

## BECOMING RABIAH

Sydney, 1980

*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar*  
*Asb-badu alla ilaha illallah*  
*Asb-badu anna Muhammadar rasulullah*  
*Hayya alas-salat*

**T**he pre-dawn wail of the *muezzin* wafted across the terracotta rooftops of suburban Lakemba, calling Muslims to pray at the Arabian-themed mosque in Wangee Road. The mellifluous chant that had merely piqued her curiosity the first time in Jakarta now filled Rabiah with a joyous relief and sense of belonging.

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most beneficent,  
 All praise and thanks be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds ...  
 You alone we worship  
 You alone we ask for help  
 Guide us to the straight way  
 The way of those on whom you have bestowed your Grace,  
 Not the way of those who have earned your Anger nor of those who  
 went astray.

Veiled in white and surrounded by hundreds of fellow Muslims, prostrated and praying in unison, their feet lightly touching to signify their communion, Rabiah knew for certain that she had found the true faith—and her true self.

‘The transformation was profound. It was so drastic. One day I was somebody and the next day I was somebody else. The way I dressed, the way I spoke, the way I looked.’ And unlike her childhood epiphany under the stained glass of the Catholic church in Mudgee, this time there was not a shadow of doubt. ‘The person I was when I was Robyn wasn’t real. I never felt comfortable and I always felt like I was looking for something, not something I’d lost but something I wanted to see and experience. When I found Islam it was so clear that that’s what I had been lacking all my life.’

Praying beside her was one of her new Muslim friends, an American convert named Rahmah McCormack, who was a member of the cohort formed around Silma and Siddiq Buckley. Rahmah’s journey had much in common with Rabiah’s own. She was born Suzanne into a Catholic family in New Jersey, but abandoned the church at the age of thirteen; much like Rabiah, she found there were too many esoteric mysteries that made no sense. ‘It was not intellectually satisfying for me. I was asked to accept a lot in faith without any intellectual backup and it was very frustrating’, she explained later. She studied education at university, obtained a masters degree in teaching, married an atheist, bought a home and explored eastern religions. ‘I had everything I was supposed to want. But I was still very confused. People of my mother’s generation had stability, but in my generation we were left on our own to decide. We really did not know what to do. I began to reject my lifestyle. My marriage was falling apart.’

It was then she met Robert McCormack, an Australian travelling in the United States who had become a Muslim and taken the name Abdul Wasi. She converted, changed her name to Rahmah, and they married and moved to Australia in 1979. They settled in Sydney’s Lakemba—whose large Lebanese Muslim population had earned it the nickname ‘Lebkemba’—where the shops stocked *halal* food and there was a huge mosque, built in

the mid 1970s with a gift of \$300 000 from the King of Saudi Arabia, supplemented by donations from Libya, Kuwait and other benefactors. Lakemba was the natural home for an ever-widening circle of about 200 Australian Muslim converts.

It was by this same community that Rabiiah was embraced when she arrived at Lakemba a year after Rahmah, with five-year-old Devi and Mohammed, now aged three. The McCormacks invited Rabiiah and the children into their home, a tidy brick house in nearby Dulwich Hill. The children slept in bunk beds while the adults slept on mattresses on the floor, as the Prophet Mohammed had done, and instead of chairs in the lounge room there were velvet cushions and mats draped in Indian prints.

With all the mettle of her namesake, Rabiiah now set about mastering Islam. She was determined to really *become* Rabiiah, not just go by the name. ‘I call this my sponge stage. When I moved here I kept my promise to Allah to try to the best of my ability to learn this *deen* of Islam. And it was the most incredible time for me. For the next six months I hardly slept. It was six months of striving to understand Islam. All I did was clean, cook, look after my kids and read. I just read anything and everything I could get my hands on.’

