



Tuesday 1 January

10 a.m. Oh my *actual* God. There's a man in my bed! A real-life *man*. I prodded Conall to make sure he wasn't a figment of my overactive imagination. Then, sitting up in bed, I pinched myself in case I was dreaming – because these things can happen, and better to find out sooner rather than later. That's when I caught a glimpse of my red pants flung over the fan on the ceiling, right next to my red hijab. (Doesn't matter that I'm living in Karachi squalor; colour coordination is very important.) Would it be inappropriate to Instagram that?

Note to self: Must not become person who pretends their life is perfect via the medium of social media.

I really *did* get on a plane four months ago with Conall to come to Karachi, and last month I really *did* marry him.

To Suj, Foz, Hannah: What should I *do* with him?

From Hannah: Lucky for you I'm up for morning prayers to tell you that if he's asleep I wouldn't do anything. Unless you want to be charged with assault.

Hannah always makes very good points.

From Suj: Jump him! Early start to gym. Sofe, get some exercise in too. Haha xxxx





AYISHA MALIK

From Foz: For God's sake. Wake him up. Doesn't he know you need to make up for lost time? If I wasn't on a break from men I'd elope with one of the hot South Americans here. Can't believe you got married without us. Though at least you don't have to worry about table settings xx

As do Suj and Foz.

'The pinging from your phone's going to be the end of me,' said Conall, putting his arm round me and drawing me closer.

He opened his eyes. I imagine the blurry ceiling was materialising as he squinted at the fan.

'Christ – are those your pants?'

'You really should stop taking the Lord's name in vain,' I said.

He looked at me, amused, as he brushed the hair away from my eyes. 'Old habits.'

There are times, as a practising Muslim woman, you have to take stock of your life – having a man in your bed for the first time would be one of them. No one really prepares you for it: having to weave this much happiness with this much fear of what could go wrong. If I hadn't married Conall ASAP, then A) the film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* would be plaguing my every still-unmarried day and B) maybe I'd have booked the next plane home and sat in my room for the rest of my life, swiping left or right on Tinder instead of having to *feel* all these things.

From Suj: BTW Han, see you tonight. Foz, bring a hottie back with you. Everyone being in different countries is a joke. When the hell are you both coming home? xxxxxx





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

I felt a sudden pang and shook Conall's arm.

'Hmm?'

'Suj and Hannah are meeting tonight.'

'Mm,' he replied.

'I wonder where they're going.'

Silence. If home is where the heart is then why does mine constantly flit towards London happenings?

'Do you think they've made a booking? Han will have done. I'll message Suj to make sure she's not late.'

'OK.'

I waited for a little more input.

'You don't care, do you?'

'About Hannah and Suj's dinner plans?' he replied.

'You could *pretend* to be interested,' I said.

He opened his eyes and pulled me closer. 'Were you this annoying before we got married?'

'No. I saved this part especially.'

Billy, our adopted cat, popped her ginger-and-white head out of the bathroom door and meandered over. I took a biscuit out of the drawer for her. Does Conall actually find me annoying? I'd probably find me annoying if I were married to me. I looked round the room with its flaking paint and grimy curtains – the lonely desk in the corner, which is meant to be a work area but instead only reminds me that I have no work. If I've decided to live in this cesspit, it must be love. More's the pity. Anyway, I did my Isktikhara before marrying him – that foolproof prayer which, once you've decided to do something, makes your path easy if it's good for you, and difficult if it's bad for you. That moment, when we sat in the mosque, there was nothing but ease. (Apart from the imam's negativity, of course.





But negativity is not a sign. I think.) And it wasn't just because one day I might be asked to take part in a documentary about *real-life* forty-year-old virgins.

'Do you think Mum's forgiven me?'

'Since yesterday?' he asked, eyes closed again.

'What other ways can I say sorry? Maybe a card?'

Her face swims in front of me every time I think about it. She'd waited thirty years for me to get married and then I went and did it without her, not six months after Dad died. I'm such a brown disappointment. Waves of guilt slosh around my stomach: the natural conclusion to an unnatural wedding.

'She'll come round,' said Conall.

I could only imagine Dad's disappointment if he were alive: the peering over the glasses; the shaking of the head. It made me want to slink back under my covers. I looked up to tell Dad I was sorry, except it didn't seem appropriate when I caught sight of my knickers. Plus, they only served as a reminder that it wasn't an *I'd-change-things-if-I-could* sorry. My guilt swelled into the size of a hernia.

'You're a grown-up, Sofe. Well, most of the time -'

I hit Conall with my pillow but looked at his face, which manages to be, by turns, both grumpy and kind.

