

I'd returned from Holland and was about to start my final year at Oxford. I had accepted a job with Linklaters, which I would take up after I had graduated and finished post-degree legal exams. Linklaters was one of the biggest law firms in the world and part of the 'magic circle', the elite group of firms. It was the first-choice destination for top graduates looking for sparkling legal careers in the City but not for me.

Barristers, not solicitors, were the ones who went to court in wigs and gowns. They were the ones I'd seen on TV making grand speeches in dramatic language to juries who hung on their every word. That was who I wanted to be, but barristers were self-employed which came with huge risks; course fees were high and places were extremely competitive. Depending on where you ended up, it could take years to earn more than a teacher's salary. By contrast, my starting salary at Linklaters was more than my parents' combined income. I simply couldn't afford to say no.

It was a Thursday evening in September 2006, a week and a half before I was to return to university. My mum and dad sat me down for a family chat. Abbas was in Thailand so the subject was specifically my future. Nowadays my parents wanted to have these talks frequently to identify the next step in the master plan. In fact they were less about planning and more about enjoying the new reality that presented itself. It was like buying a new pair of shoes for a special occasion. Even though it wasn't time to wear them, you'd remove the box from under the bed

and lift the lid, just to take a peek. That's what my parents would do with my future.

Our sitting room had two sofas. They were on one and I sat opposite them on the other. A mixture of excitement and hope emanated from them. I felt older than them in that moment. Coming out had aged me. I felt like I knew more about the world than my parents and this gave me a wisdom they could not share.

The plan, as they saw it, was for me to finish university and then move back home. After my legal exams I would begin a career as a solicitor and eventually consider marriage. Although they were in no particular rush to marry me off, my parents wanted me to start thinking about options and by 'options' they meant suitable brides. The girls had a choice of course. Arranged did not mean forced but that didn't stop the girls from being treated like job applicants, their own desires and expectations condensed into photographs for me to sift through and shortlist.

By this time Mariam, Uncle Makki's daughter, was no longer an option, but three or four families had already enquired if I might be open to the idea of meeting their daughters. My parents spoke of me spending a couple of years at Linklaters, commuting from home of course, and then finding a suitable wife. My culture had the beauty of an ornate birdcage. Rustic and delicate but ultimately criss-crossed with bars designed to prevent the bird from flying away. So many times before I'd nodded and agreed with their vision of the future. It was easy to do when I had no plausible alternative vision of my life. My mum and dad must have imagined my wedding as the jewel in the crown of their Oxford-graduating lawyer son. I had no choice but to stop them in their tracks.