

unspilt wine

I had decided to keep him and my parents at arm's length, until the crate of bottles arrived

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photo *cathy mckinnon*

There's a faint ring on the mantelpiece stained purple, almost bruise-like when the sun rests on it. I've resisted the urge to scrub it away so far. Sheer laziness it may look, but to do so would scrub away a significant moment, when wine bottles were part of an initiation ceremony between my atheist boyfriend and my Muslim family.

James and I had already ticked off the traditional markers of any relationship: meeting his parents over a Sunday roast, the couples' announcement to the world via the medium of Instagram story, and the Saturday night sleepover flowing into most of Sunday. One remained: meeting my parents.

And yet, there was a disconnect. The image of James in his crisp, black business suit, forced to crouch in the Camden flat with the low ceilings, cabinets filled with novelty trinkets from Brighton and Blackpool and mismatched furniture collected from travels in Beirut and Lahore seemed downright comical. I imagined stifled conversation, his Sidcup childhood incongruous against the East-meets-West décor and his lifelong atheism juxtaposed against the sparse religious calligraphy. I was resolutely justified: a sit-down meal was simply out of the question.

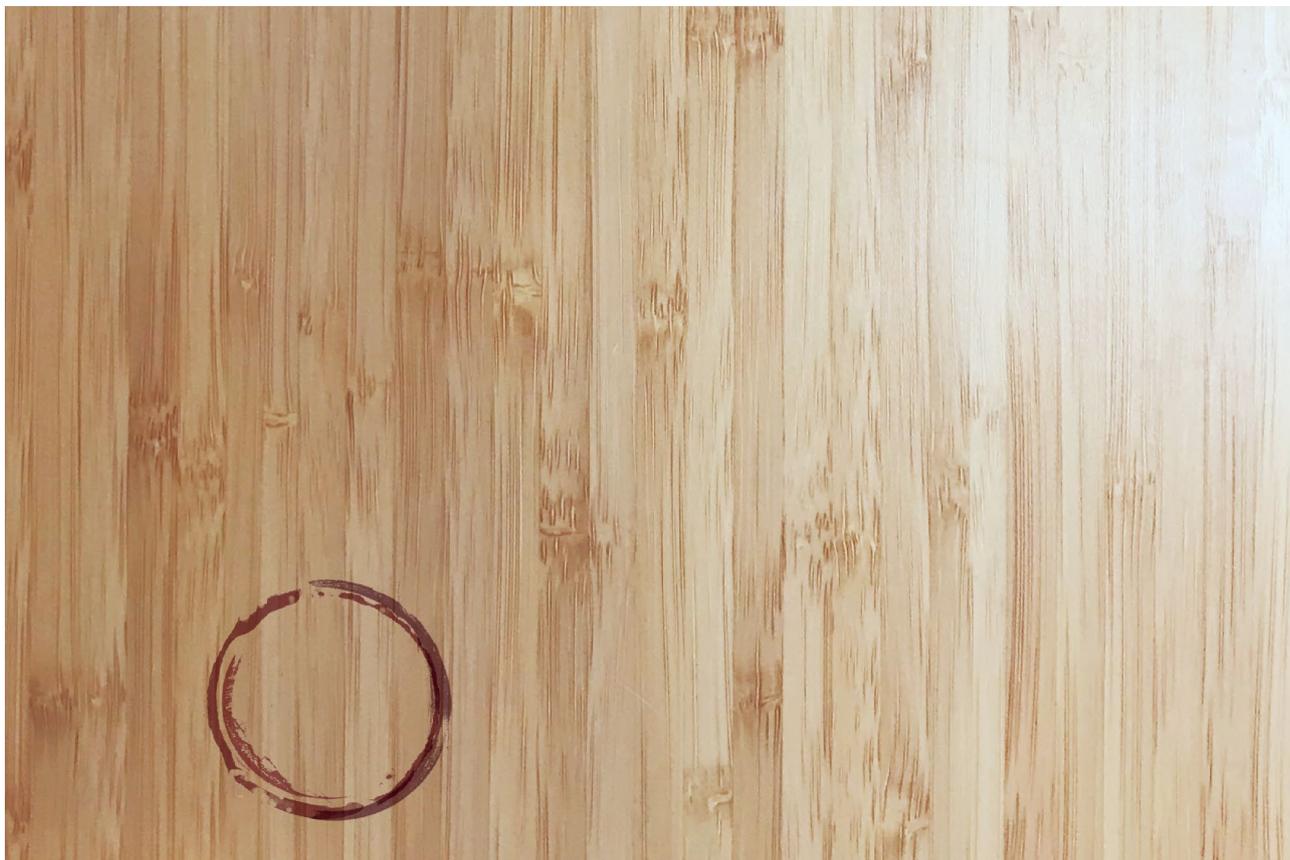
His growing desire to meet extended family denoted something serious and yet my hesitation grew, reminiscing of weekends spent with ex-lovers, where the only serious decision made was who was going to step outside of the crumpled sheets to buy cigarettes. It seemed endlessly preferable than a future where I'd be eventually dictated by a routine of freshly laundered sheets and cleaning a compost bin. But an inner turmoil was sprouting, whispering inside my ear that maybe this was simply

child's play. After all, I couldn't ignore the invisible pressure to embrace something stable, a malaise that appeared to target most women in their mid-to-late twenties, the 'you can have it all' slogan discarded as each person I knew had begun to succumb to stability, or at the very least, considering it.

There was another guilt I grappled with too: the sit-down meal to introduce the casual boyfriend-girlfriend moniker wasn't exactly de rigueur with Muslim families, unless it was an engagement announcement or something similar along those veins. Many assumed this burden had been placed by my parents, but this was not the case: it was a burden I put upon myself. It is tricky practising your faith and knowing that dating an atheist could suggest to the outside world as if you're trying to scrub your heritage away. And so, I decided to keep him and my parents at arm's length, promised to introduce them to him somewhere in a distant universe.

Alas, he insisted, and soon, the perfect opportunity arose: a huge crate of wines gifted to my workplace. It winked at me, the bottles full of promising evenings ahead - soirees, dinner parties or even a quick gift, tucked into a gift bag, in the event of a forgotten birthday. And yet the sheer weight prevented me from lugging it back home. The five-minute walk from work to the tube station transformed into a perilous journey: charity fundraisers avoiding the wooden crates, while commuters huffed and puffed. I imagined the wines crashing in the tube, the glass shattering loudly, spilt wine rendering travellers silent while shoes delicately tiptoed around the debris. James's offer to carry it home was a welcome alternative, but I was aware of what this meant: a step

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into the future and the awareness of never being able to undo time.

He looked incongruous in the doorway of our childhood home, all limbs and height, the huge wine boxes barely reaching his upper thighs. The crates of wine had arrived in one piece, a wreckage avoided signalled a good omen. Unspilt wine. I reverted into a traditional role I had almost forgotten: the child in me almost anxiously waiting for an approval but to my relief, and eventual surprise, it wasn't as scary as I feared. His presence wasn't out of place, his conversations with my parents flowed easily and they reverted to the nearby pub opposite the mosque for a soft drink. The wines were now more than the sum of their parts, they were now a peacemaker.

It has been a year now and the bottles

"Each person I knew had begun to succumb to stability"

have since gone. Guests have sipped their way through them, others had been gifted and others, unaccounted for, disappearing as quickly as they had arrived. The crate had long been sent to the recycling bin and soon too, the faint ring on the kitchen table top will be replaced with another memory or obscured by a stack of books. Only one thing remains from the crate: James is as now as permanent as the novelty trinkets from a seaside resort hanging on our fridge. ♦