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The Forty Rules of Love

Written by Elif Shafak

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by
Elif Shafak

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Prologue

Between your fingers you hold a stone and throw it into flowing water. The effect might not be easy to see. There will be a small ripple where the stone breaks the surface and then a splash, muffled by the rush of the surrounding river. That's all.

Throw a stone into a lake. The effect will be not only visible but also far more lasting. The stone will disrupt the still waters. A circle will form where the stone hit the water, and in a flash that circle will multiply into another, then another. Before long the ripples caused by one plop will expand until they can be felt everywhere along the mirrored surface of the water. Only when the circles reach the shore will they stop and die out.

If a stone hits a river, the river will treat it as yet another commotion in its already tumultuous course. Nothing unusual. Nothing unmanageable.

If a stone hits a lake, however, the lake will never be the same again.

For forty years Ella Rubinstein's life had consisted of still waters—a predictable sequence of habits, needs, and preferences. Though it was monotonous and ordinary in many ways, she had not found it tiresome. During the last twenty years, every wish she had, every person she befriended, and every decision she made was filtered through her marriage. Her husband, David, was a successful dentist who worked hard and made a lot of money. She had always known that they did not connect on any deep level, but connecting emotionally need not be a priority on a married couple's list, she thought, especially for a man and a woman who had been married for so long. There were more important things than

passion and love in a marriage, such as understanding, affection, compassion, and that most godlike act a person could perform, forgiveness. Love was secondary to any of these. Unless, that is, one lived in novels or romantic movies, where the protagonists were always larger than life and their love nothing short of legend.

Ella's children topped her list of priorities. They had a beautiful daughter in college, Jeannette, and teenage twins, Orly and Avi. Also, they had a twelve-year-old golden retriever, Spirit, who had been Ella's walking buddy in the mornings and her cheeriest companion ever since he'd been a puppy. Now he was old, overweight, completely deaf, and almost blind; Spirit's time was coming, but Ella preferred to think he would go on forever. Then again, that was how she was. She never confronted the death of anything, be it a habit, a phase, or a marriage, even when the end stood right in front of her, plain and inevitable.

The Rubinsteins lived in Northampton, Massachusetts, in a large Victorian house that needed some renovation but still was splendid, with five bedrooms, three baths, shiny hardwood floors, a three-car garage, French doors, and, best of all, an outdoor Jacuzzi. They had life insurance, car insurance, retirement plans, college savings plans, joint bank accounts, and, in addition to the house they lived in, two prestigious apartments: one in Boston, the other in Rhode Island. She and David had worked hard for all this. A big, busy house with children, elegant furniture, and the wafting scent of homemade pies might seem a cliché to some people, but to them it was the picture of an ideal life. They had built their marriage around this shared vision and had attained most, if not all, of their dreams.

On their last Valentine's Day, her husband had given her a heart-shaped diamond pendant and a card that read,

To my dear Ella,

A woman with a quiet manner, a generous heart, and the patience of a saint. Thank you for accepting me as I am. Thank you for being my wife.

Yours,
David

Ella had never confessed this to David, but reading his card had felt like reading an obituary. *This is what they will write about me when I die*, she had thought. And if they were sincere, they might also add this:

Building her whole life around her husband and children, Ella lacked any survival techniques to help her cope with life's hardships on her own. She was not the type to throw caution to the wind. Even changing her daily coffee brand was a major effort.

All of which is why no one, including Ella, could explain what was going on when she filed for divorce in the fall of 2008 after twenty years of marriage.



But there was a reason: love.

They did not live in the same city. Not even on the same continent. The two of them were not only miles apart but also as different as day and night. Their lifestyles were so dissimilar that it seemed impossible for them to bear each other's presence, never mind fall in love. But it happened. And it happened fast, so fast in fact that Ella had no time to realize what was happening and to be on guard, if one could ever be on guard against love.

