

once a stranger

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 hachette
AUSTRALIA



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2023
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Gadigal Country, Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

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A catalogue record for this
book is available from the
National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4707 9 (paperback)

Cover design by Christabella Designs
Cover image courtesy of Shutterstock
Author photograph by Govern Images
Typeset in 12.5/18.9 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

For Chris

prologue

AYAT CARRIED THE EMAIL WITH HER FOR DAYS. SHE SCREENSHOT IT on her phone and saved it to her photos, so she could pull it up in an instant. She repeated the message in her head while she walked, and read it again and again while seated on the train.

The words were stark in their sans serif font, black against white. She stared at them so long they blurred in front of her eyes.

Four sentences:

Ayat,

Our mother is very sick. The doctor has estimated two years. I think you should come home.

Give me a call on the number below and we can talk.

Laila

PART ONE

chapter one

NOW

SEATED AT THE CAFE IN HER FAVOURITE CORNER, A COFFEE unfurling steam in front of her, Ayat took a deep breath and pulled the email up on her phone one more time.

It felt easier to confront the words here, in this crowded room, even with the white noise of other people's lives pressing up against her thoughts. The table she sat at was rickety and small, but the bench seat was cosy, and she had spent hours here over the years, usually with her laptop or a book for company. She just couldn't bear the thought of being at home with the email, with nothing to stop her from opening the boxes in the spare room, indulging in the masochism of looking through her photo albums, her old diaries.

Fuelled by grief, she had taped the boxes away manically, and pushed them into the back of the closet, as if by forcing

them into a corner she could somehow prevent her old life from re-entering her thoughts. Ayat had been certain that the key to her peace was eradicating every trace of her past from her immediate surroundings.

But even once the last box had been dragged away, and the photo frames and bookshelves stood bereft and empty, she hadn't been able to stop the juddering of her heart. Khadija and Laila pulsed through her veins and settled on her skin. There was no way to eradicate her family without eradicating herself.

Shaking her head slightly, Ayat forced herself to look back down at the email.

It was brief, incredibly so. Having expected a longer missive from her sister, after so many years apart, Ayat now felt foolish for even thinking it. The email was so short it fit onto a single screen of her phone, no scrolling necessary.

She stared at the last word, so intently that it started to look bizarre, like it couldn't possibly be a real name. *Laila*, she thought.

She had always felt that her sister got the better name. Everyone could pronounce it; it was pretty like a princess's name. Laila meant *born at night* and was a flat-out lie because Laila had been born at ten in the morning.

'Ayat' meant *signs*, or *verses of the Quran*, depending on how you read it. It was a name that confused most Australians, and trying to teach the pronunciation and the spelling of it had been the bane of her life.

'Eye-yet,' she would say encouragingly, while inwardly thinking that it shouldn't be that hard.

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When she ordered takeaway coffee, Ayat had formed the habit of giving the barista a fake name, something close enough to her own that she would remember to listen for but easy enough for people to write down without double taking. ‘Amy’ or ‘Ally’, she would say, with a brief, pained smile.

Laila, she knew, wouldn’t have baulked even if her name was the more difficult one. When Laila said her name, it was a proclamation.

For the first half of her life, Ayat’s identity was cemented by nothing more firmly than her relationship to Laila. ‘Laila’s sister’ was her moniker through school, and she had worn the title like a badge. Now, her sister’s name was like a bruise on the page – it hurt to see it there. No one thought of her as ‘Laila’s sister’ anymore. She wasn’t ‘Laila’s’ anything. She was an orphan, a singular being. Reading her sister’s words was like a snap of electricity to her skin, reconnecting her to the shadow of her old life.

Ayat read the email again.

Their mother was sick. Their mother was *dying*.

Laila wanted her to come home.

She wasn’t sure which of the two truths was more frightening. That her mother could die was a reality she had always known but never confronted.

That she might have to see her mother again was harder to digest. Where would they begin? How could they even be in the same room together?

Ayat sighed deeply and closed her eyes for a moment.

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It had been six years. She hadn't seen them, spoken to them, heard from them at all in that time. She was a completely different person now, living a completely different life. The pain she used to feel had finally deadened to a cold, lifeless lump in her chest.

She *couldn't* go home.

She had to go home.

Suddenly, the panic hit her – her mother was *dying*. Dying. It felt impossible, unreal. The last time she saw Khadija, she had seemed larger than life, her fury and betrayal making her grow beyond her true small stature. How could a force so strong be brought down by an illness? What *was* this illness?

There were too many things to process.

Ayat opened her eyes and sipped from her coffee robotically.

Break it into steps, she told herself, using the method she always turned to when the minutiae of her life became overwhelming.

Tonight, she would speak to Harry. Tomorrow, she would call Laila. And then she would just keep putting one foot in front of the other.



The air in the apartment felt stifling, the walls seeming to loom claustrophobically. Ayat paced from room to room as she waited for Harry's return, her skin prickling every time she heard a loud footstep outside or a shouted word from the street.

Their cat, Meadow, watched her movements from where she lay on the couch.