Having overcome her childhood dyslexia to become a voracious reader, she now consumed every Islamic text she could find in English. In the space of a few days, she read a four-volume compilation of the *hadith*, the collected sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed, which make up the body of knowledge known as the *Sunnah*, the customary ways of the Prophet, used by Muslims as a guide to how they should live. With her near photographic memory, she says: ‘I remembered every word I read. If there was something I didn’t understand or it didn’t make sense, I would go back to the original text. I’m a very thorough person, I keep going till I get the correct interpretation.’ Her fixation with finding the ‘correct’ interpretation was reminiscent of the obsession with realism evident in her childhood games, playing horses with her schoolmates in Mudgee or playing nuns with Laurette to convert their hapless visiting

auntie to Catholicism. ‘That’s always been part of who I am and what I am, that if I do something I want to do it right. I mean I made those kids eat grass, and that poor deranged auntie was kneeling at the foot of that bed for hours.’

The year 1980 was an exhilarating time to be a Muslim. The Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini had recently toppled the corrupt American-backed Shah of Iran and established an Islamic state which Muslims the world over were inspired to emulate. The Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan, prompting the nation’s mullahs to declare a jihad (holy war) against the infidel aggressors. Muslims around the globe were rallying to support the *mujahidin* (holy warriors) in their fight against the Russians, enthusiastically backed and bankrolled by the United States and its allies.

On Tuesday nights, Rabiah and her new friends would congregate at Silma and Siddiq’s bookshop, which also served as a drop-in centre and welfare office where English-speaking Muslims gathered to discuss and seek guidance on the tenets of their faith. The converts were a bunch of enthusiastic idealists who were captivated by Islam’s strong sense of community, egalitarianism and social justice. They attended lectures on Islam at the universities and Sunday talks in the Domain by celebrated converts such as the firebrand former Communist trade union leader Mohammed John Webster.

Rabiah was drawn to Jemaah Tabligh, a missionary sect established in India in the early 1900s to promote the spiritual revival of Islam through strict observance of the *Sunnah* (customs) of the Prophet. Jemaah Tabligh’s Lakemba chapter was the most organised and active Muslim group in Australia at the time, and its adherents the most conspicuously devout. The men wore long Arab-style robes, with their pants above their ankles and their beards the length of a man’s fist, in the style of the Prophet. They took their sleeping bags to Friday *jummah* (communal prayers) so they could spend the entire weekend at the mosque. Their movement eschewed politics and the use of violence, believing that Muslims could only wage jihad once they had perfected their practice of Islam. Their stark literalism and blatant religiosity appealed to Rabiah. ‘It was something I admired

because of their outward display of Islam. It's a strong statement: "I am a Muslim". I saw them as the epitome of good Muslims.'

For Rabiiah, a potent part of the allure of Islam was that nothing was left to chance; every aspect of a Muslim's life was prescribed in the Quran and *Sunnah*. 'Once you become a Muslim, everything—from how long your fingernails are to how you go to the toilet; how you live your life twenty-four hours a day to how you rule a country—is governed by Islam.' After a life marked by domestic tumult, it spoke powerfully to her longing for discipline, order and clarity.

'She was very motivated to have a clear grasp of Islam', Siddiq Buckley recalls. 'Her attitude seemed to be: "OK, I can hang onto this—it's very clear, it's transparent, I can have no doubts about this". She wanted everything to be clear. I think she was always looking—even in those days—for the "right" kind of Islam.'

Having found her own salvation, Rabiiah was eager to spread the word. In November 1980, she and Rahmah McCormack were interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, for a story about Muslim converts in Australia. (The *Herald* sent its 'ethnic affairs reporter', reflecting the prevailing view that a story about Muslims constituted 'ethnic affairs', even though the article was about mostly Australian-born devotees.) The story appeared under the headline 'Two women converts explain Islam's "simplistic" appeal'.

'The two women are young and attractive', the reporter wrote. 'Between them, they have tried the Roman Catholic, Anglican, Baptist and Presbyterian faiths and now, they say, they are committed Moslems [*sic*] ... They are no longer confused, aimless or unhappy. The Koran tells them what to do and they do it, happily, in the knowledge of Islam.'

'I was looking for the truth. I found the truth through Islam', Rabiiah told the newspaper. 'Moslems [*sic*] say there is a way to live your life and make it easier to live with one another, and this is the way', her friend Rahmah explained. 'It is a simplistic direction. You are not confused, you are directed.'

