

# Table Manners

by

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Laili lived by a single maxim: “Don’t leave anything worse than you found it.”

This was her Hippocratic oath, one she had taken unconsciously as an 8 year old at the park picking up litter that wasn’t hers, and consciously as a 30 year old quitting a career built at her father’s ad agency to pursue a vocation that had no negative externalities. The task was a harder ask than she had realized for when she dug deep enough at considering a prospective line of work, she inevitably found the ugly head of consumerism gnashing it’s rapacious jaws at her. After 9 years of convincing people to buy things they didn’t need with money they didn’t have, she felt a deep need to atone for her sins.

With the luxury of her parents roof over her head and their money in her pocket, Laili felt the very least she could do to make herself useful was to dedicate herself to work that would not exploit another human being. The best profession to her mind was to be a teacher, but she recognised she did not have the patience of a saint required for teaching children in a way that does not diminish the genius they are born with. This would be akin to doing them harm and thus undermine the core she was attempting to operate from.

The next best thing she settled on was much humbler: starting a podcast. She landed upon the podcast idea by an inner knowing that stated “In the absence of having the right answers one has the power yet to ask questions from those whose life’s work has been to toil away at finding an honest answer”. The desire to start a podcast wasn’t entirely magnanimous either. There was a very human need connected to it: the need to find people she could respect.

All her life she had met, known, even loved, people she didn’t really like, let alone entirely respect. This was not an act of abandoning her principles; it was an act of trying to survive in a world filled with individuals that were little more than metastasizing holes of self-aggrandizement. With all the very real benefits that came from winning the lottery of being born into a well-to-do family in a nation crippled by inequality in all its hideously debilitating varieties, came the pernicious side effect of living in an insular bubble populated with people whose motives were entirely transparent and transparently pathetic.

Not only were the people in Laili’s universe confidently unembarrassed of living their lives at the altar of money, they were, troublingly for Laili, oblivious to the reality that this was cause for embarrassment. Her parents had done all they could to ensure their daughter became

the right kind of social animal, an appendage to their unit, which was chubby and overstuffed with relationships based on proximity to power and social influence. Mercifully, one doesn't have to like one's parents in order to love them. The rest of the world however had to be held to a higher standard.

A year into her foray in the noisy and overwhelmingly male waters of the world of Pakistani podcasts, Laili had gained a loyal following of 217 subscribers. She wasn't after numbers, least of all after ad revenue. She was on a quest to dispel her own lack of belief in the existence of contemporary Pakistanis who inspire respect. The task at hand had necessitated asking a question of herself first: "What makes someone worthy of respect?"

After listing down all the discernible traits, unifying qualities, and observable behaviours she imagined must necessarily belong to a person worthy of respect, she distilled her idea of what this person must be into one line: "Someone on a consciously undertaken personal journey to achieve their highest potential, whatever that may be. THAT is worthy of respect."

She named the podcast "Rare But There". The name was more than a moniker to her; it was her silent hope and most ardent prayer: "Please God, don't let my search for hidden jewels of integrity end in disappointment. Please let me discover that intelligence, honesty, virtue, bravery, and conscientiousness are rare but they *are* there."

The "studio" Laili recorded her podcasts in was an extra bedroom in the house that had previously been used to store all the artwork Laili's father bought and mother hated. Over time, the room had become a small temple to her parents' relationship with each other and with themselves – hide what you don't like, but hide it well. Spacious and in a forgotten corner of their large house, it was a barren womb, waiting, with only its own silent echo for company.

With the help of some industry "friends", she set up the space with utility instead of aesthetics as her goal. As a result when one entered the room the overwhelming feeling was of disorientation: wall to wall incongruent art screaming with superfluity juxtaposed with an austere table and two hideously sensible but comfortable chairs of the kind that one would expect to find in the office of an executive who takes himself far more seriously than is warranted.

The protocol for Laili's guests broke with the convention of her household; instead of a member of the domestic staff ushering guests in to where they were to be seated, Laili greeted them at the gate and walked them to the studio herself. This unremarkable act was, in the universe of Laili's house, a small coup. Her father protested at the impropriety of standing outside with *the guards*, her mother lamented that none of her friends' daughters ever stood outside *waiting at the gate* for visitors.

Ultimately, Laili reigned victorious over their remonstrations by using the old threat: "I think it's time for me to move out." Acting like a petulant child went against her better nature but, then again, it is impossible for opposing parties in a debate to argue philosophy unless at least one party understands the language of the other. This was the vernacular her parents responded to and so she used it, but only when their laws prohibited her from accessing the sacrosanct music of her own soul's song. Which was in itself rare, but there.

