

## A Suitable Boy

The day I said yes to an arranged marriage, my father was lying in a hospital bed. My family drummed it into me that he was ill and old and the only thing he wanted to do before his time was to see me married off. As the only unmarried daughter out of six, I was the sole burden on his mind; a burden that could be only be lifted if I said yes to this suitor.

I allowed myself to be primped and prodded in preparation for the arrival of my would-be future husband. I had already said no to about fifteen suitors and my family were becoming impatient, continually reminding me that I was 23 years of age, soon to be 24 and officially 'over the hill'. The fact that my father was lying in a hospital bed provided the perfect leverage to make me meet this suitor.

Adorned in a glittering sari and towering high heels, I was led into the living room and paraded in front of seven people. *Asalam Alaikum*, I greeted each of them, eyes downcast, voice saturated with uncharacteristic diffidence.

The two families exchanged pleasantries and engaged in polite conversation before leaving the two of us to talk, my sister-in-law serving as a chaperone. I silently questioned how I had allowed myself to get into this situation. I had always been headstrong, independent and determined. Was this really happening? *To me?*

Deciding that I couldn't play the wallflower, I met his eyes and asked, 'What do you do?' We exchanged the most rudimentary information (occupation, education, family values). In the space of twenty minutes, he cracked two jokes, making me smile twice. On that basis, I decided that he was the best of the bunch I had seen so far.

Somehow, my family's constant assertions that I was fast becoming unmarriageable managed to penetrate my defences and I began to question whether there would be a better suitor. This guy wasn't as educated as me but he seemed quite smart; he probably earned less than me but at least he had a job; he was slightly balding but he wasn't bad looking... And could I really afford to wait for something better? My family's oft-repeated question gently pushed me into making a decision.

My sister-in-law asked me what I thought. I nodded slightly and, under my breath, said, "He's ok". I assume he did the same because a few minutes later, the room erupted in joy. His mother hugged me tightly, tears of happiness streaming down her face. His sister squeezed me and assured me that I would be "so spoilt" by them all. I nodded and breathed, trying to stay present; trying to comprehend that *I* had made that decision. *I* had said yes.

In the run up to the reception, I grew increasingly desperate. I barely knew this man but I 'belonged' to him and his family. I wanted to break out of it but knew I couldn't confide in my family. I put on a brave face for everyone. Inside, I was scared and full of regret. Months later, my friends would tell me that they felt I was making a mistake but that they stayed silent for fear of offending me. How could I expect them to understand when I barely understood myself?

My desperation got to breaking point and I called my 'fiancé' to ask him if there was any way we could call it off. He asked me if there was "someone else on the scene". He didn't know that I had broken up with my long-term boyfriend when my parents started searching for a suitor – I knew they wouldn't approve of me having found someone myself. I assured him there wasn't but that I couldn't go through with it. He calmed me down and assured me that it was just cold feet. I allowed myself to believe him.

The wedding day arrived and passed so fast. The main thing I remember is sitting in the car next to him, on my way to his house, holding back my tears.

The wedding night was nerve-wracking. People had been around us for so long and to suddenly be alone with this stranger and to have to share a bed with him was beyond comprehension. I remember how he stood by the bed and took my hand, commenting that I was his wife but he had never held my hand before, never kissed me before. He pulled me off the bed and placed his lips on mine. Even as I write this, I have tears in my eyes – not because it was painful or dreadful but simply because I shouldn't have been there. I shouldn't have had to go through that.

I am tempted to skate over this section or employ euphemism to save embarrassment but my intention of writing this piece is to show what it's really like; to show what we really go through.

The room wasn't dark and I remember him reaching for me. I remember him on top of me, spreading my legs, pushing at me, trying to penetrate me. I remember him saying 'relax your hips' and I did try. I tried not to be so tense but I couldn't help it. I didn't have to say no – my body did it for me. Eventually he gave up, switched off the light and went to sleep. I didn't want to think about tomorrow so I let myself drift off.

