

Tahmima Anam

'Fresh, funny, brave, savage, smart . . . captures perfectly the age-old problems of men and women that no app can fix'

KAMILA SHAMSI

THE STARTUP WIFE



Prologue

NO SUCH THING

People say there's no such thing as Utopia, but they're wrong.

I've seen it myself, and it's on the corner of Tenth Avenue and Fifteenth Street.

Jules and I are summoned on an unseasonably hot day in April. We sneak out of the house, and six hours later we're standing in front of a wide industrial building. Across the street is the High Line, then the West Side Highway, and beyond that, the joggers and the piers and the flat expanse of the Hudson. There's no sign and no doorbell, just an enormous metal door, so we mill around and check the address. Minutes pass. I tell Jules we shouldn't have lied to Cyrus, and Jules reminds me of all the ways Cyrus would have made this trip impossible. Finally, after what feels like an eternity, the door sighs open and we cross the threshold into a pool of biscuity sunlight.

The reception area is magnificent, the square angles of the

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warehouse tamed into undulating curves. Everything gleams, from the polished wooden floorboards to the metal-framed windows that soar upward. “I love it,” Jules sighs, collapsing into a chair. “Please can we have it?”

I look up and see a giant hourglass suspended from the ceiling. “We are never going to get in.”

Jules is relaxed, like he walks into this sort of place every day. “But our platform is amazing. No one in the history of the world has ever built anything like it.”

I laugh. “It looks expensive. Are you sure we don’t have to pay anything?”

“Nope.”

We’ve been called for an audition. If we pass, we get to come here every day and call ourselves Utopians.

Someone comes over to tell us it’s time. We go up a flight of stairs, and then another, the light getting paler and brighter as we climb. On the third floor we are led through a corridor festooned with hanging plants. The air is cool but not too cold. There are repeating patterns in bright colors on the walls; there are paintings in frames and jagged sculptures bolted to the ceiling.

In the boardroom, we are greeted by the selection committee. A woman with long straight hair and the most beautiful neck I have ever seen approaches us. “I’m Li Ann,” she says. She gleams from every angle and I have to resist the urge to lean in and smell her perfume.

We shake hands. My grip is overly firm and sweaty.

Li Ann invites us to sit. “You’ve heard of us, I imagine.” She smiles, managing to appear confident but not mean.

Of course. Who hasn’t heard of Utopia? There are the BuzzFeed stories, *What is the secretive tech incubator that boasts support from Nobel*

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laureates, past presidents, and the elite of the startup world? The hidden camera shots taken from inside. The outlandish claims by people pretending to be Utopians who say that the labs have successfully cloned a chimpanzee and invented a pocket-size carbon capture machine that cleans the air faster than you can take a selfie.

“It’s like winning the lottery,” Jules had said on the bus ride over. “It’s like getting into the Olympics. It’s like turning on your computer and finding a secret cache of cryptocurrency.”



“Why don’t we introduce ourselves,” Li Ann says. “I’m the head of innovation here at Utopia.”

“Hey, I’m Marco,” says a man with deep-set eyes and a sharply trimmed beard. “I created Obit.ly, a platform that manages all the social and public aspects of death.”

A woman with bright pink hair waves hello. “I’m Destiny. I’m the founder of Consentify, a way to make every sexual encounter safe, traceable, and consensual.”

A thin, stern man in a lab coat leans against the table. “My name is Rory. I run LoneStar.” He speaks with a clipped Scandinavian accent. “I want every single person in the world to stop eating animals.”

We would never fit in. First of all, it would be impossible to find a cute, vitamin-gummy way to describe the platform. And then the rest of it, the confidence, the hair, the way they all look as if they slid into place like a synchronized swim team—I cannot imagine ever being that comfortable in my skin. Cyrus likes to call me the Coding Queen of Brattle Street, but right now Cambridge and my graduate school lab seem totally irrelevant. For the last six years I’ve been working on an algorithm designed to unlock the empathetic brain for artificial

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intelligence. After a drunken night with Cyrus (more on that later), I had the idea of turning the tiny fragment of code I'd written into something else—*this*—and that is why Jules and I are here.

“We’re ready when you are,” Li Ann says.

That’s my cue to start the presentation. I fiddle with the cable. Jules passes me his laptop, and the sight of his hand, steady and unshaking, is reassuring. Whatever happens, we’ll go home and laugh about it with Cyrus.

“It doesn’t have a name,” I begin, explaining the blank title page.

“We’ll come up with something great,” Jules says.

There’s an image of the landing page, with the Three Questions. “This is our new social media platform. We have devised a way of getting people to form connections with others on the basis of what gives their life meaning, instead of what they like or don’t like. It does this by providing rituals for people based on their interests, beliefs, and passions.”

“Like custom-made religion?” asks Rory, the Scandi vegan.

“Sort of. But imagine if you could integrate your belief system with everything else in your life. A system that embraces the whole you.”

“Maybe you should call it Whole You,” Destiny suggests.

“How it works is, you answer a short questionnaire about things that are important to you. Not just the traditions you’ve inherited but the things you’ve picked up along the way. The life you’ve earned, as it were.”