Rare But There's first guest had been a nurse Laili had met in post-op care for the removal of her appendix in a Karachi hospital that was more 4-star hotel than hospital. She chose the nurse as her first guest because the nurse was a single mother of two girls, opted out of an abusive marriage and pursued a career in nursing to provide for her girls the necessities of life, prime in which, to her mind, was a quality education, so that they would never have to attach themselves to an unworthy man for fear of food and shelter. The story of an oppressed woman finding herself with no choice but to either sink or swim was, unfortunately in Pakistan, not rare. What was rare was the calm grace with which the nurse attended to all she did. She treated her work with the devotion most people attempt – only flailingly – to bring to an act of worship. And Laili respected her for it.

Her second guest had been her high school Psychology teacher who, well into his sixties back then, brought a contagious vitality to the classroom as soon as he stepped foot in it. His passion for his subject was such that a two-hour double period flew by in a flurry of curious questions from a classroom in rapture at the excitement of learning not the nuts and bolts of A-Level Psychology but a concise history of ideas, tailored with great care to an 18 year old audience. And Laili respected him for it.

Over the course of 12 months, Laili had brought on the podcast 6 people she had known from a distance but glimpsed an undiminishable light in; the light of Integrity.

Her next guest was the first one she had never met and discovered only through an article in the country's leading English language newspaper. His name was Dara and his article had been about the dangers of the unconscious consumption of media by an unwitting public. Her favourite excerpt from the article was as follows:

*“To advertising you are not a person, you’re a consumer. And it will do everything in its power to ensure that you consume whatever it’s peddling.*

*With every catchy jingle, every grinning executive in a shiny car, every steaming hot cup of tea handed over lovingly, your idea of what life, your life, is supposed to look like is paling in comparison to your reality, making you feel like your life is not enough, like true happiness is in the accumulation of newer, better, more. Like you are not enough.*

*It’s making a killing off of your inability to take offence at the insults it hurls your way every day, hundreds of times a day. Banksy said advertising is laughing at you. I assure you, it’s not laughing in the way friends laugh. It’s not laughing at all, it’s yelling. It’s yelling at you and it’s yelling at the top of its lungs. It yells at you change your hair, your clothes, your concept of friendship, of love. It yells at you to change your capital S self.*

*Advertising is the abusive husband you are terrified of leaving because with every punch, kick and slap he erodes your sense of self, reshaping your identity until you’re completely convinced that you, the least of all mortals, are not capable of surviving life without him.*

*Advertising is calling you stupid. And if you fall for advertising, you’re just proving it right.”*

A quick Google search revealed that Dara ran a small consultancy firm in Lahore called Horizon. The company's LinkedIn page described it as specializing in advancing the interests of “socially responsible” companies and organizations. A look at Horizon's website revealed its most notable client to be a well-known and well-funded NGO facilitating free of cost education to children from underserved communities.

Laili was familiar with the NGO's work as she had volunteered there in the brief period between her return from university and beginning work at her father's agency. Her role had been as an intern in the marketing department. The job she was tasked with was one her manager disdained: writing the profiles of students in need of sponsorship. The task entailed meeting with the parent or caretaker of the student in question to gain a broad strokes understanding of their lived reality and weaving it into a story that would pull at the heartstrings – and purse strings – of

wealthy housewives. In the 6 weeks she spent at the NGO she wrote three profiles, ending each one with the line “Give this child the gift of being able to read in the way you just did.”

Having no way of contacting Dara save the email address the newspaper had provided, she proceeded to draft her invitation:

“Greetings Dara,

I trust this note finds you well. I’m Laili, a podcaster on the hunt for the jewel that is best: Rare Integrity. My father warned me when I was very young, “Everyone you will encounter in life will always have an agenda.” I’m writing to you today with an unapologetic agenda of my own: to funnel your particular brand of disdain for the normalised insanity that Pakistan’s media machine has become into a 90 minute podcast that will send alarm bells ringing to awaken those on the hedonic treadmill from their slumber. I was deeply moved by the stance you took in your article against the Frankenstein of contemporary media and advertising (not least because I have been a slave to that depraved manufacturing facility of dystopian aspirations in my past life). It would be my honour to host you on my (admittedly humble) podcast in the hope that your words may ignite even the smallest of sparks of indignation at the cud we are being fed through our screens daily. If you accept my invitation, I will be infused with the vitality of one who has scoured the desert to find its hidden well. If you reject it, I will still be glad for learning that an intellect that is awake walks amidst us, working resolutely to show us that the chains we’re bound by are the very ones we have confused for adornments.