'Just when I think you're a bit brown you go and say something so *white*,' I said.

'I didn't know being a grown-up was race-dependent,' he replied.

'Look at me, Conall,' I said, pointing to my face. 'I'm a Paki - oh, bloody hell,' I added as he shot me an unimpressed look. '*Pakistani*.'

'No, please, carry on perpetuating racial slurs.'

Typical - as if the guilt hernia wasn't bloated enough.





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

‘The point is, there are certain things a Pakistani daughter shouldn’t do – one of them is to marry outside her race. Fucked up royally there, didn’t I?’

‘What are the rules on Pakistani daughters swearing?’ he asked.

‘*Secondly*, if she does decide to jump racial ships, then to at least do it in *front* of the community. That way they can gossip about it at her wedding, behind her back, like normal people.’

He put his hand behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Did he regret it? Was he wondering how to use my hijab to strangle me? Or even strangle himself? Was he having converter’s remorse?

‘No point dwelling on it,’ he replied.

‘Yes, thanks. That hadn’t occurred to me.’

He turned towards me. ‘Go back to sleep, Sofe,’ he replied, pulling the covers over me. ‘I love you when you’re asleep.’

I laughed as Billy nibbled at the biscuit. The beeping of car horns, as usual, hadn’t stopped all night, and were now accompanied by the bleating of sheep – all lined up, naturally, outside our block of flats.

‘It’s like *Dante’s Inferno* meets *Animal Farm*,’ I said.

I miss the small things: hot water; being able to scroll through Twitter without gasping for Wi-Fi. A cockroach skirmished in the corner. *Vom*. It says something about my personal growth that I didn’t actually vom. I picked up my slipper to kill it when Conall grabbed my arm and pulled me back under the covers.

‘Be useful for once and keep me warm,’ he said, sliding his hand on to my bum. ‘Aren’t you cold without your pants?’

‘What do you mean, “for once”?’ I said, wrapping my arm around his. ‘I’ve opened your eyes to a new way of life. Before me you were all sullen and now look . . .’ I sighed. ‘*Before Sofia*. You can call it BS. As in, that’s what life used to be.’





AYISHA MALIK

Although, when I open my eyes, I'm not sure I haven't converted to *his* way of life. His breath tickled the back of my neck as he laughed.

'Shut the fuck up.'

I enveloped the blanket around us to block out the Karachi cold – and my negative thoughts – when there was a knock on the door.

'Come in,' said Conall, which begs the question: doesn't he think a person should get dressed before you let someone into your bedroom?

The door creaked open and there she was, peering into the room with her darty eyes and long limbs, already kitted out for the day. How I've ended up sharing a house with this woman, along with a documentary film crew, in the middle of the worst parts of Karachi, rather than the huge, marble-floored, multi-storeyed houses that my dad's side of the family live in I'll never know. Well, I do know: Conall. I looked at Hamida, who lowered her gaze. She's readiness personified. I wonder whether this is one of the reasons she was so unperturbed when her husband – who we're never allowed to mention – left her.

'Oh, sorry. Con, I thought you'd be ready.'

I hate it when she calls him Con.

'We can talk later,' she said.

She glanced up at my hijab and knickers. I told myself to be reasonable. You can't dislike a person when they've not technically done anything wrong. It must be the unnatural pressures of being married and living as if in a commune: not the way her gaze flickers between me and Conall, the odd time I catch her staring at me or the way she never laughs at *anything* I say. I thought Conall was tough to break.





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

‘No, it’s fine,’ said Conall, pinching my bum as he got out of bed.

I smiled at her. Hammy didn’t return the favour. She glanced at the ceiling once more before they left the room to talk about their film documentary. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling too. *Purpose*. That’s the thing. Although I’d envy them both a little more if their purpose didn’t include filming in a slum. This was depressing because the idea of coming here with Conall for some charitable reason was great in theory, but not quite so fulfilling in practice. This is why you should never attach yourself to another person’s purpose. As a thirty-one-year-old, relatively independent, emotionally self-sufficient woman, I should’ve been wise enough to know this.

‘But that,’ I said, picking up Billy, ‘is what makes this love malarkey so tricky.’

I put her back down and looked at my phone. Wi-Fi had gone again.

‘Why does nothing work here?’ I said, shaking the phone.

‘Talking to yourself again?’ Conall was standing over me, hands on his hips.

‘Lamenting. To Billy,’ I replied.

He looked around for Billy, who’d disappeared. Much like my sanity.

