



DAISY

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

The sound of snoring was driving her insane. Aunt Rhea, her mother's sister, had come to live with them after losing her job. The house, which had not seemed overcrowded before, now suddenly was.

Everything Aunt Mayra did, come to think of it, she did loudly. Her voice had a strident quality, demanding to be heard. When she was helping Mayra's mother with the cooking, she banged everything about. Reading between the lines, Mayra's mother, Fatima, was not happy about the arrangement of her sister living with them, but she tolerated it, as she tolerated everything else.

In-n-n... earth-shaking rumble. Out-t-t... funny-sounding whistle.

Staying awake at night meant that Mayra was tired the next day, which affected her schoolwork. To make matters worse, it was the first day of Ramadan. She would have to get up in a couple of hours' time – at 3.15 am precisely. The time had been worked out using a special calendar. They were obliged to eat before sunrise, then touch nothing else until after sunset.

She descended the ladder of the bunk bed, careful not to wake the dyspeptic walrus, and went downstairs to the kitchen to get herself a glass of water.

Ahhh, that was better! She suffered from a dry mouth at night.

Sitting in the living room, she noticed that her mother's mannequin looked slightly



scary in the shadows. It was as if a headless ghost was observing her. Her mother worked as a seamstress, assisted by Aunt Rhea and sometimes by Mayra herself.

Oh, my goodness! She could even hear the snoring from here!

Since Aunt Rhea had moved in, Mayra's quality of life had diminished. The woman was obsessed with how Mayra was doing academically, monitoring her while she did her homework (not helping her to do it, of course). She had even argued that Mayra should be transferred to another school because the one she was attending was not performing well enough. Mayra's school's results were in fact typical for a Luton secondary school. Not great, but not terrible either. Thankfully, her parents had rejected the idea, but the possibility of leaving her friends and starting somewhere else had been seriously disturbing.

She went back upstairs and stood over Aunt Rhea, observing her snorting away. Unfortunately, as aunt and niece, they resembled each other physically. That was another thing Aunt Rhea was obsessed with: Mayra's appearance. She had no compunction, for example, about talking about Mayra's hairy legs and armpits, which required shaving every few days. It was interesting that she picked on Mayra rather than her brother, Azmal, who was a year older than Mayra. What irked Mayra especially was Aunt Rhea's hypocrisy. Aunt Rhea's poor school record was a case in point, but she also pretended to be religious when she wasn't – arguing that Mayra should wear a hijab when she did not wear one herself. At thirty-one, she was still a relatively young woman, ten years younger than Mayra's mother. She had a voluptuous figure and was quite kittenish in her behaviour.

Mayra climbed into the upper bunk and lay down. A few moments later – or so it felt – she awoke. She must have drifted off.



‘Time to get up.’

She winced as Aunt Rhea pinched her cheeks, a habit of hers that she hated.

‘Yes, Khala,’ she responded.

Her parents, her grandmother, her brother and her aunt were already seated around the kitchen table when she arrived downstairs. Suhoor, the meal before dawn, was laid out, consisting of, among other things, a curry and hot chapattis. Naturally, she did not feel hungry, despite being encouraged by her father to eat. She did not see so much of her father these days. He used to work at the Vauxhall plant, where he was laid off, and now worked unsociable hours as a taxi driver, often at the weekends and in the evenings. Despite not holding an office job, he would invariably wear a suit and tie.

‘You look exhausted!’ Aunt Rhea remarked. ‘How much sleep did you get?’

‘Not much,’ she replied, resisting the temptation to add, ‘thanks to you’.

Unquestionably, the dynamic in the house had changed since her sister, Yumna, had moved out and been replaced by this invader. Aunt Rhea dominated every conversation. Mayra’s mother, who had a gentle nature, was shut out, and her brother, who had a dry sense of humour, now kept himself to himself. As for her father, Zahid, and his mother, Dadi, even they sidestepped the energy force represented by Aunt Rhea. When her father said to her mother that they must perform hajj one day, Aunt Rhea butted in and talked about travelling to Mecca as well. She had an annoying way of going along with whatever her brother-in-law came out with, presumably because he had the power to kick her out.