Rabiiah was pictured wearing a yellow Indian-style kaftan with a flowing headscarf held in place by a black band around her hair, 'like a Muslim

hippy', she later observed. She wore her trademark grin as she and Rahmah were photographed strolling along a street in Dulwich Hill. 'I looked like a stupid Cheshire cat and she looked like the Virgin Mary.'

The two neophytes were eager to emphasise that Islam was not a culture but a faith, that they were Australian *and* Muslim. They insisted that contrary to popular perception Islam was not oppressive, and the primitive customs followed in some Muslim countries were a reflection of their cultures, not of the true Islamic faith. As Rabiah explained it: 'Islam is not a mantle of another culture. As converts we do not have cultural ties. People look at the culture of Afghanistan or Iraq or Iran and blame Islam. (But) we look to pure Islam. Practices in Arab countries such as female circumcision or wearing veils are local practices done in ignorance of Islam.'

Rabiah's own experience as a Muslim and her study of the scripture had transformed her previously low opinion of Islam's treatment of women. Like many female Muslims, she embraced those parts of the Quran and *Sunnah* that extol the dignity, honour and rights of women. The *hadith* record the Prophet Mohammed telling his followers: 'You will be held to account for how you treated the women'. When asked by one man, 'To whom do I owe my loyalty?' the Prophet replied 'your mother'. 'And then?' the man asked him. 'Your mother', the Prophet replied again. 'And then?' 'Your mother.'

Rabiah's role models were the iconic heroines of Islamic lore such as Mohammed's first wife, Khadija, a respected businesswoman fifteen years his senior, who remained his sole partner until she died; and his third wife, Aisha, who accompanied Muslim forces into battle after the Prophet's death. It was Aisha who inspired Mohammed to enjoin his followers: 'Take half of your religion from this woman', an order that is widely read as acknowledging women's equality in religious matters. This equality is alluded to in the Quran, which addresses itself to both 'men who believe and women who believe, men who obey and women who obey'.

For the women of seventh-century Arabia, the revelations set down in the Quran were an enormous step forward. Previously, women had had the status of mere chattels who could be taken as war booty, and newborn girls were often left to perish in the desert. Wives were routinely beaten

and there was no limit on how many spouses a man could take. The Quran ordered an end to female infanticide and established that a man could take a maximum of four wives, but only if he treated them equally, stressing: 'If you shall not be able to deal justly, (take) just one'. The Prophet discouraged domestic violence, chastising his followers: 'Some of your wives came to me complaining that their husbands have been beating them. I swear by Allah those are not the best among you.' The Quran instructed that a disobedient woman should first be admonished, then banished from her husband's bed; if she continued to disobey him she could be beaten as a last resort, but never on the face. When a follower asked him what kind of beating was allowed, the Prophet replied that he could hit his wife only with a *sewak*, or tooth stick. This was a twig cut from a desert Arak tree, which was soaked in water and chewed until the fibres separated, creating a natural toothbrush that was (and still is) widely used by Muslims. While to a modern reader this may seem brutal, in the context of its time the Quran was a force for women's liberation rather than oppression; indeed in some respects it afforded them rights that were well ahead of those enjoyed by European women at the time. It was this that Rabiah and her fellow converts grasped.

'I had been reading a lot of *hadith* and my reaction was—look at all these rights that Islam has given women', says Rabiah. 'Don't forget I had just been through Germaine Greer and the "burn your bra" period. A lot of things that women were fighting for, Muslim women had had for 1400 years: the fact that a Muslim woman doesn't become "Mrs" anything; you are not the property of your husband; your husband has no right to your money; a man doesn't have the right to beat his wife black and blue; he is responsible for her upkeep.' She had read in the *hadith* that a man was supposed to provide his wife with a slave if he could afford one, that women were not obliged to do menial chores, and that the Prophet used to sew his own clothing. 'I thought all these things were wonderful', she says.

