

It was during my third arranged marriage visit that my third potential husband dropped dead. He was more cute than handsome, but had seemed genuinely interested in my monologue on books – this rarely occurred, as my sisters regularly reminded me.

Just before my prospective husband, Dawud, died, he had been making me laugh. I began to worry when his own laugh turned into a wheeze, which didn't stop. His brother, Harith, had looked at him, frowning.

'Dawud, are you feeling OK?' he had asked. His eyes had widened as he asked the question and saw Dawud's face.

Dawud didn't answer, but continued to wheeze. His hand loosened its hold on his teacup and it fell to the floor. He ignored the fallen cup and started fumbling with the pocket of his grey chinos.

I had taken a swift look at everyone else crammed into our tiny living room, and they all looked as terrified and confused as I felt. Apart from Harith.

He looked pale and had risen to battle his way over people's legs, the coffee table and his mum's rucksack to get to Dawud. Before he could reach him, though, Dawud's head flopped down, and he slumped forwards onto the coffee table. The cups of tea, including my cat-shaped mug that Ummi had

insisted on putting out, were directly in his way as he collapsed.

Harith stumbled over his mum's feet and half fell, half leant over, onto the coffee table. He rooted around inside Dawud's trouser pocket, bringing out an EpiPen. He opened it and stabbed Dawud in his arm, with a surprising viciousness.

'Dawud! Dawud!' his dad had screamed, falling over Dawud and shaking him. This was the first voluntary contribution his dad had made all afternoon. He proceeded to carry on screaming, whilst shaking Dawud's still body.

Three hours before Dawud died, I was standing in our living room, engaged in a ferocious dispute with my mum, Raheela.

‘It’s so bloody embarrassing. I won’t do it.’

‘Every girl does it. How else will you come into the room?’ she said. She had stopped dusting, which was a sure sign that she felt strongly about this.

‘Like a normal person, Mum. Girls don’t do that any more.’

‘Are you still arguing about bringing in the food?’ Saiqa, my eldest sister, had entered the room with a fresh cloth and a bottle of multipurpose cleaner. She carefully rolled up the sleeves of her jumper, which was a large, shapeless knitted number, and made sure she kept her baggy trousers away from the table so the spray didn’t get onto them. She had the most experimental style of us all – helped by the fact that she insisted on making most of her own clothes for sustainability reasons. She gave a half-hearted squeeze of the cleaning spray onto the coffee table, and then proceeded to wipe the table a couple of times.

‘Saiqa did it for her arranged marriage visit and look how nice Sajid is,’ my mum said, turning to Saiqa for support.

Saiqa was four years older than me and my favourite sister to have around when I had arguments with mum. When you have three sisters, each has their special purpose in certain situations. You learn that early on.

‘Sajid’s all right,’ Saiqa said, turning her attention away from the coffee table, evidently deciding that two swipes of the cloth were sufficient. ‘But I’m pretty sure he didn’t agree to marry me based on my ability to bring a tray of teacups into the room. Also, it’s probably safer to not let Iman carry a tray again.’

‘Saiqa, tell Mum that girls don’t carry a tray of tea and food into the living room any more, when a guy comes for an arranged marriage introduction,’ I entreated.

‘Well, she’s kind of right, Ummi,’ Saiqa agreed, twirling the cleaning cloth now. ‘If she wants to do it then fine, but no one really expects that now. She can just walk into the living room like a normal person.’

‘That’s what I said.’

Ummi sighed. I knew it was difficult for her to have people visit our house, especially if she didn’t even know them; but the pressure increased when the sole reason for them coming over was so they could inspect and judge our house, family and, specifically, her daughters.

‘Fine,’ Ummi snapped, straightening up to her full height, which was still just below my shoulders. She usually wore traditional Pakistani salwar kameez when guests came over. But when she was dusting, she would pair her baggy salwar with a T-shirt. The first time I wore that English and Pakistani mix, Ummi forced all of us to listen to a tirade about ruining ‘lovely Pakistani salwar kameezes with your stupid T-shirts’. But Ummi very quickly realised how comfy that combination was, so was currently wearing a bright-green salwar with peacock feathers and Abu’s old dark-green Pakistan cricket shirt. It weirdly worked.

She was getting ready to include Saiqa in her tirade. ‘I’ll

bring in the teas and food and you two can just sit there and let me do all the work. And what's with all this "Mum" business? I'm "Ummi" when you want something, and Mum when you think you are so grown-up.' Mum was still going on.

'Hafsa and Mariam can help you, Ummi,' I replied, noting too late that Saiqa was shaking her head at me behind Ummi's back.