The first (and last) two days of my marriage were awkward and difficult. His family were loving and sweet but I didn't *belong* there. I felt like I had lost touch with my identity. I was wearing clothes I would never wear – glittering saris heavy with jewels – full makeup with jewellery dripping off every limb. I had to be docile and subservient, which was totally against my character. A loss of self may be a strange thing to complain about since many women go through horrific things after marriage but the absence of cruelty didn't make it all okay.

I had been told many times by my sisters and friends that marriage was about change, compromise and acceptance. It meant putting someone else before you at all times. It meant biting your tongue and bowing your head when need be. But doing all of this, even for just two days, I felt alien to myself.

As I said before, the family weren't cruel. Even their act of putting chicken on my plate and refusing to let me leave the table until I ate it – despite being vegetarian – was done in jest. It wasn't cruelty I was affronted with but a total loss of identity; a strange form of punishment.

The beginning of the end started on the third day. My husband went through my phone and discovered text messages from my ex-boyfriend telling me I had made a mistake. My husband immediately told his family who rallied around him, circling around the common enemy.

I told them that this previous relationship was over but of course, they assumed it meant I was 'tainted'. I remember one of the brothers-in-law saying, "If she's slept with one guy, she's probably slept with two and if she's slept with two, she's slept with three. She's probably been with five different guys. How are we to know?"

I called home, tears streaming down my face, begging my family to come and take me home. My sister's response was "How can I face them? I can't". The family took my phone away, insisting that they would take me home in due course. The ensuing four hours were some of the worst of my life. One after another, they told me how disgusted they were with me.

After four hours of desperation, I asked them why they were keeping me trapped there. With contempt in her voice, his sister-in-law said to me, "Who's keeping you trapped? You can walk out the door any time you want."

And so I did. I grabbed the small suitcase I had packed and walked out of the front door. There was uproar as they chased me down the street. One of the men grabbed my suitcase from me. I grabbed it back saying, "That's mine." He shook it from my grip, snarling, "It's mine now!" I grabbed it back again and met his eyes square on: "No. It's mine."

His sister-in-law grabbed me and wouldn't release me. I cried out, begging her to let me go. I knew this was bringing dishonour and shame to the family but at this point, I was desperate to get away from them. Eventually, when they saw I wouldn't change my mind, they agreed to take me home.

My family weren't much better. My father sat me down and told me that I was to return to the marital home. Only the youngest of my five sisters lent me support, the others opting to exchange opinions about how selfish and stupid I was; how I always got my way and I couldn't do "this one thing".

My brothers had threatened to beat me up. Sitting in front of my father, I asked him, "Is it true that they are coming round tomorrow to 'cut me into pieces'?" My father looked me in the eye and said, "Yes."

That moment broke my heart. All my life I had strived to make him proud and this is what it had come to.

The next morning before the crack of dawn, I gathered my belongings in a small blue suitcase and walked out of my home to go and build a new one. With my worldly possessions in that tiny suitcase, I held my head high and knew I would be okay because now, I had my freedom.

I saw my father only once after that before he passed away six months later. I never told him that I was sorry.

Today, I live alone and am engaged to the man I want to marry. People ask me if I am against arranged marriage and I always say I believe it *can* work but we have to be given the space and time to decide what's right for us. And we have to be brave when making those decisions

You see, while intangible ideas such as *honour* and *culture* are often cast aside as outdated concepts, the truth is that they *do* matter to young Asian women. Most of us have an innate sense of respect for our elders and it takes a great amount of courage to go against their wishes.

We need to rid ourselves of this idea that independence, freedom and autonomy equal shame and embarrassment for our families. We need to rewire our psyches and stand up to our parents. This does not mean sticking two fingers up at culture and tradition, but finding a balance and doing what's right for us. It took me a long time to get there but I'm here and I'm okay.