

WHY IS
NOBODY
LAUGHING?

BOOKS BY YASMIN RAHMAN

All the Things We Never Said

This Is My Truth

Why Is Nobody Laughing?

WHY IS
NOBODY
LAUGHING?

YASMIN RAHMAN

HOT
KEY
BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
HOT KEY BOOKS
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square
London WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden
www.hotkeybooks.com

Copyright © Yasmin Rahman, 2022

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Yasmin Rahman to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-1134-2

Also available as an ebook

1

This book is typeset using Atomik ePublisher
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Hot Key Books is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk



*To my brother, Shamim.
Thank you for always believing in, and supporting, me.
You never accept my gifts, so here's one you can't refuse.*





1

‘Wassup, everyone. My name’s Dexter Murgan, and – fun fact about me – I was named after a serial killer!’

The people in the crowd turn to each other – some with raised eyebrows, others with smirks – but Dexter’s not paying attention to any of that. He continues strutting around the stage like he owns the place. And he might as well – he’s got them hanging on his every word.

‘Don’t worry, not a real one, just a TV character,’ Dexter adds. ‘And the only *real* thing we have in common is our love of doughnuts.’

I watch from my seat at the side of the room and it’s weird, like . . . I’ve seen this set before. I’ve seen Dexter pace around his bedroom, tracing the exact same path he’s walking now, saying the exact same things. We’ve practised for this stand-up competition *hundreds* of times. And yet today, here, in front of a real audience, it’s different. It’s new. It’s . . . weird. It’s the first time I’ve seen him perform for people that aren’t me, people that haven’t heard him make dark jokes about his dead mum a thousand times in a hundred different ways.

‘I swear I have never seen someone look more uncomfortable,’

Dexter says, finishing his latest joke. 'At least he knows never to make "yo mama" jokes to me any more!' The crowd (if you can call a handful of people in a community centre a crowd) cracks up at this. Someone lets out a hoot and a clap too. It makes me smile. I know how hard Dexter's worked on this set. People think being funny just comes naturally, and sometimes I think it does for Dexter, but I also know from experience how many hours go into perfecting a funny anecdote – making sure it's not too long, that the punchline comes at the right time, that it's universally funny. It's hard work. But Dexter is a master.

And me? Well, I'm the fraud here. Dexter and I have been friends for years, and comedy is the thing that's always held us together. In fact, the first time we spoke, both nine years old, next to each other during a fire drill, we bonded over a joke. Well, I *say* bonded. I started crying after Theo McIntyre said I always smelt like curry and then Dexter made a joke about how Theo had only said that to distract people from the smell of his fart, and that his fart was probably what caused the fire alarm to go off. Dexter's always been there for me since that day, saving me when I needed it. But . . . I can't let him see me crying any more. Can't tell him about the overwhelming sadness that consumes me. Can't tell him what it's like at home. What it's like being me. I can't tell him about any of that. He'd think I was a pussy.

So I mask it. I mask it with jokes, mask it with a fake confidence that I learned from Dexter himself. I mask it by letting him enter me into a stand-up competition that I am definitely not talented enough for. The prize is a mentorship with Kai Matthews, one of Dexter's and my favourite

comedians – it's not like either of us could have passed this opportunity up.

I look around the room and can spot some of the people I saw gathering around the sign-up sheet when we arrived. It's mostly guys, mostly in their late twenties, or their thirties. There's no one as young as Dexter and me. Luckily there weren't any age restrictions – that's usually what trips us up from entering anything. Dexter's persistent though. He's not OK with just him succeeding, he's determined to bring me along too. I should be thankful for that, I guess, to have such a good friend, but the truth is, it . . . it terrifies me. The idea of getting up there, doing this, for the first time, in front of . . . so many people. I haven't even told Dexter how scared I am.

The material in my set, a lot of it's about my experience of being a teenage Bangladeshi Muslim guy living in an extremely white town, a white country. It's all, like, a joke, obviously, and it's me making fun of myself, and that seems fine when it's just you and your best mate, but doing it in front of an entirely white group of strangers . . . I worry that it'll make them think it's OK to say the same sorts of things to the next brown person they see.