The fact that the Quran allotted women half the inheritance rights of men (again, a progressive step in seventh-century Arabia) and gave their legal testimony only half the value of that of men could be simply explained, according to Rabiah. Men were obligated to financially support their wives

and sisters, so they needed a greater share of wealth. And women were known to be more emotional than men, hence their testimony was deemed less reliable. The same explanation applied to the divorce rules, which allow a man to end his marriage by simply saying ‘I divorce thee’ three times, whereas a women must go to a judge to seek a formal annulment.

Herself hot-tempered and impulsive by nature, Rabiah felt this made perfect sense. ‘I’m not going to be apologetic about it—Islam teaches us that women are more emotional than men. The reason it (the power in divorce) is given to men is because of the nature of the female. When she gets very upset she gets more emotional, and is likely to say “Well, divorce me then!” It’s a safety net against emotional decisions.’

For all her rebelliousness in childhood and her teens, Rabiah remained an old-fashioned girl at heart. She held motherhood and family life as her most cherished values and had no time at all for political correctness. Despite her flirtation with the ‘burn your bra’ movement, to Rabiah the ‘equality of the sexes’ was nothing more than a slogan. ‘Men and women aren’t “equal”. It’s like saying a cup of coffee and a cup of tea are “equal”—yes they’re both hot, they’re both in a cup. But the mere term “equal” connotes “the same”. Men and women are so different, in the shape of their body and the functions of their brain. Is one better than the other? No. Which one is more capable? It depends what you’re talking about. Which one is kinder? A woman. Which one is stronger? Usually a man.’

To her it was self-evident that their distinctive qualities should be recognised in separate roles. As she saw it, Islam offered a different kind of ‘liberation’. ‘It’s liberating in that it allows you to be a woman and it liberates you from unreal expectations and untrue stereotyping. It liberates you from the wrong concepts about being a woman. And Islam liberates women *and* men from the servitude of any human being.’

When Rabiah’s old buddies on the surf scene saw her spouting her views in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, they were gobsmacked. The day she had packed up and moved to Lakemba, she had left without saying goodbye, severing all contact with previously close friends, some of whom had been oblivious of her conversion.

‘I picked up the newspaper one day and there’s Robyn in her Muslim regalia as “the spokesperson for the Muslim community”’, remembers Deborah Jensen, her old schoolmate from Manly Girls High. ‘Two weeks prior she’d been working as a barmaid at the Steyne Hotel in Manly. She had an argument with a customer and he threw a beer in her face so she quit her job and went back to being a Muslim again.’

Deborah was furious and rang the journalist at the *Herald* to pour scorn on the story. Next she rang her former friend to let her have it. ‘I was angry with her because she was being a hypocrite. I spoke to her on the phone afterwards, and I said, “Robyn, you know me very well and you know I don’t like hypocrites. Robyn, you’re a hypocrite.”’ It was the last time they ever spoke. Twenty-eight years later, Deborah, who volunteers that she has little time for organised religion, remains cynical about her friend’s metamorphosis. ‘I didn’t see it as a betrayal, I just saw it as bullshit. There wasn’t a religious bone in her body. She just went on a mission. That’s Robyn. Being a Muslim—I think it drew attention to her, it made her feel valued, important. It was an unusual thing for an Australian woman to be a Muslim, and she liked that. It made her feel more important and better about herself. Robyn had a hard life. She wanted to be noticed—Robyn wanted to be noticed.’

Normally thick-skinned, Rabiah was mortified at her friend’s reaction. ‘I was really embarrassed. It made me sound like I was on some sort of scam, pretending to be something I wasn’t. According to Deborah and the people who’d known me in Manly, I was an Aussie chick who did everything everyone else did, and now I was pretending to be a Muslim. In fact it was the other way around. I was a Muslim and I was pretending to be that Aussie chick—not pretending, but I’d slipped back into that way of life.’

Determined to reinvent herself, Robyn had left the ‘Aussie chick’ behind, once and for all—discarded like a cicada shell—along with her old friends. ‘I never “wiped” them. It was just that they stayed with Robyn—my friends stayed with Robyn. It wasn’t that I didn’t need them any more, like I discarded them because they weren’t useful. It was more a case of—I’m going somewhere and I can’t take you with me. And in any case, they

wouldn't recognise me any more. They didn't know Rabiah, they didn't know Rabiah existed. And they have no idea Robyn doesn't exist any more. And you could not be Robyn and Rabiah at the same time.'

