

Would
I
LIE
to
You?

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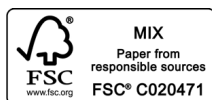
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One

Five months earlier – April

The last thing you need to hear when you're waiting to get Botox at a Harley Street clinic, is that your husband may be about to lose his job.

I was at my first Botox party, although it felt more like a field trip for the Year 12 mothers. I'd started questioning the wisdom in coming as soon as I'd stepped into the clinic, but then Lizzie's excitement began to rub off on me. I noticed that I was the only brown face there but I was used to that, especially with this group. I tried to get into the spirit of things. I reminded myself that this wasn't just about the Botox, but also hanging out with my friends. I didn't want to be the odd one out. We flicked through the menu of face 'enhancements', laughing at options such as 'Temptress', 'Diva' and 'Supermodel'. I was joking that there should be one called 'Normal', when Tom called my mobile.

'We just got an email from the CEO. "Due to the current economic climate, the Bank is restructuring with immediate effect". They're laying off half the London team. Bob's

calling us into his office one by one. The HR director's in there too.'

Shit.

I got up to walk to the far end of the waiting room. Lizzie stood in my way. She was smiling.

'Welcome to the club, Faiza! Here's to your first time!'

She raised a glass of cold-pressed kale juice towards me, as did Anna, Cora and Bella, who all stood behind her. I smiled automatically and gave them a thumbs up. On the phone, Tom was still talking. He said three people from Syndications had just been escorted away by security to clear their desks. I mouthed a silent 'Sorry' to Lizzie, pointing to the phone, and hurried to the window, away from the others.

'How can they do this? Are you all right, darling?' I said.

'I'm fine, don't worry.' He spoke in his office voice. 'I'm sure I'll be OK. I've met all my targets this year and I'm about to close that deal in Sao Paulo.' He paused. 'I won't let them fire any of my team. They're all good kids. They've worked hard.'

He kept on talking, upbeat, faster, listing the reasons why he would keep his job: he said more in those few minutes than he normally would in a week. I hated to think of him all alone in his office, high above The Royal Exchange, and wanted to rush to him. They should allow family members to be present if they're about to make you redundant, like they do for other bad news, like telling you that you might have some terrible disease.

Goosebumps flared a path down my arms. I knew I shouldn't have come. We were supposed to be on a budget. I'd tried to stay away, I really had. I'd made some excuse

the last time Lizzie had asked me along. But I couldn't stand my crumpled forehead any more, when I compared it to the smooth ones topping my friends' faces. It seemed almost rude to cart that forehead into people's houses. Like turning up without brushing your teeth. Still, now I felt like a criminal.

'Sweetheart, I'm sure you'll be—' I said.

'They're calling me. I have to go.'

The line went dead.

As I walked back into the party, Anna held out a tray of miniature brownies.

'Have one of these, Faiza. Do you fancy a make-up lesson? There's a make-up artist doing demos.'

I shook my head.

'I'm sorry, but I need to go home.'

'Why? Is everything OK? It's not one of your parents, is it?'

'No, no, they're fine, thank you. It's just a plumbing emergency, but I need to go.' The words tripped easily from my lips.

I scooped up my bag. My phone clattered to the floor. Before I left, I needed to get my money back. I hurried to the 'treatment concierge' desk in the corner.

'I'm so sorry but I can't have the treatments today. My builders have hit a pipe and my kitchen's flooded. They've had to call the Fire Brigade.'

This had, in fact, happened last year. I could have said one of the children or Baba was ill, but that would have been tempting fate.

'Of course!' said the receptionist. 'I'll cross you off the list. Good luck!'

She looked back down at the papers on her desk. I stood, not sure what to do. I held out my debit card to the top of her blonde bob.

‘Excuse me... for the refund?’

She looked up and frown-smiled at me.

‘I’m so sorry but we charge a 100 per cent cancellation fee for less than twenty-four hours’ notice. It’s clinic policy.’

I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out. The packed waiting room was silent behind me. I looked down. My face felt hot.

‘Why don’t you just have the treatment?’ I didn’t want the kindness in her voice. ‘We can have you out of here in twenty minutes.’

‘You can go first, Faiza, before the rest of us,’ said Lizzie.

The nurse was standing in the doorway. She checked her clipboard.

‘We can take you in now, Faiza. Follow me.’

I hovered between the desk and the door. Nothing had happened yet, had it? There was no need to assume the worst. I refused to think like Ami. By now, she’d have fast-forwarded the scenario to a sorry end: Tom getting sacked, then having a heart attack, the house being repossessed and all of us moving to a concrete estate at the tattered edges of London, the children becoming knife-wielding gang members! She’d be on her prayer mat, begging God to have mercy on her daughter and grandchildren, and to save her son-in-law’s life.

I followed the nurse down a corridor, hugging my coat to my chest. I heard myself replying to her comments about the tube strike and the weather. I checked my mobile to make sure the ringer was still turned on. They wouldn’t

sack Tom. He'd been nervous when he'd first joined the bank, but as the months passed, I'd heard snippets about 'million-dollar wind farms' and 'solar projects in Brazil', and he began to sleep properly again as the deals started to come in.

I lay down in the treatment chair. My foot started to shake.

