

Happily Never After

Jameela Siddiqi

A short story.

When his wife got something into her head, it was impossible to talk her out of it. Razia Khanum was a determined sort of young woman, descended from a long line of South Asian matriarchs who specialised in terrorising their men into meek submission, ensuring they remained miserable at all times. Such misery was supposed to keep other predatory females at bay hence minimising the chances of their men fooling around with younger specimens. Whilst their female ancestors had used traditional methods of control, subsequent generations of these women who were born and brought up in the West, had developed their bullying tactics into a fine art with the added veneer of western ideas of feminism and equality. Their men figured that surrender to the lady of the house was the only way to get a quiet life. And Razaq Shaykh was no exception. When his wife nagged and nagged him to get a full medical check, all his usual resistance to such a pointless activity capitulated before her dogged determination.

“But I’m fine! I feel absolutely fine,” he protested.

“That proves nothing! It’s best to make sure there’s nothing lurking in there. These things need to be caught early,” she said in firm tones, much as one would talk to a three-year-old.

“What things? There aren’t any things. Why go looking for trouble? When there are no symptoms and no problems, why go looking for them?” he tried again.

“That’s the trouble with you eastern men! You think you are invincible! It threatens your virility to submit to a medical exam. You think you’ll just go on living forever and ever!”

Using this very argument she had, over the years, curtailed many of his habits that didn’t conform to her idea of a healthy life. The first thing she’d put her foot down about was smoking. He hadn’t resented that too much because he thought a bossy wife was the perfect incentive to give up a harmful and expensive habit. But then his occasional enjoyment of a small glass of wine soon became a thing of the past as she refused to have the stuff at home.

“It sets a very bad example for my children” she would say in high moral tones as her precious children, aged five and seven, sat glued to the TV savouring some or the other cartoon character having their head bludgeoned by another one. After banning wine and other alcoholic drinks, she extended the ban to regular tea and coffee and filled the kitchen with sachets of herbal tea and other root substances that had to be infused to make something that resembled a cross between ditch-water and cow’s urine, which she called ‘tea’. He was able to ignore all of this because he could drink any amount of tea at work and there was nobody to give him a ticking off if he added four cubes of white sugar to the amber liquid.

Next, she invested in an expensive exercise bike and set it up in the spare room, announcing, “You have to get rid of that pot-belly. I’m still young and beautiful. I don’t want people think I’m married to a slob.” There was really no answer to that, so Razaq didn’t try to find one.

She had stopped cooking meat at home and Razaq could only sneak a proper korma or chicken pulao at the house of friends on the rare occasion when she hadn’t come along. She kept him on a diet of yoghurt and salad and soya-beans for six days of the week. On the seventh day, she grudgingly

served some kind of anaemic-looking steamed fish. Sweets and desserts would have been quite out of the question.

Occasionally, very occasionally, if she was away for the weekend visiting her mother in another town, then Razaq savoured his two full days of freedom by consuming all the forbidden substances to excess. Her mother, he was convinced, was the chief culprit in making his life a misery. But he encouraged her to visit her mother because the alternative would've been to have the cantankerous old bat in his house, which would have been a fate worse than death. This latest bee in the bonnet about unnecessary medical checks too, he was sure, had been instigated by his mother-in-law, providing constant advice and tips for her princess-daughter on how to tame a husband and keep him in good shape. Hence Razia had made all the appointments, booked him for all the tests and simply presented him with the ultimatum that he should keep himself ready for this most necessary outing. She had taken time off work to escort him to the tests. She wasn't taking any chances.

That had been over two weeks ago. And now, this phone call from a sickeningly neutral English secretarial voice summoning them to come and see a doctor with regard to his test results. How can one phone call from a complete stranger create such consternation in what was otherwise a fairly humdrum existence? The voice had been cold and detached and refused to furnish any details which only caused his wife, Razia, to needlessly point out: "See? I told you, one never knows. One should always have regular medical checks!"

After that phone call, he had been scared for the first time since this whole saga began. Up until then, he had seen the entire process as a necessary evil to pacify his wife. But now that he'd been summoned to go in and discuss his results, he was petrified. His own ideas on good health were completely different to his wife. You lived a simple life, you told the truth, you didn't hurt anybody and if you felt any twinges or pains or any other symptoms, you just ignored them. You carried on eating, drinking and being happy because, at the end of the day, the width and breadth of one's life was more important than its length. No point in living to be 200 years old if you were only ever

allowed to eat watercress and drink herbal tea and beetroot juice!