This belief in the all-consuming nature of her conversion was underscored, a few months after her move to Lakemba, when her sister Susan got married in a service at the Uniting Church in Dee Why followed by a reception at the Diggers Club. Rabiah balked at attending the church service but went along to the reception, albeit reluctantly, having been told that devout Muslims regard music as *haram*, or forbidden. She bought herself a new outfit and draped her headscarf to look like an exotic fashion rather than religious attire. 'From the minute I got there I wanted it to be over. I went out of duty, love and respect for my sister, but it was terrible. I felt like the biggest hypocrite. It was like knocking on a door and someone answers it and they think you're someone else, and because they insist you're that person you try to accommodate them. Everyone else thought it was Robyn. But it wasn't Robyn who went to that wedding, it was Rabiah. I just didn't belong.'

Her family, long accustomed to her knack for reinvention, was sanguine about her latest incarnation. Despite her own ambivalence about religion, Bessie took it in her stride. 'I think in the beginning Mum just thought, oh well, here she goes again. Then it was: oh well, she may dress funny but as long as she's improving herself. Because my mum saw the change in me—that I was being focused, not going out to nightclubs or drinking alcohol and taking drugs. She didn't really care if I was wearing something on my head, just as long as I was better, a better person.'

Aside from the strange clothing and rituals, Rabiah's core beliefs had changed little from the values Bessie had drilled into her as a child. 'There's fundamental things about me that are still the same—the values instilled by my mother that are a part of my character. *And* the negative things: bad-tempered, stubborn, authoritarian. I didn't turn from a devil into an angel. The only thing I haven't found to be true is that she taught me there was grey. I don't see grey, it's all black and white to me.'

Since Rabiah now avoided the northern beaches, Bessie often made the long trip by public transport across the Harbour Bridge to Lakemba

to visit her daughter and grandchildren, Devi and Mohammed, on whom she doted. Eventually she moved in and lived with them for three months. She remained entirely mystified by Islam, but when Rabiah went out and Bessie was left to babysit she always made sure the children said their prayers, as instructed. 'I don't know what they said but they said something', she would report on Rabiah's return.

The family had moved out of the McCormacks' house and into a one-bedroom flat, where the only furniture was a fridge and bunk beds for the children. Rabiah rejected repeated offers of furniture from helpful friends, preferring to sit and sleep on the floor as the Prophet Mohammed had done. She was a fastidious housekeeper who couldn't stand mess or dirt. 'I think it's just me, I like things to be in order, I think it's because I'm a control freak', she explains. She liked to hang the laundry in order on the washing line; her own clothes, Devi's and Mohammed's in separate—preferably colour co-ordinated—groups; she also used to colour-code the pegs until a friend told her it was a sign of obsessive compulsive disorder. Bessie lost her temper one day after hanging out the washing when she found Rabiah rehangng it 'correctly'. 'You can go naked for all I care', her mother snapped.

Rabiah's style of parenting owed much to Bessie's own no-nonsense firmness, with echoes of her grandfather's severity. 'Mum was a lot softer than me as a person, not as severe', she says. The children were drilled each morning to wash their face, hands and feet, fold their pyjamas and place them under their pillows. They had to finish every scrap of food on their plates; Rabiah couldn't abide waste and continually lectured them about all the poor children starving overseas. For all her efforts as a disciplinarian, it was clear early on that her children had inherited a streak of rebellion, which she put down to her own draconic temperament and the absence of a father. 'It affects children, not to have a father figure, and to have an authoritarian mother; it tends to make them more unconventional, to want to rebel.'

Five-year-old Devi came home from her first day at school refusing to go back because she hadn't been taught to read and write.

'If you don't go, the police will come and take you', Rabiah warned.

As strong-willed as her mother, Devi tried a new tack the following day.

‘Don’t forget your lunch’, Rabiah reminded her.

‘No thank you, I don’t want any lunch today.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, you know all those children who die from not eating? Well if I don’t eat, I’ll die, then I won’t have to go to school.’

