

Just The Way It Is

Yasmin's brute of a cousin will come for her soon. She recalls how he touches himself, the hunger in his hooded eyes, and shudders. From the way he leers at her, she knows he believes she is unsullied, that he will be her first. He thinks she keeps herself for him. She thinks he can think again. It's her father's fault. She's his only daughter, not yet sixteen, and he's traded her for her cousin's money, money he needs to pay off a loan shark. Yet she could never give herself to a man who, without question, gives his heart to a country he has never visited, who sacrifices his soul for a cause founded on blind revenge. Her cousin dreams of living in a land where they have turned back their clocks fourteen hundred years: a place where women do nothing more than cook, clean, provide sons, and the men sit and smoke, tell jokes, pick fights. What of *her* dreams, *her* hopes? She wants to go to university, study medicine, be a doctor in a big hospital, drive a BMW, buy nice clothes and handbags.

She won't marry him. She won't.

Pressing her ear to the door of her bedroom, she listens to her mother begging her father to change his mind, the snarl of his angry refusal. She cringes at the sharp slap; at her mother's crying. This is his way, the old way, how for him and his kind it will always be. He came to a country where women drink freely, forgo motherhood, spurn marriage, but he won't accept his daughter has a right to make her own choices. He makes her wear a salwar kameez, listen to the strings of a bulbul tarang, eat nihari and roti. She wants to wear a short skirt, dance to Justin Bieber, eat pizza. She adores the poetry of Keats and Shelley. Her father snorts at her, says neither of them holds a candle to Rahman Baba. Though how he can compare the poetry is a mystery; he has never mastered English, his sentences jumbled and broken.

He says she must cease being wilful.

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If he knew how she felt about Mattie he'd kill her. Mattie is in the year above her. He has lovely blue eyes and straw-coloured hair that curtains his face. When he smiles her legs turn to rubber. Sometimes they sit opposite each other in the school library. They sometimes talk, but often his eyes speak for him, as if they understand her situation. She has to be careful. Her best friend, Samira, went on a date with an Indian boy. Samira's brother spotted them wrapped tightly around each other, lips stuck fast like a barnacle to a rock. The next day she wasn't in school. Yasmin's mother says Samira's father sent her to his brother in Faisalabad.

She watched a tear run down her mother's cheek.

Her cousin's big black beard hides his hate, a hate he has concealed since boyhood. Now he has an excuse to set right the wrongs: the ruination of their people, the demonization of their faith: injustice burns a hole in his heart. He persuaded her brothers to board a plane to Syria. He said they didn't want to end up like their father, driving a taxi, taking the shit; he knew of something much more worthwhile. They swallowed his fiery words, imagined themselves as freedom fighters, decimating the infidels with their machine guns. (Years ago, he bought them an Xbox with a violent game. They played it all the time. Her father didn't like it, but he didn't take it off them.)

She misses them. She wishes they hadn't gone away.

She watched the horrendous ordeal of that young girl – she can't remember her name – on the TV. The one a bad man shot when she was the same age as her. It happened near Peshawar, the city of her father's birth. That girl wanted education for girls, nothing more. She nearly died. They brought her to England. The men in her neighbourhood don't talk about her. She wonders if they are ashamed, embarrassed or simply disinterested.

Her cousin's a big man, a man with steel in his arms. He boasts no one frightens him. He's a liar. That girl, the one on the TV, she scares him. He's seen how their women have

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rallied round her, supported her, defied subjugation. You wouldn't pick her out on the street; she could be anybody. But she's not just anybody, she's the future. That's the reason he clings to his cause: to murder the future.

On the street she hears people in knots talking about the man who shot those people in Tunisia. They say they're afraid something will happen to them, something unimaginable, it's a disgrace that so few shame so many. If they spot her they stare at her, their eyes cold.

It's to do with her brothers, she's sure of it.

She wishes she knew what went on inside the mosque. Her father won't allow her to go; he says she should pray alone in her bedroom, the mosque isn't a place for women. She's sure that's not right. Her mother says, Don't ask questions, that's just the way it is. Yasmin read a book about suffragettes. She absorbed their pain, their persistence. She'll be eighteen in two years. She'll vote for UKIP. Her father won't like that.

If her father forces her to marry her cousin, where will she end up? Will she become the wife of a monster who'll treat her like a dog? Doesn't her father love her anymore? Why doesn't he ask her what *she* wants? Why doesn't he tell her cousin to go to hell? What is he afraid of?

She hates her father. She hates him, she hates him, she hates him.

Yasmin's cousin is expected. Her stomach tightens. She kneels at a low table, setting out plates and bowls, staring out of the window that looks on to the darkening street. In the kitchen, the scent of spices leaking out, her mother prepares their meal. Her father reads one of the well-thumbed cricket books he brought with him from Pakistan. A car pulls up, a black Datsun, her cousin's. She asks to go to her room. Her father commands her to stay. Her

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cousin pushes open the gate, swaggers down the path as if he owns the world. Her father orders her open the door.

Her cousin settles himself on the settee, drapes his arm along the back, tells her father that Khalid and Tariq won't be coming back, not for some considerable time. Her father's face looks like death. Her mother plunges her head into her palms; her body begins to tremble.

Yasmin asks her cousin, Why?

He looks at her as if she is no more than a worm. Then he takes something green and gold out of his pocket and places it on the table. An airline ticket. He has arranged for her to fly to Peshawar, where another cousin will meet her. From there the cousin will drive her to his house in Batkhela where she is to be prepared for her wedding. Her father knows this breach of protocol is wrong, that it insults him, but he doesn't say a word, lips pressed together, too afraid to do anything about it. Her cousin says marriage will help Yasmin to remember her roots, rediscover her manners, and purify her contaminated soul. Her father gives a reluctant nod.

She shouts, Fuck Off! I'm not going and you can't make me!

It's the first time she has sworn in the presence of her parents. Her father rises, takes two steps and arcs his hand across her face. She rushes up to her room, throws herself on the bed, buries her face in the pillow. She can't stop shaking, tears come in floods. This must be a nightmare. She pinches her arm. It hurts. She'll run away. She'll go to the police. She'll stop eating. She'll kill herself. She'll . . .

She doesn't know what she'll do.

The front door slams. She flies to the window, sees her cousin's departing figure. Her mother screams, the sound of an animal in pain. There is no sharp bark from her father, no

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slap, no break in her mother's tortured keening. It lances Yasmin's heart. How must her mother feel? She has lost her sons and soon she will lose her daughter. What will life hold for her then, old age and bitter emptiness? Her mother screams again. This time the scream is one of fright, of horror. Yasmin races down the stairs.

On the hall carpet, the ticket lies in shreds. Her father is at the front door. In his hand he holds his old rampuri, its wicked blade glinting. Her mother drops to her knees, claws at his waist. He pushes her away, opens the door, and strides out into the dying light.