I keep it safe though – the obvious jokes about terrorism and living with the name Ibrahim Malik, getting 'randomly selected' for security checks all the time, stuff like that. The things everyone says anyway, the things it's somehow become OK to say. I don't go any deeper than that, even though I could. I don't talk about home, about how my parents can't speak English, about how the house always smells of curry,

about how ever since I was a kid I've had to basically be a third parent – looking after my two younger siblings as well as being the one who had to talk to the bank when we needed an extension on our loan repayments, sorting out problems with British Gas, trying to deal with adult problems as a puny little nine-year-old. I can't tell anyone about that. Can't tell them about the pressures put on me at home as the eldest child of immigrants. Not even as part of a joke.

I pull out my phone from my jeans pocket. The screen is blank. No missed calls from home, begging me to come back urgently because the Wi-Fi's gone down or they need a babysitter. Dexter makes fun of me for how attached I am to my phone. But he's an only child, also white. He doesn't understand the dread that comes from worrying there'll be an emergency and I'll have to go and sort it out. He has a parent who's capable of being a parent.

I start to worry about the blank screen. What if they call while I'm onstage? What if something happens to one of my siblings and they need me to come and talk to the doctors but I can't pick up the call cos I'm on a stage telling stupid jokes? What if someone dies? It'll be all my fault.

'Thank you everyone, I've been Dexter Murgén, and you've been . . . tolerable! Well, most of you anyway.' He laughs and gives a wave.

The small audience breaks out into applause loud enough to have come from a crowd ten times that size. I push away the bad thoughts and stand up, putting my fingers in my mouth and letting out a high-pitched whistle. Someone in the corner

joins in with a holler. Dexter puts the mic back into the stand and does a little bow. He's beaming, and I don't blame him. He was great . . . I think, anyway. I missed the end, because of the bad thoughts, but the crowd loves him, and that's what matters.

Dexter struts his way down the stairs and towards our table, head up, lopsided grin on his face. The same way he walks across the quad when he knows Stephanie Burton is around. When he gets over to me, we fist-bump and I slide his lemonade across to him.

'You smashed it!' I say as he takes a gulp so big I'm sure the bubbles are gonna burn his throat. The bottom of the glass magnifies his grin. There's a shine to him, all over his face, a glow. Part sweat, sure, but also just the pride he has in himself. I wonder how that must feel, to be so sure of yourself, so confident in your abilities.

'Honestly, mate, you were great,' I say. I know he knows it, but I also need to say it. Because it's true. And because I'm a good friend. One who's super proud.

'God, that felt fucking amazing!' Dexter says, smile so wide his teeth glint. He looks around the room, surveying the audience, trying to see whether everyone else feels the same, even though he knows they do. He runs a hand through his dirty-blonde hair – but in a way that's just him trying to look cool, rather than a nervous habit like mine is. As if on impulse, I push my glasses up my nose.

I'm next.

I put my name on the sign-up sheet after Dexter, so that means any second now they're going to call my name. I'm

going to have to climb those stairs and . . . speak . . . try to be funny . . . in front of everyone.

Shit shit shit.

'I can't do this,' I say out loud. It slips out as I look around at the crowd, watch people chatter excitedly as they go and get more drinks from the makeshift bar in the corner. I see some of them look over at Dexter, probably talking about him, things he said in his set. This is what they'll be doing about me, talking about me, judging me, laughing at me. Not with me, *at* me.

'I can't do it,' I say again, purposefully this time, looking right at Dexter. I can feel the sweat starting to bead on my forehead.

Dexter looks at me, his expression still happy and smiling. 'And here's the pre-performance nerves right on schedule,' he announces with a laugh.

'No, I'm serious,' I say, swivelling my head around, spotting the judges at their table, seeing them holding the list, looking through it, looking around for me, then right at me. 'I need to get out.' I stand up from my chair, the wooden legs scrape against the laminate flooring, and a woman nearby turns to look. She's judging me, just for a noise. Imagine what she's going to be like when she sees me make a complete fool of myself onstage. I can't do this. I'm going to fail. What was I thinking, letting Dexter talk me into this? He should have known it would end in people jeering at me, in total humiliation. It's all I'll ever be. A joke.