'Nervous?' said the nurse. 'Let me put some numbing cream on for you.'

She smoothed icy gel onto my forehead. I shivered, wishing that it would seep into my mind as well. I imagined Tom walking into the room to hear his fate, his mid-life heart hammering, trying to appear composed in the open-plan fish bowl that magnified every emotion for those watching the show.

'This should start working soon.'

The nurse smiled and took off her gloves. I dabbed the tears in the inner corners of my eyes with my index finger, pretending to dislodge a speck of dirt or an eyelash. I wasn't there just to indulge myself. The Botox injection was supposed to vaccinate my relationship against a marital superbug: the usual viruses that weaken long marriages – time, money, juggling three children, four parents, two cultures. I didn't want to add another item to the list by 'letting myself go' and have him go off with someone else. It had happened to our friends Amanda and Johnathan. As Lizzie said, 'Men become silver foxes, women just become silver.'

The highest divorce rates were for people in their forties. I hadn't dared to google the stats for a mixed-race couple. I'd always had to work hard at looking good and the older

I got, the harder I had to work at it. Not having the Botox would have been a false economy in the long run.

Dr Curtis entered, his age-neutral face and uniform tan highlighting his transatlantic credentials. My phone rang.

‘I’m so sorry, Doctor, I have to take this.’

I escaped into the corridor.

‘I’ve been let go. They’ve had to restructure due to losses across EMEA. They can only keep one Team Head. They’re keeping Matt.’

He repeated the HR spiel they must have rolled out for him.

‘Darling, I’m so sorry.’

I wanted to wrap my arms around him. They had no right to do this to Tom. He hadn’t done anything wrong. I began to pace the corridor, pressing the phone hard into my ear.

‘Look, it’s going to be OK,’ I said.

But thoughts exploded like grenades in my head, despite my verbal bravado. How would Tom cope with losing his job? How long would it take until he found a new one? Sofia was in the middle of her A levels. We couldn’t pull her out of Brookwood High. Ahmed had finally settled down at the new school. I couldn’t move him again. Not after last year.

‘You’ll find something else,’ I said.

‘I’m not so sure. The market is dead.’

‘What kind of package are they giving you?’

It was important to know what kind of cushion we had.

‘Nothing, just one month’s salary.’

‘But that’s impossible! Don’t they have to give you at least three months’ pay? What about your bonus? What about BUPA?’

Ahmed's treatment was being paid for by the insurance. I sank down on a stool in the corridor and leaned back against the wall.

'One month is all that I get. That's the contract I signed, remember. No bonus either. They say the bank hasn't made enough profit.'

'But we have some savings, right? We should be OK?'

He looked after all of that.

'I've been using the savings to pay the school fees. That account's almost empty. I was going to put my bonus in there next month.'

We'd been planning how to use this suddenly non-existent bonus for months.

'Don't worry, Faiza,' he said, listening to my silence. 'We still have the emergency fund. That should keep us going until I find something else.'

The emergency fund.

The room spun. I clutched the side of the stool, afraid I was going to fall. I leaned forwards and rested my elbows on my knees, gripping the phone tighter. I focused my eyes on the blue and yellow diamond pattern on the carpet and counted the tiny blue squares between my cream suede ankle boots.

'Yes, of course,' I managed to say.

I wasn't sure about the balance in that account. I'd been dipping into it for months, maybe more. Money for birthday parties, school trips, Ubers, Deliveroo, presents, furniture, dinner parties, concert tickets, clothes, spending money, Ami and Baba's cleaner, Lingo Bear, the Botox party... The statements were lying unopened in my 'documents folder' – an old LK Bennett shoe bag – at the back of my cupboard.

It was easier not to see what I'd spent. I'd planned to put the money back by getting a job one day, when Alex was older. I never imagined we'd need that money so soon, if at all. I couldn't have spent that much, though. I was probably worrying unnecessarily.

'Are *you* OK?' I asked.

That was what really mattered. He didn't deserve getting fired in a five-minute conversation, by a boss ten years younger than him. He should have been safe by now. That was the plan he'd slogged and sacrificed towards for twenty-five years.

'They're taking away my phone so I won't be able to call you till I get home. Where are you?'

'Peter Jones.' It popped out easily. I couldn't tell him where I really was. 'I'll head home too.'

The nurse waved at me, to hurry me along.

'I love you,' I said, but Tom had gone.

The nurse ushered me back to the doctor. As the needle sank into my forehead, I wondered what Tom would think, if he saw me. A tear slipped out from the corner of my eye. The doctor apologised for the pain.

I ran out of the clinic and zigzagged my way through the snail-slow crowds on Oxford Street. A cyclist just missed me as I darted across the road, his 'Stupid bitch!' still ringing in my ears as I ran down the escalators and jumped through the tube doors just as they were beeping shut.

At Waterloo, I caught the train to Wimbledon. I leaned my head against the window. Everything looked the same as it had that morning: the London Eye peeking out above the station wall against a matt grey sky, the usual people sitting around me, reading the *Metro* as if nothing was wrong. I

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wanted to text Tom to check if he was all right, but there was no way to contact him. I'd been trying to do a mental tally of how much I might have spent, but I had no idea. After avoiding the statements for months, I couldn't wait a second more to check them. I had to get home before Tom.