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Meadow was a rangy tabby, whom Harry had rescued over seven years ago in Canberra, before he met Ayat.

When they moved to Melbourne, they had brought Meadow with them, and she had become their cat instead of just his.

The apartment was the bottom floor of an old building in Carlton, which sat oddly beside the squat little terrace houses that lined the street. As she paced, Ayat's eyes scanned over the art on the wall, too restless for the art to have the usual soothing effect this had.

The apartment was one of Ayat's favourite things about their life in this city. They had moved to Melbourne partly for an adventure and partly for an escape, but it had taken almost an entire year for Ayat to adjust. She was lonely for a long part of those twelve months, unable to crack into a group or a scene.

The days were endless while Harry was at the university and Ayat clicked relentlessly through job ads, sending listless applications and returning to an endless stream of TV shows and books. Sometimes she sat still for so long, her hips would ache from disuse.

Despite her growing boredom, the apartment was her haven, a little bolthole of familiarity where she could hide, with Meadow on her lap and her drawing to keep her company. It was shabby in comparison to the home she had grown up in, even the sharehouse she briefly occupied, but it felt like a rite of passage. Every young couple had to accumulate a collection of war stories of the dingy houses they first lived in together. When Ayat surveyed the faded

wallpaper and the water stains on the ceiling, it was with the eyes of someone already looking back on their present.

She had given up pacing and was slumped on the couch when there was a tinkling of keys at the door. She sat up and Meadow also perked up beside her.

Harry pushed the door open and came in back first, his arms wrapped around his briefcase. It was so crammed with papers and books, it wasn't even closed this time, and Ayat could tell he had carted it home the three blocks from the university with some effort.

'Hi darling,' he said over his shoulder, panting slightly.

'Hi,' Ayat replied, pulling herself off the couch and walking over to plant a brief kiss on his cheek. Harry was almost an entire head taller than her, lean and fair-haired. He had a fine face, a 'noble' face, as Ayat had once told him. His bones were delicate and his cheeks a little hollow. He had a sort of regal handsomeness, a potential that sometimes made other people pause to look at him.

But Harry didn't care about how he dressed and looked. He hid his blue eyes behind black-framed glasses, and wore the same combination of jeans, shirt and jumper in different colours every day.

Ayat liked this about him, enjoyed knowing his beauty was only really for her to appreciate, not something he flaunted. She supposed this was part of an insecurity, a fear he might find someone of his own calibre and leave her, but she didn't dwell on this. Six and a half years together was long enough for both

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of them to feel comfortable in their relationship, to wear each other like a second skin.

Ayat pulled the front door shut and returned to the couch while Harry shoved his briefcase into the study. He then came over to kiss her properly.

‘Hello again,’ he smiled, before bending to rub his forehead against Meadow’s in their usual act of affection.

He flopped down beside her on the couch and leaned back with a sigh, his eyes closed.

‘Big day?’ Ayat asked, watching him closely.

She wasn’t sure how to begin. With Harry, it was difficult to tell what the best approach was – sometimes he could react with annoyance when he felt harassed or put upon, other times it was almost impossible to shake a response out of him.

‘Oh, you know,’ he said, shrugging and looking at her. ‘The usual. Two whingy students wanted to talk after the tutorial this afternoon, which is why I’m late.’

‘Ah, I see. They should just make appointments so they can whinge while you’re on the clock,’ she said.

Harry smiled. ‘Probably. All part of the job.’

Ayat fiddled with her hands in her lap, torn between disrupting Harry’s calm immediately or enduring her anxiety. Trapped in her indecision, her silence stretched.

Harry had his eyes closed, his head dropped back to rest on the couch. A moment passed, and then, registering her quietness, he turned his head to look at Ayat quizzically. Automatically, his hand reached out to pull one of hers away from where she was

tugging at the skin around her fingernails – it was a nervous habit that Harry knew well as a sign of her stress.

‘What’s wrong?’

Ayat bit her lip, unsure how to start, then burst out with her news.

‘I got an email. From Laila.’

Harry breathed out, a long stream of air through his nostrils. He nodded, waiting.

‘Mum’s sick. Laila didn’t say what it was but the doctors are giving her two years.’

‘Oh Ayat,’ Harry murmured, reaching out for her again. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Ayat let herself be held but her body was still rigid.

‘Laila wants me to go home,’ she said, her voice muffled against Harry’s chest.

For a moment, he was silent. Then his arms loosened around her, so Ayat could sit up again. She looked at him, her expression filled with trepidation.

‘What do you think?’

Harry’s face was impassive, the way it got when he was deep in thought or trying to inhibit a reaction.

‘I . . . don’t know. I mean, she’s your mum,’ he said. ‘Of course you should go back – if you want to . . . do you mean you would go back to visit them, or for a longer stint?’

‘Just me? You won’t come with me?’

Harry sighed, a short burst this time. He sat up and ran his hands through his hair, making the ends stand up in little clumps.

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‘I don’t know. I mean, it’s not as if Khadija will want to see *me*. I . . . do you want me to come?’