Marco nods. “Cool. So, if I were about to die, would it be able to come up with a way for me to have a special funeral?”

“Yes, it would. Would you like to give it a try?”

Jules passes his laptop to Marco. Marco types for a few seconds. “*Game of Thrones*, *The Great British Baking Show*, and Ancient Egypt,” Marco says. “Let’s see what it does with that.”

We wait the 2.3 seconds it takes the algorithm to go through its

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calculations. Then Marco starts to read from the screen: “I would propose that you be buried, in the style of the Ancient Egyptians, with your most precious possessions. Then, if you wanted, you could have your loved ones perform the Opening of the Mouth ceremony.” He looks up from the screen. “There’s an Opening of the Mouth ceremony? Is this real?”

“Yes,” I reply. “All the suggestions are based on real texts: religious scripture, ancient rites and traditions, myths. Here it gives you an option—sometimes the algorithm does that—you could choose to be cremated, like the Dothraki and the Valyrians, but if you wanted your family to perform the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, you might choose to have your body displayed, your hands clasped over a sword, as was the tradition in Westeros. In that case, you could also have stones placed over your eyes.”

“Yeah.” Marco smiles, rubbing his hands together. “I sometimes fancy myself a Dothraki, but I’m more of a Seven Kingdoms guy.” He keeps reading. “The Opening of the Mouth ceremony is a symbolic ritual in which the body’s mouth is opened so that it can speak and eat in the afterlife. This would enable you to integrate any number of baked goods into the ritual.”

Jules and I exchange a glance. How did we manage to make the platform so goddamn awesome, is what I’m thinking.

“I can’t believe it,” Marco says.

Jules leans over and reads the end of the ritual. “Someone in your family might recite the following incantation . . . *I have opened your mouth. I have opened your two eyes.*”

Marco grins. “I’m totally going to put that in my advance-directives Dropbox.”

We walk them through the platform, the target audience, the growth plan. I describe the tech behind it.

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There's a pause when no one says anything. I turn to the others, and it's hard to look at them all at once. Sunlight pours in from the large window behind them and they are encased in a giant gold halo.

Rory puts his palms on the table. "Nothing good has ever come from religion," he says.

"My father would agree with you," I say. "But it's a powerful institution—imagine if we could change it somehow."

Rory glances away, and I can almost feel him rolling his eyes.

Jules pipes up. "Look, we're here to restore something to people who have grown up in the shadow of social media—those who are living their entire lives in public. We want to address the thirty-seven percent who say they don't believe in God because their politics or their sexuality excludes them from organized religion. We believe that even the nonreligious among us deserve our own communities, our own belief systems, whatever they may be based in. Ritual, community, that's what religion offers that no other human construct has been able to replace. Until now. We are here to give meaning back to people, to restore and amplify faith—not in a higher power but in humanity."

I catch Li Ann smiling to herself. Jules has nailed it. Maybe he's right, maybe no one in the history of the world has ever built anything like it.

"I like what we've seen so far. Right, everyone?" Destiny and Marco nod, and Rory manages a tiny head tilt. Li Ann leans in and lowers her voice. "We're especially interested in projects that will support human community in the afterworld."

"The afterworld?"

"The future when there will be nothing left," Destiny says.

"You're planning for the apocalypse?" Jules asks.

"We want to be prepared," Rory explains. "In the next fifty years, things will change in ways we cannot yet imagine."

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Marco reels off a list of ways the world might end. “Famine, deadly pandemic, mass antibiotic resistance, climate collapse, insect collapse, world war.” He ends with a flourish: “Asteroid.”

“We are not connected to any major public utilities,” Li Ann explains. “We get our water from an underground aquifer. The servers are disconnected from the major fiber-optic lines. All waste is recycled. We are funding research into last-resort antibiotics and antivirals, building an army of robotic bees, and turning electricity into food. We believe that technology has a role to play in the post-world world.”

I realize where we fit in. “You’re going to need faith?” I say, trying not to start singing the George Michael song.

“Well, that’s what we’ve been debating,” Li Ann says. “I think it would be great to offer people something to help frame their existence. Rory wants to do away with all that, but some of us still think it’s important.”

“If we are going to imagine a better world, I would prefer it to be based on science, not superstition,” Rory says.

I ask the question that’s been on my mind since the call came: “How do you pay for all of this?”

“I’ve been given a mandate,” Li Ann says. “On the one hand, we operate like any other startup incubator. But our mission is also to find solutions to the inevitable demise of the world as we know it. Our endowment is made up of tech companies, high-net-worth individuals, even some government pension funds. I think there’s a general sense that we are going to face unprecedented challenges in the future, and everyone wants to be prepared.”

What will Cyrus say? I haven’t thought about him for at least half an hour, which is the longest I’ve not thought about him since our reunion. The doomsday cult thing is definitely going to put him off.

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Or is it? Cyrus is full of surprises. I would never have guessed, nine months ago, that he was going to be the sort of person who would get married on a whim. I wouldn't have thought that about myself either, but there you have it. Love. Mysterious ways.

Li Ann promises to send us her decision before the end of the day, and Jules and I are returned to the ordinary, imperfect world.