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Catch a Fish from the Sea (Using the Internet)

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Extract

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Prologue

This is the story of an ordinary girl who searched high and low for an extraordinary guy. But the problem she found was that extraordinary guys want extraordinary girls. So you can see my predicament already.

I am a thirty*something* female, British Asian and of Pakistani origin. The Pakistani/South Asian/female aspect was set right from my conception. The British came in many years later, at the very cute age of six, when I was naturalised a citizen of Great Britain and, of course, I wasn't always thirty*something*.

I was twenty-six years of age when I first entertained the idea of going out into the big, bad world to try to find someone with whom I could settle down and have many babies. Up until then, whenever the word 'marriage' was mentioned, it would set off an unknown chemical reaction devouring my whole body like a drop of ink consuming a glass of clear water.

This reaction has been a great friend of mine ever since I can remember. As a child, once I had passed that adolescent age when *boys* repulsed me, I promised myself that I would never (ever) get married. The Western women on TV were single and free and I wanted that too. What was marriage if nothing but totally ruining your life? I saw misery around me and I was going to make sure that that didn't happen to me. Then the pestiferous teenage years kicked in. Romance and

love familiarised themselves with me and so things began to change.

Our neighbours, an elderly English couple, totally wonderful people, asked me once, '*So are you going to have an arranged marriage?'* An absolutely cringe-inducing question, despised by almost every British Asian female; a most hated question on a par with the equally discomforting, '*Why aren't you married yet?'* or the even more suffocating, '*When are you getting married then?'*

'Never,' I told them.

I didn't even want to think about marriage, let alone to someone I didn't know. The idea of having no control over your life; that someone else dictated who you married and who you didn't made me uneasy. So I have had a hate-hate relationship with the words '*arranged* marriage' since forever. Every time that horrid question was asked, I remember turning into the Incredible Hulk. The mere thought of the *arranged* marriage mortified me.

It conjured up all sorts of unwanted and unthinkable images. Images that I would make sure wouldn't become my reality. This fact everyone knew. I knew, my family knew and even the worm in the garden knew. And so they all left me to it (especially the worm in the garden).

By the age of twenty-six, after officially having reached the 'Best Before Date' in the Pakistani Marriage Supermarket, my poor father decided that it was time he took matters into his own hands and defy the sanctions I had imposed. Quite dutifully, he lived up to his paternal role and tried to find his daughter a 'suitable match'. Religiously, every Saturday, he would buy the UK *Urdu Daily*, turn to the exclusive

matrimonial section which was a special feature catering for desperate fathers trying to get rid of their daughters, and meticulously he would find the:

> 'Hum apne beteh, 29, handsome, computer analyst, keh liey achey gharaney ka rishta dhoond rahey hain. Larkhi must be maximum age 26, educated and pretty. Parental involvement necessary.'

Loosely translated that means:

> 'We are looking for a good match from a respectable household, for our son, 29, handsome, computer analyst. Girl must be 26 max.'

… The rest is self-explanatory I guess. Or is it? …

Don't these adverts, especially the ones placed by parents, seem to have a language of their own? Literary forensics of the aforementioned advert reveals an interesting picture. What it actually says is something along of the lines of:

> 'Looking for submissive virgin whose parents are not *divorced* (oh the shame of that horrid word).
>
> Our son, quite possibly nearer to 40, is 'in computers' and lives at home. For the sake of syntax, let's randomly throw in a word … this will do … 'handsome'. He is handsome.

> The girl must be less than sell by date of 26 so that the community doesn't wonder why our daughter-in-law wasn't married at a more acceptable age. After all, there obviously has got to be something wrong in her biological programming if she has passed the age of 25 and remains unmarried. Even 26 is pushing it slightly, but it is closer to 25 than 27. Twenty-seven obviously says, *'Hey look at me, I am probably infertile,'* or worse still it shouts out, *'Hey world look at me, I have been delaying the whole marriage thing all this time because I have a boyfriend but really I have been pulling the wool over my parents eyes telling them I wanted a career first.*'
>
> Did we mention that she must be stunningly breathtakingly gorgeous and a brain surgeon at the same time? Well she must because we want Saeeda Apa to be jealous.
>
> Parental involvement is necessary so that we can establish whether you would be at the same level as us and whether our caste will allow you to sit on the sofa with us, or on the floor; while we sit on the sofa – of course.'

For those who think that the above is an exaggeration, I can assure you that there is more truth in what I have said than you can possibly know. What is perhaps worse is that not much has changed in the last few decades or so.