The appointment with the doctor was to be early on the following morning. Razaq was a bundle of nerves the night before. While Razia slept soundly, he spent the night tossing and turning and getting up to drink water followed by going to the bathroom. At one point he even managed to sneak out of the back door into the cool night air and smoke a couple of cigarettes in the back garden. He kept his secret stash in a box of Kleenex, at the back of one of the bookshelves, the white death-sticks cleverly buried between layers of white tissues. He came back in and switched on the TV. After staring at CNN for a full 20 minutes, he felt sleepy again. He went back to bed and felt wide-awake, so he got out of it again. Eventually, he crawled back to bed and just when he felt he was drifting into a comfortable drowsy state, Razia was shaking him:

"Get up! Get up! We're going to be late. Nine-thirty sharp, they said!"

"It's not fair," he protested. "I've hardly had any sleep. This lack of sleep is far worse for my health than anything they might find wrong..."

Razia shuffled and pushed and threw various garments at him to get ready. When he came out of the shower, she had laid out his breakfast: sugarless porridge made with water and a cup of raspberry tea. Today, of all days, he could have done with two fried eggs, crusty white bread, cream, honey, jam, toast, proper PG Tips tea with lots of sugar.

Still smarting at not having had enough sleep, he sat quietly as she drove to the special private hospital complex where he'd had the expensive tests. The doctor greeted them with a cheery Good Morning but managed to convey the impression that he had other, more exciting and fulfilling things to see to and they were merely holding him up.

"Now then, Mr... err... 'Sheekh'? Is that how you say your name...?"

"Shaykh", said Razak sullenly. Razia interrupted, "Oh just call him Razaq, and I'm his wife, Razia."

"I'm really, really sorry but you see, there is nothing," said the doctor in a crisp voice.

A puzzled Razia said, "But that's great! It's great there's nothing, so why are you sorry?"

"He's sorry he can't make any more money out of me because I've got nothing wrong with me," Razaq said under his breath, with a great deal of relief – only to have his toe stamped on by his wife's high-heeled shoes.

"No, you don't understand. Mr ...err... Mr Sikh, you see there is nothing. Nothing at all! Nothing registered on our machines! No pulse, no heart-beat, no brain function, no liver function, no kidney function, no blood count...err... nothing. I don't know how to say this but, you see, you are dead! I'm really, really sorry."

Razia let out a high-pitched wail: "Whaaat? No, no you've got it wrong. There's been some mistake. Tell me you're lying. My husband can't be dead. I'm too young to be a widow. But we eat such healthy food and take exercise, how can he be dead?"

"Not only is he dead, there's a distinct possibility he was never alive," said the doctor in a dramatic whisper.

Razia screamed. "What? You mean I've been married to a corpse all these years? Oh no! I wish I'd listened to my mother. You see, I thought he was just lazy. I didn't know he was actually dead!"

Razaq, who had remained quiet all through these ridiculous exchanges between the doctor and his neurotic wife, finally spoke up.

"Doctor, listen. You can't be serious. I am alive. I am 35 years old..."

"And I'm 58," retorted the doctor. "What's that got to do with it? You're still dead. Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I need to...."

"No, no, please," wailed Razia. "Please don't ask us to go. There must be something you can do. There must be some cure. Isn't there an operation he can have?"

"Sorry, Mrs...err...Mrs Sake. We are only allowed to operate on the living. No operations for the dead! Those are the rules," the doctor said with a dismissive wave while at the same time getting up to see them out.

"This is silly, let's go," Razaq said to his wife.

"You're not taking this seriously are you?" she squealed. "The doctor says you are dead and you don't think we should be doing anything about it? You're happy to see me as a widow, aren't you? Think of your children! Think of my poor mother! How will she take the grief of having her daughter turned into a widow at the tender age of 30? Don't you have any feelings?" Razia was whimpering openly now.

"How can I have feelings?" her husband replied wryly. "I'm dead, remember?"

"This is no joking matter," she chided him and then, turning to the doctor she said, "I demand a second opinion! You are not the only doctor in the whole world! Come on," she said, dragging her husband by the arm. "We are going to go and get a second opinion."

"I know this is upsetting," said the doctor, "but believe me there is no second opinion. Death is death and now, I'm obliged to issue a death certificate. Cause of death... err... Let me see. It's hard to say, really since nothing is working in his body. Let's just call it bronchial pneumonia. That sounds good and nobody really knows what it means. That's usually the cause when nothing else can be found. Here, take this certificate. You'll need it for the registry and the funeral parlour otherwise they'll refuse to bury him."

Razia took the certificate tearfully and stared at it in disbelief. She folded it lovingly and stuffed it into her overcrowded handbag.