Love came to Ella as suddenly and brusquely as if a stone had been hurled from out of nowhere into the tranquil pond of her life.

Ella

NORTHAMPTON, MAY 17, 2008

Birds were singing outside her kitchen window on that balmy day in spring. Afterward Ella replayed the scene in her mind so many times that, rather than a fragment from the past, it felt like an ongoing moment still happening somewhere out there in the universe.

There they were, sitting around the table, having a late family lunch on a Saturday afternoon. Her husband was filling his plate with fried chicken legs, his favorite food. Avi was playing his knife and fork like drumsticks while his twin, Orly, was trying to calculate how many bites of which food she could eat so as not to ruin her diet of 650 calories a day. Jeannette, who was a freshman at Mount Holyoke College nearby, seemed lost in her thoughts as she spread cream cheese on another slice of bread. Also at the table sat Aunt Esther, who had stopped by to drop off one of her famous marble cakes and then stayed on for lunch. Ella had a lot of work to do afterward, but she was not ready to leave the table just yet. Lately they didn't have too many shared family meals, and she saw this as a golden chance for everyone to reconnect.

"Esther, did Ella give you the good news?" David asked suddenly. "She found a great job."

Though Ella had graduated with a degree in English literature and loved fiction, she hadn't done much in the field after college, other than editing small pieces for women's magazines, attending a few book clubs, and occasionally writing book reviews for some local papers. That was all. There was a time when she'd aspired to become a prominent book

critic, but then she simply accepted the fact that life had carried her elsewhere, turning her into an industrious housewife with three kids and endless domestic responsibilities.

Not that she complained. Being the mother, the wife, the dog walker, and the housekeeper kept her busy enough. She didn't have to be a breadwinner on top of all these. Though none of her feminist friends from Smith College approved of her choice, she was satisfied to be a stay-at-home mom and grateful that she and her husband could afford it. Besides, she had never abandoned her passion for books and still considered herself a voracious reader.

A few years ago, things had begun to change. The children were growing up, and they made it clear that they didn't need her as much as they once had. Realizing that she had too much time to spare and no one to spend it with, Ella had considered how it might be to find a job. David had encouraged her, but though they kept talking and talking about it, she rarely pursued the opportunities that came her way, and when she did, potential employers were always looking for someone younger or more experienced. Afraid of being rejected over and over, she had simply let the subject drop.

Nevertheless, in May 2008 whatever obstacle had impeded her from finding a job all these years unexpectedly vanished. Two weeks shy of her fortieth birthday, she found herself working for a literary agency based in Boston. It was her husband who found her the job through one of his clients—or perhaps through one of his mistresses.

“Oh, it's no big deal,” Ella rushed to explain now. “I'm only a part-time reader for a literary agent.”

But David seemed determined not to let her think too little of her new job. “Come on, tell them it's a well-known agency,” he urged, nudging her, and when she refused to comply, he heartily agreed with himself. “It's a prestigious place, Esther. You should see the other assistants! Girls and boys fresh out of the best colleges. Ella is the only one going back to work after being a housewife for years. Now, isn't she something?”

Ella wondered if, deep inside, her husband felt guilty about keeping her away from a career, or else about cheating on her—these being the only two explanations she could think of as to why he was now going overboard in his enthusiasm.

Still smiling, David concluded, "This is what I call chutzpah. We're all proud of her."

"She is a prize. Always was," said Aunt Esther in a voice so sentimental that it sounded as if Ella had left the table and was gone for good.

They all gazed at her lovingly. Even Avi didn't make a cynical remark, and Orly for once seemed to care about something other than her looks. Ella forced herself to appreciate this moment of kindness, but she felt an overwhelming exhaustion that she had never experienced before. She secretly prayed for someone to change the subject.

Jeannette, her older daughter, must have heard the prayer, for she suddenly chimed in, "I have some good news, too."

All heads turned toward her, faces beaming with expectation.