I read Ummi's face as she raised her fluffy blue duster in a threateningly upright manner and I darted out of the door quickly, muttering something about ironing my clothes. I ran upstairs to my sisters' room. My younger sister, Hafsa, shared with my elder sister, Mariam, who was sitting on the floor in front of a large mirror which she had propped up against their chest of drawers. Despite their nine-year age gap, Mariam had always been closer with seventeen-year-old Hafsa than she had ever been with me.

'Can you believe that my make-up tutorial only got five hundred likes? And someone made a comment about me not using enough highlighter. What is wrong with people – do they not recognise good make-up any more?' Mariam exclaimed, somehow managing to apply eyeliner at the same time.

'Your highlighter made you look like you were glowing in the dark, so I'm surprised anyone thought you hadn't used enough,' I said as I settled onto the floor, my back against the wardrobe. The room didn't have much space for anything else, other than a bunk bed, the wardrobe and the chest of drawers which was placed underneath the window.

Mariam glared at me through her reflection in the mirror. Her dyed blonde hair was tied up like a pineapple on top of her head. She was wearing a baggy Primark T-shirt and Hafsa's

old tracksuit bottoms. I always wondered what Mariam's Instagram followers, or indeed anyone outside of our house, would make of what Mariam was like once she was home. She was very pretty anyway, but she didn't leave the house without her hair done perfectly, carefully applied make-up and clothes which, though still from Primark, at least fitted properly. All of that combined made her the type of person that people always seemed to take a double look at whenever we went out. Though I have to say, Mariam barely noticed the stares she got and was always genuinely surprised, and openly annoyed, when men approached her.

Hafsa was lying on her bed and scrolling through her phone. She was still in a bad mood, as Ummi had insisted she should wear appropriate clothes for when the guests came over. She had trotted down happily in her 'nice' tracksuit bottoms and jumper and had been promptly sent back up. She was still in them, probably waiting until the very last minute to get changed. Her hair was scraped back in the style of her favourite footballer, Alisha Lehmann.

'How are you feeling about meeting Dawud?' Hafsa asked, without looking up. Getting her to focus on anything except her phone took a monumental effort.

I shrugged. 'Don't know. It would help if I knew something about him, other than him being an accountant.'

'That's nice,' Hafsa muttered. There was no point in talking to her when she was on her phone.

'You should just find someone to marry yourself,' said Mariam, putting copious amounts of highlighter onto her cheekbones.

'Yeah, 'cos I've spent the last five years hiding under a rock. I've tried, Mariam. The boys at university were either not

interested in marriage, or me, or not my type. And there is no one at work. This is the only way I'm going to meet someone. Anyway, the arranged marriage route worked well for Saiqa.'

'You should try a Muslim dating app,' Mariam continued. 'There are so many boys on there.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'Boys. I want someone who is looking to get married. And by going through an arranged marriage, at least I know the men I meet are seriously interested.'

Mariam and Hafsa exchanged looks quickly before Hafsa turned back to her phone and Mariam to her reflection in the mirror.

'What is it?' I asked, knowing that they were leaving something unsaid – which was not like them at all.

They were saved from answering by Ummi's shrieking. 'Am I supposed to cook and clean and serve the guests while all my daughters just sit upstairs in their rooms? I thought your generation didn't believe in princesses any more?'

We all jumped up and ran downstairs.

After two hours of cleaning, tidying, frying samosas and arguing over turns in the shower, it was nearly time for the guests to arrive. Mariam and I had a heated debate as to whether or not I deserved to get my make-up done by her. Having been promised a loan of my favourite shoes, Mariam had conceded and done my make-up – with no highlighter.

At exactly 3 p.m. the doorbell rang. This was unexpected. It was rude to be on time for Asian families, but clearly Dawud's family had not realised this. There was a silent panic as we all quickly grabbed random bits and pieces which had not been cleared up and Ummi slammed shut the kitchen door, so the visitors could not see the mess and that morning's shopping – not yet unpacked – in the kitchen.

I felt a pang of sympathy for Ummi. She looked so nervous. I didn't feel quite so nervous myself; this was only the third man I was meeting via the arranged process, but I was already feeling fed up with it. It was like going on a blind date with all your family and his family.

I scuttled up to my room, arms filled with bits of laundry, paper and a random teacup that my mum had insisted we didn't have time to put into the kitchen. I heard the front door being opened, the expected arrangement being that I let Ummi and my sisters meet the family first, and then after an interval of thirty minutes I should come in – minus the teas.