Once they were outside, he said to her: "Hey, you don't really believe I'm dead, do you? Look, I'm here, right here, walking alongside you. I'm talking, I'm breathing, I'm seeing, I'm listening. How can I be dead?"

"He's a doctor. He should know what he's talking about. He said there was nothing, absolutely no-

thing, working inside you. According to the medical tests, there is no evidence that you are alive. I want to get that verified by another doctor, just to make sure..."

Just then her mobile phone rang. It was her mother. On hearing her mother's voice, she started crying again. Her mother had rung to see how the appointment had gone.

"Oh, Mama!" she whimpered. "Razaq is dead. Yes, dead ... I know, I know, I can't believe it either. What? Cause of death? I don't know, they said pneumonia-something. There is no heartbeat, no liver or something and, clinically, he is dead. "

A few minutes of disjointed conversation was followed by a lot of crying on both sides. Eventually, she said to her mother, "Yes, I need you. Please, as soon as you can. Yes, I'll get a neighbour to pick you up at the station. Oh, I just don't know how to tell the children."

That's all I need thought Razaq. First, a doctor tells me I'm dead. Next thing I know, the mother-in-law from hell is coming to stay. Oh God! Death would be the better option. But, wait, I am dead. Great! Perfect excuse! I'll start behaving like a corpse. That way, I won't have to eat her insipid food, or make polite conversation or get on that wretched exercise bike. I'll just lie down and be dead. Oh, God is kind. He certainly works in mysterious ways!

Razia's mother took charge from the moment she arrived. She started fussing in the kitchen and preparing inedible fruit and flower salads for her grandchildren. She got out all the kitchen towels and started ironing them. She emptied out every kitchen cupboard and then rearranged things all neatly again. In between these vital tasks she comforted her daughter: "I knew there was something wrong with him all along. I always I disliked him. Now I know why. You married a dead man! You see he was never alive. No wonder I felt so uneasy around him. I don't like looking at corpses. Now, my dear, I know this is a distressing subject, but we have to talk about the funeral."

At that point Razaq had had enough of the joke. He got up from the sofa where he'd been lying down and arrived in the kitchen. His mother-in-law let out a yelp: "Tell him to go away! I'm scared of corpses."

"Mother, dear, I'm not a corpse. How can you be so silly? See, it's me. I'm walking, talking, my eyes are open. How can I be a corpse?"

The mother-in-law looked at him strangely and still keeping her distance said: "One must accept death. I know it is very hard but it's bad form to expect to live forever. When you are dead, you must bow your head gracefully and prepare to go. Now, where would you like to be buried? And what sort of coffin would you like?"

"I'm not dead!" he screamed, getting a bit fed up of the game.

"Yes, yes. Of course you're not. The soul lives on. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be able to visit us whenever you like. And you'll be able to visit your relatives in India without having to buy a plane ticket. Think of the savings!"

That evening, as Razak had been dozing in the spare room, he was woken up by lots of voices in the living room downstairs. No doubt, the news of his death had spread and neighbours, friends and relatives had arrived for condolences. There was a great deal of moaning and wailing. He crept downstairs to take a look and, standing on the staircase which afforded him a good bird's eye view of the living room, he saw a closed coffin placed in the centre of the mourners. All the women were dressed in black and they were all lamenting the fate that now awaited the beautiful 30-year-old widow. One of the women caught sight of him on the staircase and threw her hands up in prayer followed by an utterance of "Astaghfirullah! [May God forgive me!] It's amazing how the body clings to life. The soul stays very close to the body, refusing to give up."

Soon after witnessing this surreal image, he felt the cold February breeze of the local cemetery. Again, there were noises and murmurs around him. He heard the sounds of the Muslim midday prayer, done as a special funeral prayer. And then he heard his own voice in the distance, perhaps coming from deep under the ground: "No, no, let me out! Please let me out! I'm not dead! I'm alive. Get me out of here!"

It was pitch-dark. He could hear himself clearly, but he wasn't so sure that those above the ground

could hear him. He thumped his hands on the roof of the coffin and went on thumping until he heard a scream.

“Why are you beating my face?” shouted his wife. “Get up! We have to go and see the doctor.”

Suddenly a strange resolve took hold of him. After a lifetime of meekness and subservience, he felt born again. In a tone that he'd never used for her in their entire married life, and one that left her utterly stupefied, he said:

“I'm not going anywhere! You go where you want to go! Now, just clear off and let me catch up on some sleep! I don't need any doctor to tell me whether I'm dead or alive.”

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