"Scott and I have decided to get married," Jeannette announced. "Oh, I know what you guys are going to say! That we haven't finished college yet and all that, but you've got to understand, we both feel ready for the next big move."

An awkward silence descended upon the kitchen table as the warmth that had canopied them just a moment ago evaporated. Orly and Avi exchanged blank looks, and Aunt Esther froze with her hand tightened around a glass of apple juice. David put his fork aside as if he had no appetite left and squinted at Jeannette with his light brown eyes that were deeply creased with smile lines at the corners. However, right now he was anything but smiling. His mouth had drawn into a pout, as though he had just downed a swig of vinegar.

"Great! I expected you to share my happiness, but I get this cold treatment instead," Jeannette whined.

"You just said you were getting married," remarked David as if Jeannette didn't know what she'd said and needed to be informed.

"Dad, I know it seems a bit too soon, but Scott proposed to me the other day and I've already said yes."

"But why?" asked Ella.

From the way Jeannette looked at her, Ella reckoned, that was not the kind of question her daughter had expected. She would rather have been asked "When?" or "How?" In either case it meant that she could start shopping for her wedding dress. The question "Why?" was another matter altogether and had completely caught her off guard.

“Because I love him, I guess.” Jeannette’s tone was slightly condescending.

“Honey, what I meant was, why the rush?” insisted Ella. “Are you pregnant or something?”

Aunt Esther twitched in her chair, her face stern, her anguish visible. She took an antacid tablet from her pocket and started chewing on it.

“I’m going to be an uncle,” Avi said, giggling.

Ella held Jeannette’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You can always tell us the truth. You know that, right? We’ll stand by you no matter what.”

“Mom, will you please stop that?” Jeannette snapped as she pulled her hand away. “This has nothing to do with pregnancy. You’re embarrassing me.”

“I was just trying to help,” Ella responded calmly, calmness being a state she had been lately finding harder and harder to achieve.

“By insulting me, you mean. Apparently the only way you can see Scott and me getting married is me being knocked up! Does it ever occur to you that I might, just might, want to marry this guy because I *love* him? We *have* been dating for eight months now.”

This elicited a scoff from Ella. “Oh, yeah, as if you could tell a man’s character in eight months! Your father and I have been married for almost twenty years, and even *we* can’t claim to know everything about each other. Eight months is nothing in a relationship!”

“It took God only six days to create the entire universe,” said Avi, beaming, but cold stares from everyone at the table forced him back into silence.

Sensing the escalating tension, David, his eyes fixed on his elder daughter, his brow furrowed in thought, interjected, “Honey, what your mom is trying to say is that dating is one thing, marrying is quite another.”

“But, Dad, did you think we would date forever?” Jeannette asked.

Drawing in a deep breath, Ella said, “To be perfectly blunt, we were expecting you to find someone better. You’re too young to get involved in any serious relationship.”

“You know what I’m thinking, Mom?” Jeannette said in a voice so flat as to be unrecognizable. “I’m thinking you’re projecting your own

fears onto me. But just because you married so young and had a baby when you were my age, that doesn't mean I'm going to make the same mistake."

Ella blushed crimson as if slapped in the face. From deep within she remembered the difficult pregnancy that had resulted in Jeannette's premature birth. As a baby and then as a toddler, her daughter had drained all of her energy, which was why she had waited six years before getting pregnant again.

"Sweetheart, we were happy for you when you started dating Scott," David said cautiously, trying a different strategy. "He's a nice guy. But who knows what you'll be thinking after graduation? Things might be very different then."

Jeannette gave a small nod that conveyed little more than feigned acquiescence. Then she said, "Is this because Scott isn't Jewish?"

David rolled his eyes in disbelief. He had always taken pride in being an open-minded and cultured father, avoiding negative remarks about race, religion, or gender in the house.