Three-year-old Mohammed was a similarly forthright child. One day, while Bessie was staying with them, they were about to walk to the shops when Mohammed darted into his mother’s bedroom and came out with a headscarf, which he handed to his grandma.

‘Oh no, darling, I don’t wear that’, laughed Bessie.

‘But Muslims have to wear it’, replied Mohammed, echoing his mother’s oft-repeated words.

‘I’m not a Muslim, darling’, explained Bessie.

‘Well you’ll have to leave then’, said a solemn-faced Mohammed.

The education of their children was a pressing concern for the small but vocal convert community, which lobbied the New South Wales government to introduce Islamic education into the state’s public schools. In those days there were no exclusively Islamic schools; most Muslim children attended government public schools where they were expected to take part in Christmas nativity scenes and Easter passion plays. Islam rarely rated a mention, even though in some schools in south-western Sydney 80 per cent of the students came from Muslim families. Finally, a program was launched under the auspices of the Islamic Council of New South Wales to teach Muslim scripture in certain schools. Rabiah was among the volunteers who offered to take the classes.

She showed up on day one at the Hampden Park Public School in Lakemba where the teachers had rounded up about sixty children, aged seven to ten, and herded them into the assembly hall for their first Islamic scripture class.

‘They were totally out of control’, Rabiah recalls. ‘It was like being in a zoo, they were running and screaming, it was absolute bedlam.’ She first tried cajoling them into some semblance of order. When that failed she resorted to the bootcamp approach.

## *Becoming Rabbiah*

‘I got ’em all in there and I literally screamed at them. I made them stand up against the wall. I threatened them—“I know who your father is”.’ The children came from mostly Lebanese families who hailed principally from impoverished rural villages or were refugees from the country’s civil war of the 1970s. Many of their parents were on social security benefits or in poorly paid manual work, and most spoke English as a second language and felt like second-class citizens in Australia. ‘They were ashamed to be Muslim, most of them. I wanted them to be proud of being Muslims, to give them back their self-esteem’, Rabbiah recounts. After haranguing them into submission, she taught them how to perform *wudu*, the ritual washing, and how to recite *salat*, the five obligatory daily prayers. She taught them Islamic songs and games. Then she delivered an ultimatum.

‘Right, now it’s up to you. Which one did you like better—when I was screaming at you and punishing you, or when we were doing fun things?’

‘When we were doing fun things, Miss’, they chorused.

‘OK, well this is the rule. We’ll do fun things as long as you behave. If you misbehave, you get out.’

Silma and Siddiq Buckley remember Rabbiah as always an eager volunteer. Siddiq says she had ‘a lot of determination, a lot of energy’. Silma recalls: ‘If there was a challenge, she would do it. If they told her that to be a Muslim she would have to climb Mount Everest, she’d do it. She would do it in the morning, and then she’d go back and do it again in the afternoon. That’s how determined and committed she was. She had a lot of respect in the community.’

Rabbiah could often be found proselytising with gusto on the streets of Lakemba, issuing instructions to hapless passers-by on the ‘correct’ practice of Islam in her usual stentorian tone.

‘Oh no, here comes Rabbiah with her *shariah* stick’, people would mutter as they spotted her striding down the street.

‘Excuse me, brother’, she would yell across the road in her strident Australian accent, if she spied a man standing in the shopping strip having a drink.

‘Do you know you’re not a Muslim any more, because the Prophet said Muslims don’t stand up to drink?’

Or if she saw someone eating with their left hand, she would berate them: ‘You know you’re not going to paradise, don’t you?’ Looking back, she shakes her head at the memory of her younger self in full flight, ‘screaming at the top of my lungs from one side of the street to another’. ‘In a very short time I had acquired—I wouldn’t call it knowledge, but massive amounts of information. Sometimes this is good, but sometimes it can be a disaster, if there’s no method or rhyme or reason to it—like someone who loves science but turns out to be the mad professor. I think I was a bit dangerous, I had no qualms.’

