A Marriage of Convenience

He’s a handsome boy, Aalimah’s husband.

Sometimes she just watches him, like you might watch a pleasant view - a slow sunset, or a thunderstorm – for the sheer, constant individuality of him. She watches him in the knowledge that no one will ever see him exactly as she sees him in that one, small moment; the angle of an eyebrow, and the fine veins in his eyes from a heavy night on the wine, which, somehow, only make him lovelier. The strands of tar-black hair always fall differently, and he blows them away from his face with faux impatience, like his beauty is nothing more than a small annoyance to him, a mosquito. He knows she watches him but pretends he doesn’t catch her, a small curve of the upper lip the only indication that he isn’t oblivious to the admiration his physical appearance has always demanded. He is more than used to it. He’s sharp and square shouldered, clipped and neat. Skin the texture of a downy peach and the colour of dark rum, or treacle. He smells of orange blossom, cumin, coriander. Baadir is a chef, but even when he isn’t working he smells the same, even after a shower. When they were first married she hid his aftershave to see what he’d smell like without it, but he was just the same to her. He laughed when she told him what she’d done. She always tells him what she’s done, *I went to… I kissed a… I think I love…,* and more often than not, he laughs. He is shorter than her, so when she takes him to work parties she must wear flat shoes, which are not flattering to her ankles. He says her ankles are not flattering to the shoes and she taps him on the back of his glossy head, calls him *Short Arse* while he calls her *Lanky Bitch*, which never ceases to amuse them both. They do not talk like this in front of their respective parents, although she does tap his head, occasionally, in front of her mother. In her mother’s eyes, his height is his only flaw. Aalimah, for once, agrees.

He’s leaving for work now, and he kisses her, taking time over the gesture. It is important to them both, this ritual. She submits to his embrace, limp as McDonald’s lettuce. He leaves a warm dab of moisture on her cheek that she does not brush away, even after he’s gone, letting her skin dry naturally. His invisible mark is as real to her as a wax seal on a love letter, or a stamp that certifies their union, if not before God then between themselves. There are, after all, four people in their marriage, and God isn’t one of them. Aalimah has privately issued the numbers: Baadir is 1 (of course) and she is 3 (logically). She supposes if God was to have a number he’d be 13. *Unlucky for some,* she says to the burgundy kettle they chose together. She fills the void he has made by making a cup of very sweet, milky tea – cinnamon, star anise, ginger – and leaves her seat at the dining table, which is spread with crisp sheets of A4, to perch at the breakfast counter.

She sips short and quick, as she often does when she thinks about God, and flips her wallet open, snaps it shut. She does this several times, *flip and snap*. The sun is beginning to break through the dawn, and she squints in the light of a new day. Her feet are cold, but her face is hot and her forehead perspires. She fans herself with her wallet, which is made of sturdy brown leather and contains only a few things; she does not believe in debris, in the dregs of life that people are wont to carry around. There are only: two bank cards, a driver’s licence, a library card and a single slip of paper - a cutting from a newspaper. She removes the cutting now, reads it without seeing the words. She has carried it so long that the paper is fluffy and soft, like the inside of a puppy’s ear. The edges are an ugly, soiled black, from the dye of her wallet and the grease in her hands. From its own bleeding print. She has read it so often that the words have lost their meaning; it is her rabbit’s foot, this newspaper cutting, and she would feel unprotected without it, like a character in a corny 90’s video game, facing an Endboss without a pixelated amulet. She realises, quite suddenly, that she is holding it and she drops it on the counter as if it’s hot. Takes up her tea once more, which is tepid by comparison.

Around her, practical things sit on expensive surfaces. An angle poise lamp, ugly enamel white, squats on the statement dining table they only ever use one corner of at a time. Her dainty soldering iron is poised and ready for use on the other end to her scattered papers. There are delicate pieces of filigree silver surrounding it in various stages of completion, and small burn marks, scalded deep into the wood. Her foot is banging on the leg of her stool, knocking out a rhythm – she always turns to the music in her head when she is waiting – the foot is getting numb but she doesn’t notice. Even if she did notice she wouldn’t stop. There is no television in this or any room of the house, instead there are books left in piles where a television might be. Aalimah and her husband select books each evening from these piles as though selecting a TV channel, and drape themselves over the furniture to read, their warm, brown limbs hung artfully over the arms of chairs, fingers and toes skimming the hardwood floor, and lips moving silently as though they’re having a secret conversation. They read each other’s recommendations but never discuss them. The first time they met (darkness broken by neon flashes, red wine for him and cappuccino for her, shoes sticking to the dirty floor, someone else’s chip by her elbow) she’d said: *the intimacy of shared reading can be so easily broken by the brashness of opinion*, and whether he agreed or not, he has never divulged. She loves him for this. She loves him for so many things.