My heart is pounding now, so hard I can feel it all over my body, but mainly in my ears. Thud-thud-thudding. So loud

and fast it feels like my ears are about to burst – just start spurting blood everywhere.

‘Hey, hey, calm down,’ Dexter says. He tugs on my shirtsleeve hard, so that I sit back down. ‘Ib, look at me.’ I do. He stares at me, wide-eyed and determined. I’ve seen this look so many times – it’s the look he gives me when he’s about to deliver a pep talk, about to tell me to stop being a baby, have some balls and stand up and be a man. Do something that’s easy as fuck for him. It’s meant to be a comforting stare, but I swear I see pity in there too. Every time. Today there also seems to be some anger – he flits his gaze towards someone behind me, gives them a slight head nod and a smile, before looking back at me. I’m getting in the way of his celebrations – stopping him from doing the rounds, celebrating like he should be after a successful set. I bet he regrets being friends with me.

‘Ib, you’re gonna be great,’ Dexter says, taking his hand away, now that he knows I won’t move. ‘You’re going to get up there,’ he continues, ‘and do the set we’ve practised five hundred times. You’re gonna smash it, and we’re both gonna get a bunch of points, right? We’re gonna shoot straight to the top of that table, yeah? It’s gonna be me and you up there next month for the final. And then . . .’ He lets the sentence dangle.

I laugh. This is our practised hype-up speech. We do it every time one of us gets cold feet – which means it’s Dexter doing it to me pretty much every time we try anything.

‘And then you and me will take over the world,’ I finish, with a smile. I roll my eyes and shake my head a little, feeling immediately calmer.

‘Exactly!’ he almost shouts. ‘Murgen and Malik headlining the Apollo, remember? Well, that ain’t gonna happen if you don’t get up there, right? You got this, man. I promise you. I’ve heard your stuff. I love your stuff, and you know how hard it is to impress me.’

‘Do I?’ I ask with a smirk. ‘Cos from what I remember, all I need to do to impress you is buy you a Snickers bar.’

His eyes light up, his back straightens. ‘You bought me a Snickers?’

I roll my eyes with a laugh.

The echo of the mic static rings out around the room. We both look across and there’s a woman standing where Dexter was just a few minutes ago. She’s got a clipboard in her hand. The sign-up list. *I’ve got this*, I repeat in my head over and over. Letting the words take on Dexter’s voice because he’s the only one that would ever say this to me, the only one whose words I would actually believe. He doesn’t bullshit me, I know that for sure. If he says my stuff is good, then it’s good. I need to be confident. How the fuck am I gonna be a stand-up comedian if I’m not confident?

Fake it till you make it, right?

‘And next up is sixteen-year-old Ibrahim *Milk*,’ the lady says, looking at her clipboard, where I’ve written out my name in block capitals, and yet still pronouncing my surname wrong.

‘Get on up there and *milk* it for all it’s worth,’ Dexter says with a laugh.

We bump fists as I get up from my chair and walk over. Everyone’s clapping now, and I keep my eyes down. It doesn’t feel as daunting if I can’t see them. Maybe when I get up

onstage, I can sneak my glasses off. Or I could just stare at Dexter the whole time. Although he might think that's weird.

My body is vibrating by the time I take the mic from the woman, who smiles warmly at me.

'Hi, everyone,' I say, forcing myself to look out into the crowd. Unfortunately it's not like on TV, where the lights are blinding. There's only the ceiling lights in this crappy community centre. Nothing fancy at all, considering it's mainly used for the weekly bingo games and toddler birthday parties.

'My name's Ibrahim *Milk*, apparently,' I say, looking over to the woman, with a forced grin. 'And here I am thinking it's Malik. The opportunities I've missed out on growing up, man.' The crowd chuckles a little. I do the trick Dexter taught me to unfocus my eyes, so that everything and most importantly *everyone* is a blur. 'I could've been an excellent mascot for a milk company if I'd known my true surname earlier. Well, *chocolate* milk, obviously.'

I push my glasses up on my nose. 'I could even bring my own glasses.'

The crowd groans a little, with an undertone of laughter.

I go straight into my memorised set, probably speaking too fast, but knowing that if I pay too much attention to what I'm actually saying that I will stumble and lose my place. It takes me a few minutes to get into the swing of things.