She dates her zeal to the evening of her pizza epiphany when she had been gripped by a sensation of dying, as a result of which she carried a burning conviction that God had saved her. ‘That feeling I had of dying has never left me. Since that day I thought Allah was going to take my soul from me, that has stayed with me. It has made me very intense. People find me intense and scary.’

This assessment is confirmed by those who know her. ‘She was very stern about everything, not just religion, that was just her character’, Siddiq Buckley says. ‘Everything for her was serious, and she had an opinion about everything, no matter how big or small it was. If she saw things a certain way then that was how it was; it was either right or wrong, there was no grey area in between the two. She had very pessimistic views about Australia, even though she was a dinky-di Aussie. We were all concerned about the lax moral attitudes, but she expressed herself more forcefully than most people. And once she had an opinion it was very hard to shift her, because she was very firm in her conviction. People are generally happy and enthusiastic about becoming a Muslim. Most of the people who came to Islam were much softer in their approach to Islam. They didn’t seem to have a chip on their shoulder about doing something to change the world, they were more interested in changing themselves. She seemed to be an angry young woman. I wasn’t sure if she was angry about herself, or angry at others, or angry at life in general. Not angry as in violent, but she was not happy.’

Silma Buckley recounts an occasion when she was looking after Devi and Mohammed, of whom Rabiah was fiercely protective. When Rabiah

arrived to pick them up, she was furious to learn that Silma had given them biscuits that she believed were not *halal*. Silma remembers: 'She went off. "How can you give the kids biscuits? I've heard there's liquor in these!" She was very angry and upset that she had been violated and her kids had been violated.'

The split between them deepened during a debate over the 'correct' interpretation of a particular *ayat* (verse) of the Quran. At one of their Tuesday night meetings, Silma was reading from a verse that states that Jews, Christians and non-believers will be judged by Allah alongside Muslims on the Day of Resurrection. Silma told the gathering that the meaning of this verse was that other 'People of the Book' could gain entry to paradise, along with Muslims. Rabi'ah was taken aback.

'Hang on a sec, do you mean to tell me that I could still be a Christian, and drink and party, and I don't have to wear this, and it's acceptable? And I can still go to paradise?'

'Well that's what it's saying.'

'But that doesn't make sense. Why would someone become a Muslim if they can just be a good Christian and it's acceptable to Allah?'

Rabi'ah resolved to seek a second opinion from an Egyptian friend who spoke fluent Arabic and could therefore check the original text, rather than rely on a translation. The woman consulted a book on *tafsir*, the study of interpreting the Quran, by a renowned eighth-century scholar named Ibnu Kathir. His view, her friend explained to Rabi'ah, was that the only Jews and Christians who could enter paradise were those who lived in pre-Islamic times. Rabi'ah announced her discovery at the next meeting.

'What we said last week was wrong. Here's the correct interpretation', she explained to the gathering. But Silma stood her ground.

'Well Ibnu Kathir's got his opinion and I've got mine.'

Rabi'ah was shocked by Silma's seeming renunciation of a renowned Islamic scholar, who she assumed must be correct.

'It's like saying, "Well, Rabi'ah's got a scalpel and the brain surgeon's got a scalpel, so I might as well just let Rabi'ah do my brain surgery".'

The differences between the two women would prove irreconcilable over time. 'I couldn't accept that interpretation—that only Muslims can

go to paradise. I've simply never accepted it', says Silma. 'People like Rabiah have one view, they can't countenance alternative views.' Rabiah believes there can be only one interpretation of the Quran because it is unthinkable for a mere human to change the laws of God.

Rabiah also parted company with Jemaah Tabligh, deciding the group was cult-like and that its eschewal of politics—including the waging of jihad—meant denying an elemental part of Islam. 'Their concept was that you have to be a perfect Muslim before you can defend Islam, which is wrong. And this business of not being involved in politics. I mean Islam is a way of life. You can't separate the political side of Islam from ritual devotion because it's a way of life. If Islam teaches us how to go to the toilet, how can it be that it doesn't teach us how we should be ruled? It doesn't make sense. There's no such thing as politicised Islam and non-politicised Islam. If you have un-politicised Islam, then you've only got half of it.'