When my family was looking for that 'suitable match' for my sisters, the politics were exactly the same. I remember those days when my poor old father would sift through the adverts in the same manner that he did when it came to me.

We had many *our young son* matches for my sisters. 'Young men' who were never quite the age that their adverts said they were. Back then, parents were notorious for fabricating the truth when it came to age.

'Why is that?' I once asked.

'Because it is not good to be unmarried, especially if you have many years behind you,' my mother would say.

Clearly, this stigma of being *advanced in years yet behind the ranks of the married* was an almost shameful phenomenon. But on the plus side it was a comfort to know that this social taboo also touched the male sector of Pakistani society and wasn't confined to just the womenfolk.

So, every time there was a sighting of a potential *rishta* [candidate for marriage], initial contact, in the form of a letter had to be sent to the P.O. Box c/o the newspaper. They would pass the mail on and interested parties would then exercise their prerogative of whether they wanted to reply and whether a subsequent meeting would take place. Relatively harmless, yes, unless of course you came from a single-parent family, in which case there were numerous hurdles along the way; the first being that all important and ever so decisive phone call.

'When the authoritative fathers rang, they would want to speak to my dad so I would hand over the phone. However, if it was the boy's mother, she would want to speak to the girl's mother and that is when a *situation* would arise,' Labiba once told me. 'I would have to explain to the *Aunties* the reason why they couldn't speak to my mother and then have to put up

with the awkwardness that would fill the air because of which they would scurry to get off the phone.'

Growing up with just the one parent had repercussions when it came to thriving in some sort of social circle. A single father would hardly spread the word that his daughter of *marryable age* needed a suitable suitor. Even if he wanted to, how would he do it? Who would he approach? Culturally, it was the mother's role to socialise with the right people in the hope that someone somewhere would be interested in her daughter; hence the 'arrangement' of the *arranged marriage*.

Of course, these days there are various degrees of '*arranged marriage*'. You can easily produce a whole survey scale of 1–5; 1 being the, '*Extremely and so very arranged marriage that it is forced*' to the, '*My mum knew someone who knew someone*' arranged marriage to the, '*We got to talk to each other on the phone'* arranged marriage to the, '*Going out with him for months or even years and then telling my parents that if they didn't marry me to him then I would run away*' arranged marriage, and 5 being the, '*I arranged the caterers, the flowers, the photographer, the transport and my lehnga* [bridal dress]' arranged marriage. But back then, it was a different story altogether.

The newspaper route (which probably sits somewhere between 1 and 2 on the scale above) was a last resort and so, by some unofficial logic, anybody who went down this road to find a marriage prospect was some kind of reject; a social outcast. This stigma was magnified further if the mother was a single parent searching for a suitable match for her children. If a widow, then that was acceptable; anything otherwise was shunned horrendously.

But even in situations where both mother and father were very much together, sometimes parents would still find themselves at a lost end when it came to arranging their children's marriages. The fact was neither of my parents knew anyone nor were part of the *community* where introductions were possible; so the newspaper route was the final and only resort they could explore.

Brace yourselves now please. I am about to tell you about my first and last ever experience via the newspaper matrimonials. (Now may be a good time to go get yourself a cup of tea.)

One: Some People Are Coming to See You

My sister is a terrible communicator. When she found out that she was *with child* she sat in my room for a good twenty minutes, suddenly taking an interest in me and my life. Out of the sheer frustration of knowing that she wanted to tell me something, even knowing what she wanted to tell me, yet her not getting to the point, I asked, '*You're expecting, aren't you?*' I was careful not to say the word 'pregnant' for fear that she may disappear into thin air from the shame of it all even though she was married.

Similarly, on that particular Thursday afternoon, she had been hovering around me for nearly an hour trying to be normal, not realising that she knew that I knew that she wanted to talk to me about something, and that I knew that she didn't know that I knew what it was regarding. *A moment please as I just go over the last sentence to make sure that it does make sense.*

I should tell you more about my sister. Even though she looks like me (we are often mistaken for twins) and sounds like me, she is actually nothing like me, because she is, in fact, not me. I am more open in my approach to life, whereas for her there were certain things you just didn't entertain, let alone vocalise.

Boys, periods and that other thing a man and a woman do, and then nine months later they have a little human being, we never talked about any of that stuff. In my family almost

everything was taboo and the subject of marriage was like dynamite. I don't think there has been any sexual activity in any corner of this house for a few decades. Even the mice under the floorboards have probably signed the 'Official *Sexuals* Act', prohibiting them from fulfilling their carnal desires.