‘Most couples have a few good years before lamenting,’ he said, sitting next to me.

I tugged on his black beard, flecked with more grey than a few months ago. Is this life’s doing or mine? I do love his beard, and not just because it sets off the unusual blue of his eyes (although it’s a pleasing by-product) but because it’s homage to his Muslim-ness.

Note to self: Give money to charity as thanks for fact that I get to sleep with my next-door neighbour, turned friend, turned Muslim husband.





Then he gave me this look. A serious one. Well, a sexy serious look, so I wasn't sure whether he wanted to have a shag or give me a lecture.

'*I'm ready,*' came Hammy's voice.

'Think of the shitty Wi-Fi as a social media detox,' he said.

'Hmm,' I replied, thinking about this. 'Maybe then I could blog about it?'

'You do know that there are people who live without proper food?'

Of course he's right. That's the problem when you haven't been to Afghanistan or Sudan and God knows where else – wanting things like hot water and electricity sounds unreasonable. Turns out a person can suffer from all kinds of dependencies.

'Yes. *Obviously,*' I said. 'Heating might be useful, though. Sleeping in twelve items of clothing is boring.'

'Oh, really?' He slipped his hand back round my waist when there was another knock at the door.

'*How long will you be?*' called Hamida.

'He's coming!' I shouted, giving Conall a semi-remorseful smile for my loudness.

'God, you have a big mouth,' he said.

'Isn't that why you married me?'

He leaned in and considered me for a moment. 'It was the only way to get you to sleep with me.'

I laughed. Stupid sod. 'Here, have a biscuit.'

I took one out of the drawer and it would've been the perfect time to put my hands down his pants when we heard: '*Feroza will be waiting for us.*'

Taking a deep breath, I looked at him. 'We could still go and live with Chachi,' I said. 'Just for a bit more privacy. And, you know, electricity.'





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

'I'm not living in comfort while the rest of the team have to stay here,' he said as he began searching for his 35 mm lens.

'How do you cope with such an excess of morality?' I asked.

He looked up and stared at me.

'Don't worry, I get it. *The team*. Speaking of,' I added, trying not to get distracted by his bare chest. 'Better go before team leader has a coronary.'

Bit inconvenient to have sex right now anyway. Why did no one warn me about having to shower (including washing your cascade of hair) *every* time you have a shag? Obviously I *knew* the Muslim rules, but try spontaneity when you live in a hovel where the water's always cold. He looked down at me and rubbed the back of his neck.

'When we get home we need to have a talk,' he said.

There was that serious look again. My heart skipped a beat. Nothing good ever comes from someone saying those words. Was it regret? Was it finally here?

'About what?'

'Just . . . things.' He gulped down his glass of water.

'FYI – you should never make someone wait a whole day to find out what "*Things*" means.' I used air quotes because they annoy him.

'You could do with a bit of patience,' he said. 'And I know you're trying to annoy me,' he added, pointing his finger at me.

I laughed. 'I hope your water's not boiled and you get the runs.'

'Might be worth it seeing as you'd have to nurse me better,' he said. He stared at me for a while and the fluttering of mad creatures in my stomach prevented a smart retort.

'Weren't you looking for something?' I asked.

He paused. 'Right. Yes. What was it?'

'Your lens. In the drawer,' I told him.





AYISHA MALIK

Why wasn't I repulsed at the idea of looking after him, runs and all? What has happened to me?

'Conall . . .' came Hammy's voice, which I think I had the capacity to throttle, so at least not all my natural instincts were dead.

'Before you go, mind if you hand me my hijab and pants?' I said, looking up at the fan.

He stood on the bed and picked the items off the fan.

'Your highness,' he said, handing them over and kissing me. The long type of kiss. The kind that – forget home – makes me forget my hijab and pants.

I'll stop complaining about where we're living. It's not that bad. Well, it *is*, but then being in an adult relationship is also about compromise: weighing up the pros and cons, and if Conall got fed up with all my moaning and told me to leg it, that would definitely be a con.

'Thanks, husband,' I said, smiling.

Just then, Billy sprang up on the desk and deposited a dead mouse on the table.

God, I'm a Londoner, get me out of here.

1.40 p.m. My God! Was cleaning the flat when out of nowhere I heard a huge crash, so violent it seemed as if the walls were shaking. Jawad, the servant, rushed into the room a few seconds later.

'What was that?' I said.

'Wait here,' he replied.

I couldn't just wait! I ran up to the rooftop. Plumes of smoke rose from not too far away. The noise of sirens blared as people flooded out of their homes. A bombing. I turned round as the door flung open and Jawad was standing there.