They once took a drunken personality test online, which proclaimed him to be a Hedonist and her a High Achiever. They argued with the screen, flecks of rainbow moisture hitting and sticking there, slim, healthy arms across bare shoulders and tears of uncomplicated joy rolling down their cheeks. In retrospect, the personality test was right. Frightening how a Facebook quiz knows her better than her mother. U*neducated flesh and passionless blood*, she says aloud in the empty room. Baadir is undoubtedly a hedonist. She looks across the room where his violin hangs from the wall by the dining table. It is only one below a Stradivarius, but he plays it every day and the neck is slick from use. Little scratches around the F holes where his fingernails have grazed in the passion of his playing. He once told her solemnly that he was evicted from a flat when he spent three month’s rent money on the instrument. She loves to look at it when she is thinking and when she’s not. She loves to watch him play it - the rosewood sets off the fire in his skin and the music makes his eyes dance with more life than a thousand men. Baadir plays violin like her father plays golf, but his prowess is lost on her parents. She doesn’t care; she prefers that he plays just for her, she is capable of jealousy.

*More sugar*, says Aalimah to herself. The heat of her tea had hidden its blandness, and now with cooling she can tell it is not like her mother’s. Where Baadir is warm, almost hot to the touch and to the eye, Aalimah’s mother is cool. A room seems to physically drop in temperature when her mother enters it - *maybe that’s why she makes so much tea*. She makes the best sweet tea Aalimah has ever tasted, and Aalimah has tasted a lot of tea, all over England and Europe and China and India. Aalimah loves her mother but does not really like her. When she visits home, and holds her mother to her chest, she never sighs in that contented way a person should sigh when they know they have come home, there is no sense of relief. There are very few senses at all. In their place is an abundance of other things: calculation, planning, execution, as precise as Baadir’s music and as cool as her mother’s breath. Her mother embraces Baadir with more warmth than she can muster for her own daughter – she can see the relief in that particular embrace - and both her parents adore Baadir, though her father wishes he would take up golf, *It is a pastime for men*, her father tells her through his teeth when she has kept them at the first hole for more than five minutes. She only plays for the thrill of hitting something with a stick, *It is called a club*, her father likes to correct her. She also plays for the comfort of her father’s limited conversation, his staccato words and awkward sentences that are so familiar. She enjoys the comfort of knowing a person completely who will never know the completeness of herself.

When she thinks of her family, her face stretches into an automatic smile which may be mistaken for happiness. In reality, it is something more and less and altogether complex – a mosaic of imbedded tradition and assumed love, the shards of a difficult conscience, struck together over time to form a firm sediment of half-formed opinions. She smiles her automatic smile now, stirring her cooling tea with a long naked fingernail. The tea is too sweet to drink, she has over-compensated. She sucks it from her finger, slipping her tongue beneath her nail, and still watching the violin. Her fingers rub at the slip of paper without her brain’s knowledge or permission. They move with the quickness of habit.

A knock on their thick oak door comes to her now over the noise of her memories, echoing through the house. It’s the beat of a song in her heart and she knows this particular rhythm well – *Dum, de-dum, dum dum*. She taps out a canon of the knock on her mug of chai and a new smile settles on top of the last one. She gets up to answer the door.

The room is empty without her, but for the practical things on expensive surfaces. The sound of Aalimah and her guest in the hall is muffled and secretive, as though they are ashamed. The sharp suck of an affected kiss of greeting in the air, some whispering, shoes being removed and falling with a clunk to the bare wood floor. A musical laugh that rings out very clear and sweet as a violin solo, and more kissing, soft and genuine this time, altogether different.

On the counter, the slip of paper lies beside a cold cup of tea and a good leather wallet. There is a teaspoon making a dent in a pool of cold milk, and the pool is slowly spreading as if it’s alive, inching ever closer to the paper. The print is faded with the oil of Aalimah’s hand – there is more ink in Aalimah than on the paper, now. It says:

*Gay Muslim woman seeks similar*

*man for marriage of convenience.*

*Must be professional, must be non-smoker.*

 *Musician preferred.*

The milk makes contact with the paper and the words begin to disappear in the dark spread of liquid. Above, two women are making love in the late morning, in a bed that smells of orange blossom, cumin and coriander. She’ll make dinner later, for numbers one, two, three and four, but she isn’t thinking of what she must buy, or about the table cloth that needs airing. She’s forgotten the dullness of paperwork and the tiny pieces of silver. There is a quiet sigh in the air that seems to come from the house itself.

The tea is cold now. The words on the paper are illegible.