So, you can imagine what my sister must have gone through. I don't know what was worse for her – having to tell me that some *people* were coming to 'view me' for their son or the fact that if I passed the viewing, I might be having 'sexual relations' (thanks to Bill Clinton for enriching the English vocabulary) with a man.

Like bee to nectar, my sister hovered around me that afternoon trying to send me a barrage of telepathic messages. When that didn't work, she eventually gathered the courage,

'… Make sure you are in on Saturday,' she said, attempting to leave the room.

'Excuse me?!? … Where do you think you are going?' I exclaimed, sprinting across the room faster than any action hero could have done.

'Some people are coming to see you,' she said, all flustered, before making a quick exit. If there was ever a world record for one, she had just broken it.

The next few days felt as if my family was preparing for a celebration. It was manic and unbelievable and I hated every minute. Anyone would think that it was my wedding day. My dad acted as if these people were my new in-laws and would carry me away on an elephant, like in a Bollywood movie. If it

had been up to him, he would have changed the wallpaper in all the rooms and had new carpet laid down; but alas, there was only one day left until the *guests* came, and so varnishing the stairs and painting the downstairs bathroom was about all that he could manage.

'But Dad, they are not going to be inspecting the bathroom, just your daughter,' I felt like saying to him, before it suddenly dawned upon me that maybe the whole idea was to display me in the bathroom.

They were only coming for tea, but it was like an Indian restaurant in my house with menus being discussed ardently. If I hadn't stepped in, they would've started interviewing for waiting staff. Amidst all the *excitement* I remained unaffected. I hadn't even bothered to ask who this guy was, but it was mentioned to me in passing (as if I cared) that he had some business in America (or '*Amreeka*' if you really want to pronounce it correctly) and was coming over to the UK for two weeks in search of a bride. This probably meant that he was illegal and waiting for his Green Card.

On the day of my potential in-laws' arrival, my sister began to get slightly worried that I wasn't getting ready. '*Getting ready*' in Pakistani terms means dressed and made up as if going for a magazine cover photo shoot. I refused to 'get ready.' I wasn't a doll or even an object that they were coming to 'inspect' to see if they found me attractive.

I had been told that this wasn't a *forced* marriage and that I wasn't obligated to say *yes*. Of course I had the right to choose;

if I liked him I had to say and they would take things further. If not, then that was it. This was only an introduction.

Introduction …?? Let's, for one unthinkable split stroke of a second, assume that I did 'like' this guy based solely on looks, what would happen?

'Well, Dad would talk with his parents and they would discuss arrangements.'

'And where would I live?'

'You would have to move.'

'What if I didn't want to move?'

'But you would have to.'

'And these arrangements, what would they be?'

'You know, stuff.'

'What sort of stuff?'

'Just stuff.'

'Well what if I don't get on with him?'

'You learn to overcome it.'

'What if I don't learn to overcome it?'

'You will. That is the way it is.'

'Well I don't want this.'

'It's just scary, but it's not that bad. We had to go through it.'

'If you want a medal, I don't have one to give you. And it is bad and I am not going to put up with it.'

'Look, you have to get married one day.'

'So?'

'So, nothing, what other way is there?'

'There must be other ways, and I tell you, it's got to be better than this one.'

'Well we can talk another time. Let's get this over and done with.'

'We can get this over and done with right now. Why don't you give me their phone number and I will tell them to ***%^$&'

Unfortunately I wasn't given the chance to articulate my feelings because soon after, the doorbell rang. And it rang. And it rang. And it just kept ringing. Just my luck that no one was in; my mother had gone to the shops, my father was at the *masjid* [mosque] and my sisters went home (I suspect to put on their jewellery). If you are South Asian, you will understand. If you are not South Asian, you may want to know that some women from our community like to take advantage of such occasions and display their collection of 22-carat Asian-gold earrings, necklaces, bangles and bracelets. So I was the only one left to open the door to our *guests*, who were of course probably expecting me to be wearing lots of gold jewellery too.

I prayed so much that they would just knock a few times and then leave quietly but I soon discovered that prayers, although listened to, aren't always answered that quickly and sometimes you have to take a ticket and wait in the queue. It was as if they somehow knew that they were not welcome but felt the need to chronically **** me off with their persistent bell ringing. (I realise that the publisher has probably blotted out the foul language using a few stars.)

