

Faith-crossed lovers

“I know you chose me, but am I making your life harder?”

The emotions that come with being in an interfaith relationship

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In the middle of a movie night, a phone call interrupts. Cosied socks with animal faces, three blankets unrecognisable as one, the warmth of limbs and legs entangled are released. The Netflix film is paused. A side light is switched on. My mother’s voice comes barging into the room, a complaint about how annoying my brother visiting from university is being, “why doesn’t he understand anything?”, a grievance about my father, a quick switch into asking me where I am before I have time to answer and then

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asking if I had eaten – truly the most important question by a Bengali mother. I hurry the conversation as my other half scrolls through his phone next to me in silence. The conversation is rushed and finished as I make the excuse that my friends are waiting.

The light is switched back off, the film unpaused, an apology for the interruption

and the attempt to fit back into the positions we once were. The film continues and as the cider and crisps are passed around, the guilt remains. Sorry looks are thrown over to make up for the difficulty in something as simple as watching a film in peace.

All because this relationship is kept secret; not just because it is an interfaith one, but because my heritage asks for boys to be brought home and into the picture only at times of marital engagement – they simply do not exist in my realm – or shouldn’t before then. It’s an age-old tale, a tad browner than Cinderella but just as mythical and homely as any bedtime reading.

Before we begin, I want you to know that this piece is not going to reflect all interfaith relationships. Sometimes, people see the word “faith” and get scared, so they generalise the negative connotations they’ve absorbed and perceive it all to be the same. Anyone in a healthy interfaith relationship knows it is just like any other in the sense that you choose to be in one. You select who is the one for you. You may have skipped into a love you didn’t expect, or maybe you’re walking on the pages of a story you knew was meant for you. In an interfaith relationship, you may have never crossed paths if it had not been for the stories lived by your ancestors.

Tahmina’s relationships will always be defined by her own relationship with her family



Just like a “normal relationship”, you are not conscious of being in an interfaith relationship, when you’re walking down the road, laughing with each other, calling the other embarrassing names and discussing why the last *Batman* film was so bad. “Damn you, Zack Snyder.” It is not really noticeable until someone coos that you will have beautiful babies (as many interfaith relationships are also interracial). It’s not truly acknowledged until you argue without arguing about what will happen if or when you were to get married, have those beautiful babies or other questions – by the way, do souls *really* exist?

When speaking to a variety of people who are currently in interfaith relationships – whether their partner follows a different

stem in Christianity, or a religion that on a chart would appear to be the ‘opposite’, or having a spouse who does not have a religion – a familiar pattern throughout was stating the feeling of guilt. From the partner who may have a less lenient background to the other half who had to watch their loved one go through difficulties for them. The common realisation was that maybe life would be easier if they or their partner was the epitome of what was expected on paper, but who has ever wanted easy?

It may be easy to say to these couples, “Well, you knew what you were getting yourself into”, and if you do think that, you may need review your manual on How To Love and get a thicker knit this winter for

your heart – you’re clearly forgetting the process. The method of falling in true love is made up of chapters trying to explain the lack of instruction, the merriment in feeling aligned with someone who likes the weird and can’t fathom not having this attachment in their lives. In addition to understanding that love, as accessible and as easy finding this bond may seem to be in the digital age, is still just as rare.

However, the feeling of experiencing guilt is not explicit. It’s not like being hit in the face with racism or sexism or simply being belittled for who you are. It comes at you sideways and when you’re in a place of insecurity. It manifests sporadically at dinner parties when you look around feeling joyful for what →



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you have been blessed with only to be struck in the gut that your other half can't experience the whole of you as you can experience him. It's felt in the smiles given kindly when his parents sit down with you to have a coffee, a generosity, he has yet to experience from my side. It's burst out of your chest in frustration when spitting to yourself the half-felt words: “Oh, why can't

he just be with a white girl?"; when really you know it's just a bad day and not a bad situation. The ringing of guilt sings in your ears instead of in the back of your mind, replacing the devil on your shoulders by questioning if the scales of romance are tipped in your favour. “I know you chose me, but am I making your life harder?”

Yet, the face of guilt where it concerns my parents does not look like disappointment but self-preservation. It's about whether the sacrifices they have made justify the lifestyle I have chosen. Being from a Muslim South Asian background, the passing of culture and religion has been done seamlessly from one generation to the next. The communities were smaller and many

had similar perspectives because their resources were each other. The physical act of moving to a foreign land is much more layered than being excited, scared and worried about what is to come.

There are certain things that are said - or at least implied - to all of us albeit the culture we are wrapped around as tight as wool when growing up. A number one example would be to never compromise your beliefs. Though by knowing interfaith couples by proxy and talking to them for this story, some couples may compromise the way a child is baptised when born or the kind of wedding they will have, but I know most are in the mission of inoculation. Similar to two different trees next to each other, through time, both branches will wrap around each other until they touch. Like all interfaith couples I have spoken to have said, they do not plan on living separate lives next to each other but one shared with each other.

Navigating your thoughts by debating whether you are compromising your beliefs when opening up to ways you haven't previously envisioned can be tricky to decipher. But there is this false idea that you are giving up a part of yourself in order to be fulfilled by someone else who has a different set of rules. That is incorrect. You are both choosing love, every time. As one partner of an interfaith

relationship said: “You look past the initial questions, which give you an idea of the person, and claw your way back so you know the human.”

When immigrant ethnic minorities feel as though all they have is their culture and the conscious act of remembering where they came from - both from those who may or may not look like them - the one measure they take with their children is naturally handing them their mother tongues, habits and ways to lead a life balancing ethnicity and nationality. By being in an interfaith relationship, there is a feeling that these have been forgotten or sacrificed for another man's fate.

On the topic of destiny, many ask me if I feel as though I can be a woman of faith if my other half has a different world perspective. If I feel guilty, because our ideas on the little things, such as what happens when you die, if hell and heaven exist, are polemical.

But I've found in my conversations with God are not ones where I am questioning my iman but being grateful for all that is good, including the non-believers who shape my life largely. I've noticed time and time again that, when battling guilt with God, it's never about being in an interfaith relationship, but if my behaviour is up to the truth I know it can be. It also makes me question those who feel they can decode

my friendships - Godly or amorous. I have much doubt that if I didn't live in the skin I'm in, and believe in what I believe, there would this many questions by others, all to work out where I need to be boxed in.

I've unlearned much in the past three years and in the act of decolonising my mind, I've come to hate phrases such as “normal relationships”, a term nearly always directed at those who do not look like their partners or have the same belief system. If anything, those in an interfaith relationship are hope for a new age - post Trump and Brexit and a tonic against the rise of the alt-right, i.e. modern Nazis. Just as one of the couples said: “We are here because we respect each other and believe in tolerance. Before we found the differences, we found the connections.” Because we all really know that someone who you have been told to desire on paper could be not what you need or want in the flesh, regardless of what your mother told you.

Another couple reflected on what the best thing about being in an interfaith relationship was: “I get to know something different to who I am.” That throughout these spirals of thoughts, this pang of guilt from time to time, the darkness fades into white noise. And frankly, none of it matters in the end. •