Jeannette, however, seemed relentless. Turning to her mother, she asked, "Can you look me in the eye and tell me you'd still be making the same objections if Scott were a young Jewish man named Aaron?"

Jeannette's voice needled with bitterness and sarcasm, and Ella feared there was more of that welling up inside her daughter.

"Sweetheart, I'll be completely honest with you, even if you might not like it. I know how wonderful it is to be young and in love. Believe me, I do. But to get married to someone from a different background is a big gamble. And as your parents we want to make sure you're doing the right thing."

"And how do you know your right thing is the right thing for me?"

The question threw Ella off a little. She sighed and massaged her forehead, as if on the verge of a migraine.

"I love him, Mom. Does that mean anything to you? Do you remember that word from somewhere? He makes my heart beat faster. I can't live without him."

Ella heard herself chuckle. It was not her intention to make fun of her daughter's feelings, not at all, but that was probably what her laughing to herself sounded like. For reasons unknown to her, she felt extremely

nervous. She'd had fights with Jeannette before, hundreds of them, but today it felt as though she were quarreling with something else, something bigger.

"Mom, haven't you ever been in love?" Jeannette retorted, a hint of contempt creeping into her tone.

"Oh, give me a break! Stop daydreaming and get real, will you? You're being so . . ." Ella's eyes darted toward the window, hunting for a dramatic word, until finally she came up with ". . . romantic!"

"What's wrong with being romantic?" Jeannette asked, sounding offended.

Really, what was wrong with being romantic? Ella wondered. Since when was she so annoyed by romanticism? Unable to answer the questions tugging at the edges of her mind, she continued all the same. "Come on, honey. Which century are you living in? Just get it in your head, women don't marry the men they fall in love with. When push comes to shove, they choose the guy who'll be a good father and a reliable husband. Love is only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away."

When she finished talking, Ella turned to her husband. David had clasped his hands in front of him, slowly as if through water, and was looking at her like he'd never seen her before.

"I know why you're doing this," Jeannette said. "You're jealous of my happiness and my youth. You want to make an unhappy housewife out of me. You want me to be you, Mom."

Ella felt a strange, sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, as if she had a giant rock sitting there. Was she an unhappy housewife? A middle-aged mom trapped in a failing marriage? Was this how her children saw her? And her husband, too? What about friends and neighbors? Suddenly she had the feeling that everyone around her secretly pitied her, and the suspicion was so painful that she gasped.

"You should apologize to your mom," David said, turning to Jeannette with a frown on his face.

"It's all right. I don't expect an apology," Ella said dejectedly.

Jeannette gave her mother a mock leer. And just like that, she pushed back her chair, threw her napkin aside, and walked out of the kitchen. After a minute Orly and Avi silently followed suit, either in an unusual act of solidarity with their elder sister or because they'd gotten bored of

all this adult talk. Aunt Esther left next, mumbling some poor excuse while chewing fiercely on her last antacid tablet.

David and Ella remained at the table, an intense awkwardness hanging in the air between them. It pained Ella to have to face this void, which, as they both knew, had nothing to do with Jeannette or any of their children.

David grabbed the fork he had put aside and inspected it for a while. "So should I conclude that you didn't marry the man you loved?"

"Oh, please, that's not what I meant."

"What is it you meant, then?" David said, still talking to the fork. "I thought you were in love with me when we got married."

"I was in love with you," Ella said, but couldn't help adding, "back then."

"So when did you stop loving me?" David asked, deadpan.

Ella looked at her husband in astonishment, like someone who had never seen her reflection before and who now held a mirror to her face. Had she stopped loving him? It was a question she had never asked herself before. She wanted to respond but lacked not so much the will as the words. Deep inside she knew it was the two of them they should be concerned about, not their children. But instead they were doing what they both were best at: letting the days go by, the routine take over, and time run its course of inevitable torpor.