‘May I have a cup of tea, Fatima?’ Dadi asked.

‘Of course,’ the other replied.



The old lady was obsessed with chai, which she saw as a restorative for her nerves. She was bent over, nearly blind with cataracts, and suffered from diabetes and arthritis. Yet, as everyone knew, she was still sharp mentally. While her son was the patriarch in the family, she was the power behind the throne. She was always talking about the past and the relatives she had left behind. The family had had a tough life, selling fruit and vegetables in Karachi.

‘OK, that’s it,’ Mayra’s father instructed. ‘Stop eating.’

It was not quite the end of the rigmarole, however. Encouraged by the fanatical hypocrite who shared her bedroom, Mayra made wudu, cleaning herself before praying. She washed her hands, face and feet, as taught to her by her mother, then knelt on the prayer mat, the Ja Namaz, and did the Fajr prayer. It had already gone four o’clock when she slipped back into her bunk.

Up again!

In a daze, she got dressed for school, donning her customary black trousers, white shirt, black coat and hijab. She was allowed very little privacy. Somehow it had not been a problem when sharing the room with Yumna, but now she was obliged to endure a running commentary. She was informed that she needed to watch her weight, which, apparently, was prone to accumulate in the same areas as the speaker.

Eventually, though, she escaped the house, where she met up with Zara, her best friend, at the bus stop. Zara was a cultural Muslim, who did not wear a hijab and wore the limit of make-up allowed by the school in the sixth form.

‘Ramadan Mubarak,’ Mayra said.

‘Ramadan Kareem,’ Zara responded.



Both girls, especially the latter, were only following convention. Zara's parents, like her, had liberal views, but she still had needed to get up early on the orders of her father.

'None of us were in a good mood. Mum and Dad were snapping away at each other. My brother did not come downstairs at all. God knows how he's going to manage not eating today. I tell you, Mayra, I don't think I will last it out for even a few hours. If I don't feel well – in other words, hungry – I'm defo going to hit the tuck shop.'

Zara had always been a rebel. She was happy to call herself a coconut – brown on the outside, white on the inside – and would use swear words, drink alcohol and eat pork. Shockingly, she had kissed four boys, one of whom was white. In fact, most of the time these days she talked about boys. Nick Carter of Backstreet Boys was her favourite all-time male. 'He should wear a burqa to stop me from being attracted to him!' And she found it hilarious when Aunt Rhea had described the video for the song 'Everybody', which Mayra had played at home, as 'filth produced by the devil Shaitan'.

What could Mayra say about boys in return? All she had managed to proffer was the name of someone to whom she was attracted. Ross Atkinson was a tall bespectacled boy who attended her English classes. There was something about his smile and the way he moved that appealed to her. Fortunately, he was not Zara's type. She preferred, she said, boys who were less straitlaced.

The morning passed without incident. However, as Mayra was on her way to the prayer room at noon – she felt guilty if she did not perform the five daily prayers – she noticed a ten pound note lying outside the girls' toilets. Bending down to pick it up, she was startled by a shout.



‘Oi! What d’you think you’re doing?’

Three girls from the top year, all taller than her and wearing short skirts, suddenly surrounded her. She recognised them as being the same trio she had seen the previous week smoking in the corner of the playing fields. The smell of their perfume was sickly.

‘Isn’t stealing a sin in your religion?’ one of them asked, snatching the ten pound note out of her hand.

‘Yeah,’ another said. ‘Shouldn’t they cut off your arm or something?’

Mayra was tongue-tied, staring at each speaker in turn. Her intention, of course, had been to hand the money in to the lost property office.

‘She probably needs the money to fund her terrorist activities,’ a third one sneered. ‘What’s with the headscarf? Are you afraid some man will be turned on if they see your hair?’

‘Leave her alone.’

The interruption was just as shocking in its way as the initial confrontation.

‘This is not funny,’ Ross Atkinson said.

‘Who are you?’ one of the girls asked.

‘Come along, Mayra,’ he said. ‘Let’s go.’