‘Of course I want you to come!’ Ayat snapped. She suddenly felt angry, her blood pulsing quick and hot through her body. ‘You’re my partner, shouldn’t you *want* to come with me?’

Harry paused, weighing his words.

‘I do, and I’m really sorry about Khadija, you know that – but she hasn’t spoken to you for six years, Ayat. She’s only *ever* spoken to me twice . . . I think it’s going to be hard enough for you guys to reconnect without me there to complicate things, don’t you?’

‘I think that’s a cop-out,’ Ayat said quietly. She didn’t know why she was so angry when what Harry said was true. But his reaction made her defensive and unsure.

Had she expected him to immediately volunteer to go back to Canberra with her? Had she expected him to forgive Khadija because she was dying? Did dying somehow absolve her mother?

‘I think it’s a cop-out that Laila is only contacting you now,’ Harry said evenly. ‘It’s not like she hasn’t had the opportunity before this. Are you meant to pretend none of it ever happened?’

Ayat shook her head in irritation, feeling even more defensive. ‘That’s not fair, Harry, you don’t get it from their perspective,’ she started, and then she sighed, leaning forward and resting her elbows on her knees, her head in her hands.

Her impulse to stand up for her family, even after all this time, was hard to reconcile with Harry’s justified anger on her behalf. She was at once the protector and the victim. It was maddening.

'I don't know . . . I don't even know if I want to see her yet. I just . . . What are we meant to do?'

Harry looked at her for a long moment.

'I guess you need to call Laila. Find out what the illness is and how serious it is. Then we can . . . talk again.'

'That's not going to change the question, though, Harry. Should I go?'

'I can't tell you that.'

Ayat nodded bleakly. 'I'll call her tonight then. Let's just . . . let's not talk about it for now. Let's just have dinner like normal, and I'll call later.'

'It's getting late,' Harry pointed out. 'It might be too late to call her tonight if you wait until after dinner.'

'I know, but Laila always stays up late. Or, at least, she used to,' Ayat corrected herself.

Her words hung in the silence between them, Ayat leaning forward to rest her head in her hands again, elbows on knees. She could feel Harry watching her with a slight, worried frown – she knew that expression.

With the ghosts of Laila and Khadija unleashed in the room now, the energy in their apartment had shifted, troubling the sense of sanctuary they had built here together. Something was opening up between them in an echo of the distance and difficulties of those years when everything fell apart.

Meadow jumped lightly from the couch and fled into the study, leaving Harry and Ayat frozen behind her.



The last time she had seen her sister, Ayat had been twenty-one. She didn't feel that different as a person now at twenty-seven. There were no discernible differences to her, other than the gaping large hole where there had once been a family.

When she was younger, Ayat had imagined family as being a bond that was malleable, ill-formed at times, but never breakable. She had visualised a sort of thread stretching from her fingertips to link with Laila and Khadija at their fingertips. Fine, flexible, barely visible, but always connected.

When the bond had finally snapped, it had felt like a physical blow, a pain so sharp and continuous that Ayat had realised the separation was permanent.

Laila's email, though, had started a reconnection process Ayat wasn't prepared for. It felt like two pieces of flesh that have never touched before being sewn together, forced to join. The wound was unlikely to heal smoothly.

Now, facing the phone, Ayat wondered what Laila's voice would sound like, and whether it would feel stilted and weird to speak to her. As she dialled the number, her heart hammered even though she was pressing the buttons slowly.

'Ayat?' The voice on the other end was familiar, but tinny and quiet from the phone connection.

'How did you know it was me?' she asked dumbly.

'You have the same mobile number,' Laila said briskly. 'You got my email then?'

'Yes. How is Mum?'

'Are you coming back?'

Ayat twitched in irritation. 'How is she, Laila?' she demanded. 'What's wrong with her?'

There was a pause and a sigh.

'It's motor neuron disease. She's not that bad right now. A bit sore and slow, but the real symptoms haven't kicked in completely – that'll happen slowly, over time. Are you coming?'

Ayat's brain felt like it was woolly – she heard her sister's words but couldn't comprehend them. Motor Neuron Disease. She knew the name of the illness but couldn't picture what it meant. Only that it was bad. Devastating.

Somehow she focused on Laila's question.

'I don't know yet. We need to talk about it, and figure out what works . . .'

'We? So, Harry would come too?'

'Yes, Laila, of course he would, if that's what I want,' Ayat snapped. 'It's a package deal, okay?'

'Don't yell,' Laila said calmly. This was what frustrated Ayat about Laila the most, her complete inability to lose control. 'That's fine. But we'll need to talk about how we manage that with Amma.'

Manage it.

'Right. Well, you'll have to figure it out, because Harry is part of my life,' Ayat muttered.

'Let me know once you've made up your mind and we'll talk more. I have to go, but . . .'

Silence hung between them. 'I, um, it's good you're coming home, maybe.'

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Ayat's vision blurred suddenly, tears filling the corners of her eyes.

'Mhmmm,' she coughed slightly. 'I'll be in touch. Bye.'

In that moment, the distance between herself and Laila felt too wide to traverse, and yet also so short, so near, that it was almost nothing at all.