Political Islam was now the fastest growing ideological movement in the world. The Iranian revolution had fuelled a global surge of Muslim pride and a resolve to replicate the Ayatollah's *shariah* state in other Islamic countries. Iranian women had taken to the streets wearing the face-covering *chador*—which had been banned by the Shah of Iran's father—as a symbol of protest against the corrupt Western-backed regime. After meeting an Iranian woman whose husband was studying in Australia, Rabiah abandoned her hippy-style kaftan and headscarf, and began wearing a more austere Iranian-style hijab, which she teamed with a grey *abaya*, the flowing cloak-type garment designed to conceal a woman's body shape, in keeping with the Quranic *ayat* that says women should 'draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their finery'.

Another front in the Islamic revolution had been opened in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion of 1979. Volunteers from all over the Islamic world had begun trekking to Afghanistan to join the *mujahidin*, and donations were pouring in from Muslims around the globe, a contribution soon eclipsed by the billions funnelled from the United States and matched dollar for dollar by Saudi Arabia. Rabiah didn't know much about Afghanistan, except that the Russians were 'filthy Communists' who had invaded a Muslim land. On Fridays, she and her friends would spend hours

at the mosque collecting money for the *mujahidin*. Women would hand over their gold necklaces, bracelets and rings, sometimes thousands of dollars worth in a day. The proceeds were handed over to a roving representative of the *mujahidin*, an Afghan doctor named Abdul Aziz, who had been given the use of an office in Lakemba by the Lebanese Muslim community.

On one of his visits, Dr Abdul took a shine to Rabbiah's boy, Mohammed, an intrepid youngster who was by now four and a half years old.

'Do you want to come to Afghanistan with me?' Dr Abdul asked the boy. 'You could come and live in Afghanistan and be a Muslim soldier.'

Mohammed's eyes lit up. 'My son thought he was serious', Rabbiah recounts. 'When Dr Abdul left and went back to Afghanistan without him, he was devastated. After that Mohammed used to say "One day I'm going to Afghanistan".'

Rabbiah herself was growing restless. Like her own mother, she had never really settled down, and had never lived in one place for more than three years (she still never has). In late 1981, she decided to make the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca, a journey that Muslims are expected to make at least once in a lifetime as one of the 'five pillars' of Islam. She booked the trip through a tour group in Lakemba and arranged for Bessie to mind the children while she was away. But two days before their scheduled departure, Rabbiah was seized by a sense of foreboding. Seeking guidance, she performed an *istikharah* prayer, a special supplication that Muslims make to solicit Allah's advice.

'I'm not going', she announced to her fellow pilgrims' dismay.

'But you have to go.'

'No, I've prayed *istikharah*. That's it, I'm not going.'

The *hajjis* left the following Saturday. On the Sunday, Rabbiah's mother collapsed and was rushed to hospital where she was diagnosed with chronic emphysema, which would eventually take her life. After a week or so in hospital, Bessie was discharged and went to stay with her younger daughter, Susan, at her home on Sydney's northern beaches.

Having missed out on the trip to Mecca, Rabbiah resolved instead to take the children to Indonesia so they could see their grandparents and

she could study Islam. ‘I couldn’t bear it any more—sitting around with a translation of the Quran saying, “I think this” or “according to me, that”. A lot of the time it was just empty talk. The reality was we weren’t putting into practice even the things we knew. I didn’t know how or where, but I just knew I wanted to go back and study.’

Before returning to Indonesia, there was one outstanding matter that she wished to resolve—her marriage to Bambang Wisudo, which had not yet been annulled. Neither she nor the children had seen him since he left Australia and returned to his family in Indonesia after their separation two years earlier. She was confident she had grounds for a divorce based on Bambang’s drug use and failure to support her financially, and wanted to have the marriage dissolved before going back to Indonesia. She travelled to Canberra to visit an Indonesian cleric, Amin Hady, who was then *imam* of the Canberra mosque and recognised as a religious authority by the Indonesian embassy in Australia. However, he refused to grant her a divorce, having not heard Bambang’s side of the story. Legally she was still Mrs Robyn Wisudo, a situation she resolved to remedy on her return to Indonesia.