I wanted to leave them standing there, but their endless ringing of the doorbell was driving me so crazy that I had to force myself to open the door. I was dressed in my *lazing*

around the house attire, with which my potential mother-in-law was not pleased. I could tell her disapproval from the unimpressed look she shot at me as I let them in. After the forced, pleasant, '*Hello, hello, how are you?'* coupled with the silent, '*Come in and I hope you choke on the food and please take your son with you*,' I let Auntie in, followed by Uncle. Naturally, I mean who heard of a Pakistani family where the lady did not wear the *shalwar?*[1]

Behind them was a horrid looking 'young man' who was eyeing me up so much that I wanted to pull his eyes out and gently place them in his shirt pocket. I showed them into the lounge before proceeding to send out smoke signals as a desolate plea for someone to come and save my soul.

The eagles had landed firmly and were left sitting alone for a good fifteen minutes before the doorbell rang once more. I was so traumatised by the unfolding events that I refused to go downstairs and open the door again. It was my father at the door. He had forgotten his key. In the end I think it was the guy who got up to open the door for him. I didn't like the look of him already, trying to 'get in there' with his 'father-in-law.' I mean, who asked him to open the door in the first place? If that was some feeble chivalrous attempt to impress me, it wasn't going to work. I didn't care how gracefully a man could open the front door to my house. I did not want an *arranged* marriage/*introduction* or whatever they wanted to call it and no one could make me.

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1 Traditional Pakistani trousers

The longer they sat in my house the more I cried. This was awful. This was probably worse than awful. Was this what I would have to go through every time people came to my house to take me off my father's hands? This was not a good feeling. I cried and waited for 'movement' in the house, ready with my archery set, willing to employ *any means necessary* to fight off the aggressors who sought to take away my fundamental civil and human rights by removing me from my bedroom and taking me downstairs; to the lounge.

An hour went by and my sister came upstairs. After catapulting all known shoes in the house at her, I politely let it be known that I would not be gracing everyone with my presence.

'Are you crazy? You can't stay here the whole time!' she said.

'No, but I think that you are if you think that I am going to go downstairs.'

Never having been a rebel teenager, I felt the need to make up for lost time on that particular day, and it felt good to be able to take the, *I am not going to clean my room and you can't make me* stance on things.

'Look, I understand what you are going through and I don't blame you. But it will look bad if you don't come down,' she said.

I didn't care though so I sent her back empty handed. Ten minutes later, she returned.

'Just tell them that they have already seen me as I was the one who opened the door,' I tried to barter.

'We already did, and the mother turned around and said, *What kind of people are you? How were we supposed to know that that was the girl?'*

'Well, what do they want to do; observe me under a microscope?' I asked.

Minutes later she came upstairs again, 'Look, his mother is getting annoyed, you'd better come down right now,' she said angrily.

I knew she was serious when my suggestion that she take down my passport and show them my photo didn't work. Reluctantly, I headed towards the door ready to go down before I was stopped. Apparently the clothes I was wearing were *unsuitable.*

The truth was that I didn't have any 'suitable' clothes. The fact that I barely possessed Asian clothes meant that the Western clothing that I did have was naturally unsuitable. Any respectable mother would obviously frown at my choice of garments. Even though they were loose, modest items of clothing, somehow my sister seemed to think that it reflected badly on them. What would people think? What would the boy's mother say to her friends, '*We went to see a girl, and she was not even wearing shalwar kameez!'* [Pakistani clothing]

I was tired of arguing and retaliating. I needed to get this over and done with. The quicker I conformed, the quicker they would be out of my house; that sounded good … very good in fact. Having made my sister solemnly promise that I would only be in that room for as long as necessary, I agreed for her to dress me up like a Christmas tree. This would also

give me a ticket out of there; I couldn't stay long as I was going out to a party!

'Wear some make-up and do your hair,' she said as I headed towards the staircase.

'Don't push it now,' I responded and off I went to the gallows.

I went downstairs to find my father sitting there in the room and so … I walked back out again. I just couldn't go in. I had never felt so embarrassed in all my life. It was one thing to draw blood and dip my bleeding arm into the shark pool but to do it in my father's presence? No, I couldn't. I just couldn't. He understood and said that it was best that he leave. Thank God for that!

With a push and a shove, I found myself sitting with the *guests*; opposite his parents and parallel to 'him'. I was so glad that he was sitting on the chair otherwise I would've had to hire architects to build a wall on our sofa (which does not have home-made floral settee covers, may I just add).