She started to cry, unable to hold back this continuing sadness that had, without her knowledge, become a part of who she was. David turned his anguished face away. They both knew he hated to see her cry just as much as she hated to cry in front of him. Fortunately, the phone rang just then, saving them.

David picked it up. "Hello . . . yes, she's here. Hold on, please."

Ella pulled herself together and spoke up, doing her best to sound in good spirits. "Yes, this is Ella."

"Hi, this is Michelle. Sorry to bother you over the weekend," chirped a young woman's voice. "It's just that yesterday Steve wanted me to check in with you, and I simply forgot. Did you have a chance to start working on the manuscript?"

"Oh." Ella sighed, only now remembering the task awaiting her.

Her first assignment at the literary agency was to read a novel by an

unknown European author. She was then expected to write an extensive report on it.

“Tell him not to worry. I’ve already started reading,” Ella lied. Ambitious and headstrong, Michelle was the kind of person she didn’t want to upset on her first assignment.

“Oh, good! How is it?”

Ella paused, puzzled as to what to say. She didn’t know anything about the manuscript, except that it was a historical novel centered on the life of the famous mystic poet Rumi, who she learned was called “the Shakespeare of the Islamic world.”

“Oh, it’s very . . . *mystical*,” Ella chuckled, hoping to cover with a joke.

But Michelle was all business. “Right,” she said flatly. “Listen, I think you need to get on this. It might take longer than you expect to write a report on a novel like that. . . .”

There was a distant muttering on the phone as Michelle’s voice trailed off. Ella imagined her juggling several tasks simultaneously—checking e-mails, reading a review on one of her authors, taking a bite from her tuna-salad sandwich, and polishing her fingernails—all while talking on the phone.

“Are you still there?” Michelle asked a minute later.

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. Listen, it’s crazy in here. I need to go. Just keep in mind the deadline is in three weeks.”

“I know,” Ella said abruptly, trying to sound more determined. “I’ll make the deadline.”

The truth was, Ella wasn’t sure she wanted to evaluate this manuscript at all. In the beginning she’d been so eager and confident. It had felt thrilling to be the first one to read an unpublished novel by an unknown author and to play however small a role in his fate. But now she wasn’t sure if she could concentrate on a subject as irrelevant to her life as Sufism and a time as distant as the thirteenth century.

Michelle must have detected her hesitation. “Is there a problem?” she asked. When no answer came, she grew insistent. “Listen, you can confide in me.”

After a bit of silence, Ella decided to tell her the truth.

"It's just that I'm not sure I'm in the right state of mind these days to concentrate on a historical novel. I mean, I'm interested in Rumi and all that, but still, the subject is alien to me. Perhaps you could give me another novel—you know, something I could more easily relate to."

"That's such a skewed approach," said Michelle. "You think you can work better with books you know something about? Not at all! Just because you live in this state, you can't expect to edit only novels that take place in Massachusetts, right?"

"That's not what I meant . . ." Ella said, and immediately realized she had uttered the same sentence too many times this afternoon. She glanced at her husband to see if he, too, had noticed this, but David's expression was hard to decipher.

"Most of the time, we have to read books that have nothing to do with our lives. That's part of our job. Just this week I finished working on a book by an Iranian woman who used to operate a brothel in Tehran and had to flee the country. Should I have told her to send the manuscript to an Iranian agency instead?"

"No, of course not," Ella mumbled, feeling silly and guilty.

"Isn't connecting people to distant lands and cultures one of the strengths of good literature?"

"Sure it is. Listen, forget what I said. You'll have a report on your desk before the deadline," Ella conceded, hating Michelle for treating her as if she were the dumbest person alive and hating herself for allowing this to happen.

"Wonderful, that's the spirit," Michelle concluded in her singsong voice. "Don't get me wrong, but I think you should bear in mind that there are dozens of people out there who would love to have your job. And most of them are almost half your age. That'll keep you motivated."

