. They were rude, spiteful, and completely uncalled for."

She saw the boy's head snap up in amazement, but she had no intention of stopping. "Comments such as those merely demonstrate your own small mindedness and have no place in a school." When she finished, she took a deep breath and pulled her chair back around so she was facing the front of the room. She could see her teacher's eyebrows raised in an expression of incredulous admiration and could hear a few giggles from the students directly behind her.

Doug's jaw dropped in astonishment. His face flushed red as Nargus's words sank in. "Wow," he thought. "Not only is she right, but I don't think I've ever seen a prettier face, close up! I sure have a lot of making up to do before the winter formal dance!"

1. Who sat down next to Nargus in her first class?

- A. The new teacher she had just met.
- B. Two smiling girls who looked nice.
- C. A boy who had teased her outside.

2. What frustrated Nargus about being insulted?

- A. The insult was unprovoked, so she couldn't prevent it.
- B. It was her first day there, and she wasn't given a chance.
- C. She felt she and the boys probably had a lot in common.

3. What in the story shows that Nargus was going to be fine in her new home?

- A. Her dad was a college professor there.
- B. She was in Honors History at school.
- C. She knew how to speak up for herself.

- 4. Why did Nargus feel it was especially unfair that the boys insulted her?**
- A. She was born in the United States.
 - B. She didn't like being cast as an outsider.
 - C. She didn't want to be stereotyped.
- 5. What made Nargus and Navid different from the other students?**
- A. They were new to the high school there.
 - B. They followed the teachings of the Koran.
 - C. They didn't listen to really loud music.
- 6. Why did Nargus refuse Mr. Barker's offer to speak to the boys who insulted her?**
- A. She thought it was important to stick up for herself.
 - B. She was embarrassed to draw more attention to herself.
 - C. She didn't think it was important enough to bother a teacher.
- 7. What first caused Doug to pay attention to what Nargus said to him?**
- A. He knew that the teacher was watching them.
 - B. He decided that she was really quite pretty.
 - C. He realized that what she was saying was true.
- 8. What did Nargus feel was lacking in Saratoga Springs?**
- A. A lot of diversity.
 - B. Good schools.
 - C. Small neighborhoods.
- 9. What did Nargus do before telling Doug how she felt about the morning's incident?**
- A. She shook his hand despite how she felt about him.
 - B. She recognized an opportunity and decided to seize it.
 - C. She took a deep breath and reflected on what to say.

10. What will Doug probably do over the course of the semester?

- A. Try to figure out how to get Nargus to like him.
- B. Avoid sitting next to Nargus so he won't offend her again.
- C. Watch his behavior so he can go to the winter formal.

11. Why did Nargus' family move to Saratoga Springs?

- A. To be in a better school system.
- B. Because her dad got a new job.
- C. For better opportunities in life.

12. What is probably the reason Doug become quiet when Nargus shook his hand?

- A. He was ashamed and shocked that he had to sit next to a Muslim.
- B. Her mature handshake showed how immature his actions had been.
- C. He didn't want to give her the satisfaction of a full response.

13. What was the main idea of this story?

- A. There are difficulties in moving to a new place and school.
- B. People who come from different backgrounds don't get along.
- C. People may not always fit your assumptions about them.

14. What did the teasing boys call Nargus?

- A. An evil foreigner.
- B. A dangerous terrorist.
- C. Saddam Hussein's wife.

15. When did Nargus and Navid begin to feel disliked at the high school?

- A. When they were insulted by a group of boys.
- B. When they first walked up to the school.
- C. When their father first drove up to the school.

16. What kind of person was Nargus?

- A. She was determined and able to take care of herself.
- B. She expected others to do the right thing always.
- C. She really didn't care what others thought about her.

17. Why did the boys tease Navid and Nargus?

- A. Because they knew they were Muslim and new to the school.
- B. Because they thought they were from Iraq and were scared.
- C. Because they looked different from the other students.

18. What was the main problem in this story?

- A. Nargus and Navid were different from others at school.
- B. Nargus had difficulty in adjusting to a new school setting.
- C. Nargus needed students to see beyond the stereotypes.

19. Why was Nargus having such a hard time getting ready for school?

- A. Her brother was making her nervous by rushing her.
- B. She didn't really want to attend a new school.
- C. Her uniform and hijab kept getting messed up.

20. Of all of Nargus' fears, which probably would be the biggest issue for her?

- A. She wouldn't make any friends.
- B. She would be getting into fights.
- C. She would get suspended.