I looked on as my sisters tried to justify why I was late coming down to join everyone. The excuse was as suspicious as it sounded. His mother sat there looking at me, wondering why I was wearing fancy clothes and shoes yet my face was bare, make-up less and my hair looking as if I had just been dragged through a bush backwards. Biting my tongue trying to hold in an array of emotions that were intent on jumping out and performing the hula, I sat there, unable to look at his mother or his father. I had decided that he wasn't even worth looking at, and so I carried on ignoring his existence.

His parents attempted to exchange pleasantries, before moving on to 'interview' me as I sat there on the *Mastermind* chair. His mother started asking me questions; questions that were deliberately designed to confuse me. Questions like, '*What is your name, Nasreen?'*

'With all due respect, why ask me a question to which you already know the answer?' I felt like saying. But envisaging the aftermath, I thought it best to exercise my prerogative of silence. Besides, every time I tried to respond, nothing would come out; and so all of a sudden, the carpet seemed like the most interesting thing in the world.

His mother continued with the interrogation whilst I wrestled with the next question, 'How old are you?' At that moment in time, to be honest, perhaps even I didn't know my name, or my age. All I knew was that there was a guy on my left, gawping at me as if he had never seen a woman before and, worse still, he was sitting there all smug, thinking that he was going to marry me!

'In your dreams,' I thought, as I walked out of the room.

Yes that is right, I asked to be excused and I left. It was as simple as that.

I didn't even bother with the follow-up after they had left. I was just so glad that they were gone. It was such a horrific experience for me and I couldn't care less. I had expected that my father would send out a feedback questionnaire but he didn't. I think the fact that I went on a hunger strike was a strong indication that I was not impressed by the newspaper route. Days later when I did start eating again (and who can

resist chicken biryani unless you are a vegetarian), my sister took that as the green light to approach me for comment, asking me and I quote, '*So what did you think then?'*

I looked at her, held her gaze for a few seconds and then walked away. We never spoke about this again. It was obvious to me and it soon became obvious to them all, that whereas my sisters had been the *obedient daughters*, I would be the opposite. Even though my parents were relieved that I had managed to get through my teenage years without being a rebel to society and culture and not disgracing their good names (too much), it seemed as if I had been investing all that energy over the years and would channel it into resisting the smooth transition to marriage. They were right of course.

For me, at that point, 'marriage' was a ghastly word. It was scary enough without having to deal with the prospect of being lumbered with a stranger. I did not want to get married their way or on their terms. Why should I? What about me? It was just something that was an obligation to my family; God would not be happy until my parents fulfilled their parental duties and married me off. Exactly what marriage was, I did not know. All I knew was that I didn't like the ideology that was attributed to it by the Pakistani culture, or indeed the wider South Asian culture to which belonged the Pakistani subset.

As Asians from the Indian subcontinent, I think it is generally understood that marriage has nothing to do with love. It is as if there is no room for 'love' in a marriage and that the two components are unrelated. Growing up in the

UK, in a predominantly Asian neighbourhood, when someone did get married, the first question that would be asked was if so and so had a *love* marriage or an *arranged* marriage. Should the response be the former, then that was high scandal. If it was the latter, however, then the girl was obviously 'good', 'respectable', and 'decent'.

Perhaps that is why I avoided the marriage issue. I didn't want nosey neighbours putting me in their 'categories' and I certainly did not want to be joined to *man with moustache*. If that wasn't bad enough, I couldn't picture myself amongst fancy Asian clothes, jewellery, cars and the nightmare of the wedding *movie*. Did I want all that? No. And I didn't want what came after. Nor did I want what came before.

From what I knew of tradition; the boy's family visited the girl's family and the girl brought in the tea and biscuits. If the boy's family found her attractive then things would progress. They would come a second time and finalise the wedding. It didn't matter if the personalities did not mix, what was important was that the families were wealthy, the girl could cook and clean, look after his parents, run the house, raise the children, please her husband and most of all look good. It was better that she didn't have a brain because that way she would be able to think for herself and this was not a desired trait.

So, if this is what marriage was, and I was sure that I didn't want it, then why was I even entertaining the idea? I had fast approached twenty-seven years of age, and started to feel past my *sell by* date. I was going through a phase where I was so convinced that my insides would somehow curl up and disintegrate if I didn't have a baby there and then. But I didn't

want all this 'traditional' business. I wanted a shining knight who would come on his white horse …

Years later, I found myself still waiting. He obviously needed a satellite navigation system (designed for horses of course). Although I have just made a highly valid observation, that is not the point though. The point is that I needed to find my man, my way, by myself. I couldn't let them humiliate me through the disgraceful newspaper route or any sort of parental involvement.

So I turned to the World Wide Web.