My room was the smallest in the house. It could fit a single bed along the left wall (which had been a bunk bed when Saiqa had lived here). A large window at the end of my tiny room let in a good amount of natural light, and this March afternoon was particularly bright and sunny. I perched on the edge of my bed and glanced at my phone, grinning at the messages from my best friend Lekisha, who was deeply interested in all the details about this visit.

With ten minutes still left before I was expected to turn up, I felt the familiar butterflies in my stomach intensify. I turned to my racing-green notebook and began to write. I'd had a notebook ever since Mariam had received one from Saiqa for her birthday when she turned ten years old. She had promptly handed it over to me, before turning her attention to the children's make-up set that her friends had got for her. I had immediately begun to scribble down my thoughts from that day on. In this current notebook, I had a mixture of entries about my two previous Rishtas.

Reading them back, I seemed to be bordering on hysterical. My second Rishta entry seemed to have me worrying entirely

about whether I should hug the man's mum and whether that would show a warmth that she would find lovely. Or would she think it presumptuous of me to be so familiar? Or would it be rude if I didn't hug her? This continued on for another page. I was relieved that my thoughts today seemed a little more composed. Maybe I was getting more confident about this whole Rishta process than I had realised.

I heard my door creak open and looked up sharply to see Mariam slide in, adjusting her black top, which she had insisted on wearing, despite Ummi's outrage that it was too short. As a compromise, Mariam had tucked it into her jeans so that if she stretched up no skin could be seen.

'Because I usually sit and wave my hands in the air when guests come over,' Mariam had muttered.

'How are they? What's Dawud like?' I hissed. I had learnt to my detriment that noise, and especially conversations, travelled through our tiny 1930s terraced house like the wind.

Mariam plopped onto the bed next to me. She liked to come up to my room, usually under the pretext of going to the toilet, to fill me in on her first impression of my Rishta.

Mariam grimaced. 'The family seem nice – well, the mum and dad do. I don't know how well you will get on with the whole family, though.'

She opened up her phone. She had a small but devoted following on Instagram and she had uploaded photos of her make-up under the post title, 'Sister's Rishta Make-up!' I outright refused to be on any of her Instagram posts, so she had to be content with putting up different make-up looks of herself. Which meant she had probably anxiously reloaded her page many times, to see how many likes she had generated.

'What do you mean, the whole family?' I asked, filled with

dread. ‘How many people are there? I mean it, this is going to be my last Rishta. I should have just stopped after the first Rishta meeting I had.’

I still cringed when I remembered my first ever Rishta meeting.

After I had walked into our living room and promptly dropped the heavy tray and its contents of a filled teapot and cups and saucers all over the carpet, the man who had come to meet me had helped clear up. He had even pretended I had not scalded his hand where the boiling-hot tea had splattered onto it.

However, he had then spent most of the visit speaking to Mariam and had looked enthusiastically at her when Ummi had asked if ‘the two’ wanted to talk in private.

Saiqa had taken that as her cue to explain who Mariam was, and that the person who had dropped scalding hot tea on him was who he was here to see.

‘I’m so sorry. Auntie Ghazala, the matchmaker, gave us this photo.’ He had shown us his phone, which sure enough had a message from Auntie Ghazala, with my details – but Mariam’s photo. I had refused to give my photo out for strangers to look at, and anyway, most of the men didn’t share their photo either. So Auntie Ghazala must have just sent an old photo she had of Mariam to reel him in.

‘She must have got them mixed up, but it’s Iman who would like to talk to you,’ Ummi had said, her panic showing clearly on her face.

‘Oh, I was interested in getting to know *this* Iman – I guess Mariam,’ he had replied, looking hopefully at Mariam.

I wished I could have dug a hole with my bare hands in the living-room floor and hidden in it. Instead, I had to watch as

Mariam explained, in her usual diplomatic style, that she was not looking to get married and especially not to someone who was so dismissive of her sister. Which had been followed by the man and his family making a swift exit. A phone call to Aunty Ghazala immediately afterwards had led to loud apologies for her mistake. She was one of Ummi's oldest friends and, despite her constant mistakes, Ummi insisted on using her services.

My face was still warm; I didn't know if I would ever be able to remember that day without feeling like I was reliving it all over again. The one thing we had all learnt was that, at Rishta meetings, we should introduce everyone straight away.

'I need to tell you something,' said Mariam. She had deigned to look up from her phone and had clearly not listened to my rant. 'You need to promise not to tell Saiqa or Ummi until I'm ready, though.'

She looked at me intently, to show how serious this was.