He took her arm and led her away. There was some sniggering from the girls but no attempt to follow them. Her mind was in a whirl over what had just happened. This was Ross Atkinson. And he knew her name!

They went outside and turned a corner. Now, she was facing him. He was dressed in a smart blue shirt and grey blazer. She was mesmerised by his floppy brown hair and soft



brown eyes.

‘They’re total lowlifes, aren’t they? I saw them place that ten pound note on the floor. I wondered what they were up to.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘You were very brave.’

He laughed. ‘I don’t think so. What were they going to do? Beat me up?’

‘No, but, well, you know! I’m glad you were around.’

‘Hey – no problem. Next time, we’ll report them to Mr Eccles.’ Mr Eccles was the head of the sixth form. ‘Look, tell you what. Let’s swap numbers. You can tell me if they bother you again.’

She typed in the digits on his phone and then waited as he texted her his number in return. Fortunately, the school had not yet banned the use of mobile phones outside of lessons.

‘Oh dear!’ she said, noticing the time, ‘I must go and pray.’

‘Do you want me to accompany you?’

‘It’s OK. Hopefully, I’ll be fine.’

She walked off, red-faced. What an idiotic thing to say! She should have taken the opportunity to spend longer with him.

Oh, well. At least she had made his acquaintance. And now, for once, she had something to tell Zara.

At lunchtime, which she spent not only with Zara but also with another friend, Leanne, she told them about the incident with the ten pound note. Leanne was sympathetic, but strangely enough, Zara thought Mayra had partly provoked the girls’ hostility.



‘Take my advice. If you don’t want that sort of trouble, don’t wear a hijab.’

‘Don’t you think people respect the choice I’ve made?’

‘In some cases, maybe, but it’s also a target for bullies.’

‘Anyway’ – Mayra did not want this discussion right now – ‘somebody came to my rescue and whisked me away.’

‘Whisked you away?’

‘Ross Atkinson.’

Zara shrieked. ‘You’re kidding! Isn’t he the guy you’ve got a crush on?’

Mayra had not confided this information to Leanne. But never mind. Leanne could be trusted.

‘Ross Atkinson is a tall specky guy in my geography class,’ Zara explained to Leanne.

‘Do you know him?’

Leanne shook her head.

‘OK, continue,’ she said, redirecting her attention.

Mayra revealed what had happened, practically word for word.

‘Right. So, he’s interested in you,’ Zara pronounced.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Come off it! He’s got your number!’

‘Why would he be interested in me?’

‘Are you joking?’

‘I dress plainly. I wear a hijab.’



‘Believe me, boys will be checking you out. You’ve got a great figure and a pretty face. So, how did things end?’

‘I told him I had to go away and pray.’

Zara’s eyes narrowed.

‘You told him you had to go away and pray?’ she repeated incredulously. ‘Oh, my God, how big a turn-off is that?’

Leanne was laughing so much that she was practically choking. It took her a while to recover.

‘What?’ she asked.

Zara was eyeing her suspiciously. ‘I’m generally a nice person, am I not?’

‘Yeah. What about it?’

‘Even I have my limits. I recommend you hurry up and finish that sandwich or, believe me, something bad will happen.’

The pangs of hunger did not hit Mayra until midway through the afternoon. By the time she got home, she felt weak and tired and just wanted to go to bed. Before she did so, she looked up Ross’s profile on Instagram. She had seen that his account was private on a previous occasion but hoped that he might have changed the settings. He hadn’t, of course. She then lay down to sleep for a couple of hours before being woken up and asked to help prepare the meal, which was known as Iftar.

At last! It was 8.30 pm.

The family started by eating dates, which was traditional, then moved on to pakoras and samosas. How delicious it all was, particularly the jallab, which was a fruit syrup. For the



second time that day, somebody – her father – complimented her appearance, telling her that she looked beautiful. She recalled Zara’s remarks that morning about her parents snapping away at each other. While Zara regarded her father as an ogre, Mayra’s father was a kind-hearted person. The only complaint she had with him was over his religious views. Nothing made him happier than when she prayed.

‘Don’t gobble down your food,’ Aunt Rhea cautioned.

[These are the first few pages of a longer story.]

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