'I mean, I have to admit, being racially profiled isn't *all* bad,' I say to the crowd, about halfway through my set. 'At least I never have anyone sit next to me on buses or trains.'

The crowd laughs and I find myself laughing too, anticipating getting the next bit of the joke out.

‘You suck!’ A deep voice rises above the dwindling laughs. ‘Get off the stage and go get your eyes fixed, four-eyes!’ My gaze focuses. Right onto the table of guys, mid-twenties, a collection of empty beer cans in front of them. They’re laughing – mouths so wide I can see one of their fillings. They’re mocking me. I knew this might happen. Hell, you go on *expecting* to be booed off the stage right away. But when it *actually* happens, everything you planned to do in response – the jokes you were going to throw back at them, the way you planned to pick out a feature about the heckler and make fun of that right back at them – all that goes right out of the window. And instead of making a comment about how one of the guys has a questionable white stain on his black jeans, you just stand there, frozen on the spot, forgetting your practised routine. It’s like my brain has just completely stopped. All I can see is these three guys laughing, heads thrown back, snarls on their faces. The image plays over and over in my mind like a GIF.

My heart is pounding again. So loud in my ears that it feels like it’s about to burst. I turn to look at Dexter – he’s my anchor – he’ll bring it back, bring *me* back. But no, he’s fuzzy too. My eyes are focused though! What’s happening? Why is my vision so blurry?

Oh.

Oh no.

It’s happening again.

This happened just the other day. I was alone in my bedroom, on hold with O2 because Baba had accidentally spent a fortune on mobile data without realising it. And of course I was the

one who had to sort it out, which stressed me out so much. Suddenly my heart started pounding hard, my eyes went funny and it felt like I couldn't breathe. It genuinely felt like I was about to die. I thought I was having a heart attack. I was on the verge of calling for an ambulance. Except I couldn't move. It was by far the scariest thing that's ever happened to me. But since it went away after a few minutes, I assumed I was fine. That it was a freak one-off. But no . . . it's happening again.

And everyone is watching.

Oh God, no. They can't see this. They can't see me like this. I need to . . . I need to leave. I look around. Everything is still fuzzy as fuck. I stagger in a semicircle, trying to get away from the lights in the ceiling which suddenly seem to be burning down on me. I stumble, almost tripping over my own foot, and there's a huge laugh from the audience. The panic rises up inside me. Why, oh God, why did I think this was a good idea? Why did I think I could do this? That I was ready for this? That I could handle this?

Someone from the audience says something. A deep voice. I can't hear what, because now my hearing has gone too. It's like I'm underwater and sound can't reach me through the waves.

I need to leave. Get out. Last time this feeling went away after a few minutes. The same thing will probably happen again, right? I just need to ride it out. Alone. I spot a gap through the curtains to the side of the stage. I know there's a small room back there that's used for the women's prayers every Friday for Jummah. The perfect place.

My body feels like it's made out of marble, but the overwhelming need to just NOT BE HERE overpowers that,

makes my legs move, makes my feet stagger across the stage and through the curtain. I move as fast as I can down the corridor, and into the back room. I push the door so hard I almost fall flat on my face, but manage to right myself by grabbing on to a chair that's at the side. I sink down into it. I still feel like my body has stopped working, everything inside is broken and I'm about to completely explode or implode or break down.

I feel like I'm going to die.

This is how I felt the last time whatever this pain, this . . . whatever this is, happened. But it went away eventually. I hold on to that thought. It will go away. It has to go away.

Unless it doesn't.

Unless this time it kills me for real.

I'm struggling to breathe. Everything is coming out as a shudder. I pull my feet up on the chair, wrap my arms around them and bury my head in the gap. I focus all my energy on pressing myself together, as if it's up to me to keep myself whole. To stop myself from falling apart. I press myself into a ball, as small as I can, but still the tightness in my chest somehow gets worse, as if my lungs are completely closing. And I realise . . . this is it. This is the end. This is what's going to kill me. I thought it would pass, just a wave of pain, of something more than pain, a wave of . . . whatever. But this time it's worse . . . much, much worse.

This is it.

The end.