When Ella hung up the phone, she found David watching her, his face solemn and reserved. He seemed to be waiting for them to pick up where they'd left off. But she didn't feel like mulling over their daughter's future anymore, if that was what they'd been worrying about in the first place.



Later in the day, she was alone on the porch sitting in her favorite rocking chair, looking at the orangey-red Northampton sunset. The sky felt so

close and open that you could almost touch it. Her brain had gone quiet, as if tired of all the noise swirling inside. This month's credit-card payments, Orly's bad eating habits, Avi's poor grades, Aunt Esther and her sad cakes, her dog Spirit's decaying health, Jeannette's marriage plans, her husband's secret flings, the absence of love in her life . . . One by one, she locked them all in small mental boxes.

In that frame of mind, Ella took the manuscript out of its package and bounced it in her hand, as if weighing it. The title of the novel was written on the cover in indigo ink: *Sweet Blasphemy*.

Ella had been told that nobody knew much about the author—a certain A. Z. Zahara, who lived in Holland. His manuscript had been shipped to the literary agency from Amsterdam with a postcard inside the envelope. On the front of the postcard was a picture of tulip fields in dazzling pinks, yellows, and purples, and on the back a note written in delicate handwriting:

Dear Sir/Madam,

Greetings from Amsterdam. The story I herewith send you takes place in thirteenth-century Konya in Asia Minor. But I sincerely believe that it cuts across countries, cultures, and centuries.

I hope you will have the time to read SWEET BLASPHEMY, a historical, mystical novel on the remarkable bond between Rumi, the best poet and most revered spiritual leader in the history of Islam, and Shams of Tabriz, an unknown, unconventional dervish full of scandals and surprises.

May love be always with you and you always surrounded with love.

A. Z. Zahara

Ella sensed that the postcard had piqued the literary agent's curiosity. But Steve was not a man who had time to read the work of an amateur writer. So he'd handed the package to his assistant, Michelle, who had passed it on to *her* new assistant. This is how *Sweet Blasphemy* ended up in Ella's hands.

Little did she know that this was going to be not just any book, but

the book that changed her life. In the time she was reading it, her life would be rewritten.

Ella turned the first page. There was a note about the writer.

A. Z. Zahara lives in Amsterdam with his books, cats, and turtles when he is not traveling around the world. Sweet Blasphemy is his first novel and most probably his last. He has no intention of becoming a novelist and has written this book purely out of admiration and love for the great philosopher, mystic, and poet Rumi and his beloved sun, Shams of Tabriz.

Her eyes moved down the page to the next line. And there Ella read something that rang strangely familiar:

For despite what some people say, love is not only a sweet feeling bound to come and quickly go away.

Her jaw dropped as she realized this was the contradiction of the exact sentence she had spoken to her daughter in the kitchen earlier in the day. She stood still for a moment, shivering with the thought that some mysterious force in the universe, or else this writer, whoever he might be, was spying on her. Perhaps he had written this book knowing beforehand what kind of person was going to read it first. This writer had her in mind as his reader. For some reason unbeknownst to her, Ella found the idea both disturbing and exciting.

In many ways the twenty-first century is not that different from the thirteenth century. Both will be recorded in history as times of unprecedented religious clashes, cultural misunderstandings, and a general sense of insecurity and fear of the Other. At times like these, the need for love is greater than ever.

A sudden wind blew in her direction, cool and strong, scattering the leaves on the porch. The beauty of the sunset drifted toward the western horizon, and the air felt dull, joyless.

Because love is the very essence and purpose of life. As Rumi reminds us, it hits everybody, including those who shun love—even those who use the word “romantic” as a sign of disapproval.

Ella was as bowled over as if she had read there, “*Love hits everybody, even a middle-aged housewife in Northampton named Ella Rubinstein.*”

Her gut instinct told her to put the manuscript aside, go into the house, give Michelle a call, and tell her there was no way she could write a report on this novel. Instead she took a deep breath, turned the page, and started to read.