With great respect,

Laili”

*With great respect.* It brought her joy to be able to write those words with a full realisation of the heavy weight they carry, and to mean it.

Dara replied a day later:

“Dear Laili,

I would be pleased to appear on your podcast for no other reason than as a gesture of gratitude at having found at least one reader of my tirades who is not my poor wife. Let me know the details.

Dara”

After exchanging numbers over email they corresponded via text messages to set a date and time. Dara confirmed he would be in Karachi in a month's time to pitch to a potential client and would have a free day in his itinerary.

When Dara met Laili at her gate, she was struck first by the solemnity of the smile that greeted her. An unusually tall man in his forties and of slender build, he had deep lines on his face that sat at odds with his age. Laili wondered whether these lines were remnants of the commonplace tremors that leave no life untouched, or hard-won through a life spent battling with less personal, more noble concerns. The latter, she liked to imagine. He walked into her house with his own center of gravity anchoring him amidst the gratuitous display of wealth he was surrounded by. Unlike her previous guests, who had glanced around, momentarily distracted by the adornments the house bore, Dara looked directly ahead, uninterested in what was on display and what it revealed about those who had placed it there.

They sat down at the table and began recording.

The podcast with Dara focused on the responsibility of the individual to “vote with their eyes” and reject the media’s “increasingly unapologetic” attempt at becoming “a voice inside our head”. Over the course of an hour and forty minutes Laili’s prompts allowed Dara to illustrate the ways in which being conscious of the media one consumes is a precursor to freeing oneself from the “asphyxiating binary of Fear and Desire”. Dara’s final statement for the episode was “We must look away from our TV and cell phone screens if we wish to see the horizon of a future that would be worth calling our own.” Laili ended with “The promise of that future makes me smile. Thank you for joining us Dara.”

After wrapping up the podcast, the pair decided to share a meal and exchange ideas for Laili to take *Rare But There* forward. Dara invited Laili to decide where they should go for dinner. Laili decided it needed to be somewhere they didn’t have to shout at each other across the table to be discernible and so took him to the restaurant her parents frequented most often and where she would need no reservation nor a guarantee that the food would be delectable.

Over the course of their long dinner, Dara was the one asking the questions. His line of inquiry led Laili to share the blue print of her existence; over the better part of two hours, she spoke with the ease only experienced by those who know they are being fully understood.

As they sipped their post-dinner coffees, Dara pushed back his sleeves and rested his elbows on the table, looking directly at her. “You’re an objectively attractive, wealthy, intelligent young woman. I’m certain many men have tried to attach themselves to the gifts you possess. And yet, you’re single. Tell me Laili, what is it you’re really looking for?”

Laili extended a palm onto the table with a deep inhale. She felt the starch of the immaculate white tablecloth she was so familiar with under her fingers and weighed her words before saying them.

“You know how when a new movie is about to hit the cinemas, and it has big-ticket names, celebrities everyone loves, and an award-winning director... You know how everyone is all *excited* about it and your friends call you up and tell you that you just *have* to go watch it with them because it’s going to be *so* good... so you agree... even though the movie has a dumb name like *Legend of Forever* or something. And when you take a second to think about it, the actors aren’t even actors you really even *enjoy* watching, and if you think about it for just another second, you remember that these *friends* aren’t even people you *truly* enjoy being around... But you go to the damn movie, and you eat the damn popcorn, and you tolerate the damn company because that’s what everyone else is doing too. But then you come home and you can’t look at yourself in the mirror because you don’t respect yourself for being such a damn sheep. What I’m trying to say is, you don’t respect yourself because you didn’t stand your damn ground. And all these guys who come along are exactly like that. Sheep – grazing through life. If I can’t respect that in myself, I sure as hell can’t respect that in a guy. What I mean to say is, it’s about Respect. I can’t be with someone I can’t respect.”

Dara sat silently for a minute, then extended his arm towards her, resting his hand atop hers. “Then why not *me*?”

Laili withdrew her hand sharply, and whispered with a tired, broken voice, “You’re married.”

“So?” Dara replied casually.



Laili rose up from her seat and turned to leave, thinking of her Hippocratic oath.

“You have terrible table manners. I can’t respect that.”

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