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

‘Baji, I told you to stay there. Conall-sahib has told me to look after you when he’s not here.’

‘Where is he?’

I went to run down the stairs but Jawad stopped me as he got his phone out and called him. It took several rings before someone answered. I closed my eyes in relief as Jawad handed the phone to me.

‘I’m OK, Sofe. I’m OK.’

2.55 p.m.

From Katie: Are you all right?? Let us know you’re safe.

Love you xxx

2.56 p.m.

From Hannah: Your penchant for dramatics just because you’re now a writer is ridiculous. All limbs intact? Xx

2.57 p.m.

From Suj: Toffeeyyyyy! Come home! Twenty-eight people dead. So sad. My old man says the world’s ending. Thanks, Dad. Miss you. FaceTime later xxxxxxxx

3.25 p.m. ‘Oh, thank God,’ said Maria as I picked up her Skype call. ‘Mum, she’s OK.’

‘Would she have forgiven me if I were dead?’ I asked, closing the bedroom door behind me. Everyone was sitting in the living room with their head in their hands.

‘Don’t go out,’ she said. ‘Tell Conall to stay indoors too. Foreigners get kidnapped all the time.’





AYISHA MALIK

‘Hai hai!’ came Mum’s voice before her frowning face came into view. ‘Forty years ago your baba moved to London for a better life and you’re back where he started. Conall’s mama, baba don’t say anything? But they are *goray*. White people don’t think of these things like us.’

‘Mum,’ I said, tears surfacing.

Despite her racism (and tendency towards run-on sentences) all I wanted was to hug her. It’s this place. Everything feels on the verge of collapse and I’m made for sturdier foundations. Mum looked at me, her eyes softening. Then she seemed to remember what I’d done and disappeared as swiftly as she’d emerged.

‘Sorry,’ said Maars.

She lifted my nephew up to the screen who made a wild attempt to grab her iPad. ‘Say hello to Khala, Adam. Doesn’t she look like someone who’s having a lot of sex, despite all the bombs?’

‘Maars,’ I said, feeling smug and mortified in equal measure.

‘Don’t be such a prude.’

‘When will Mum start speaking to me?’ I asked.

‘Right now she’s just crying about the Karachi madness. Says she doesn’t want you to end up a widow like her,’ said Maars.

‘Oh God – she needs to stop watching Bollywood.’

Although the fact that she didn’t want Conall dead was a good sign. The thought of Conall and co. driving back at the time the bomb went off punctured my denial that we were safe. Anxiety enveloped my stomach.

‘Sofe, you *eloped*. And Mum’s not been feeling well. Has this cough she can’t seem to shift.’

‘What’s wrong with her? Has she been to the doctor? It’s not pneumonia, is it? Or TB?’





THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS

What if something happened to her while we were estranged? How would I live with myself? I had to take a deep breath. It's not how short life is sometimes, but how shocking its end can be.

'Calm down. She's fine. It's *people*. Coming over and filling her head with ideas,' she added. 'Running away –'

'I didn't *run* –'

'Getting married, without telling anyone –'

'It was spur of the moment –'

'Not coming back to see us . . . ?'

Did these grievances come from Mum or Maars? The guilt hernia was ready to explode.

'It was all very quick.' She leaned into the screen, her eyes looking bigger than usual. 'I mean, how well do you actually know him?'

'It's *Conall*.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'Yeah, but who's his family?'

'I didn't realise we were living in a Regency novel.'

'You can tell a lot about a person from their family,' she said.

'I hope not,' I replied as she stuck her finger up at me.

She handed Adam a rusk and added: 'You never just marry one person. You marry their whole family.'

Pfft. No one knows this better than Conall. Poor man. But to be honest, I've tried not to think about his parents. Mum's silence manages to speak a thousand run-on sentences about how she sees our marriage, but has Conall even told his mum and dad? Has his brother, Sean, told them? Sean, who seems to have an absolutely fine relationship with the parents. Every time I bring the subject up with Conall he starts brooding around the house. Something about the rigidity of his movement, the shadow that passes over his face prevents me from pushing the matter. (This, I realise, reflects poorly on my sense of personal resolve.)





AYISHA MALIK

‘Maybe . . .’ Maars began. ‘I don’t know. Maybe you and Conall should come home? You’ve been away long enough. Then there’s Mum.’

God, I missed London, but I tried not to think about leaving here because Conall won’t want to go until the project’s finished.

‘Well?’ said Maars. Before she could say anything else the screen went black as the electricity went out, leaving us – literally and metaphorically – in the dark.

