

Turning over A BAD LEAF

I expected to spend Valentine's Day this way. I had recently broken up with my long-term boyfriend and was dreading my first Valentine's Day alone in years. That February 14 night, I found myself curled on the couch in a foetal position, trembling and crying hysterically.

But it wasn't because of my ex-boyfriend.

On a quiet afternoon a few weeks earlier, I received a call from a friend who worked for an animal rights organisation. Lucy's organisation had undercover footage of trainers belonging to a well-known circus beating their chained elephants with bull hooks. The circus was coming to a nearby town and Lucy was organising a protest in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina.

"I'll be there," I told her, outraged by the footage I had watched online. "You can count on me."

"Great," she responded. "Just one thing... will you wear a pair of pasties and paint your body like a tiger and get into a cage?"

I almost laughed. "What did you say?"

Lucy explained that her volunteer got sick at the last minute and the media had already been alerted to the protest. She needed someone immediately, and I prepared for a resounding not me. Was she out of her mind? I grew up in a conservative Pakistani community. I worked for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). I was a well-behaved, pantsuit-wearing bureaucrat.

Then, standing there in my kitchen, I found myself hesitating. Well, Lucy was in a bind. And this was for a good cause. And I was just going to continue to be... well behaved? I'd always taken the safe, expected path. No risks, no mistakes, no surprises. I was thirty-one and single for the first time in my life. What better way to launch my new single-status than a bold, unorthodox act that would bring attention to animal cruelty? Before I could ask 'what are pasties?' I shocked Lucy, and especially myself, by saying yes.

The protest fell on a frigid February day. I woke up early in a hotel room to apply the paint. There were three other volunteers who helped apply black stripes to my back and set up the cage. It was all so novel and crazy that I was laughing and having a good time. When our van pulled up to the street corner in the middle of the business district, however, I almost had a meltdown.

"What the hell am I doing?" I thought as I wrapped my

robe tightly around me. Lunchtime crowds streamed out of office buildings. Cops, who had been informed of the protest, started gathering. People were starting to notice and look over. And my breasts were hanging out, and orange.

I saw the first media van pull up. They were coming. I couldn't back out now. I took off the robe, felt the stinging cold wind on my body, and got into a small, wire cage.

For the next hour, I sat in the cage, holding a little sign that said 'Wild Animals Don't Belong Behind Bars' while onlookers circled around me. People took our flyers. Men took pictures of me on their camera phones. The local news station videotaped me in the cage, and one of the volunteers spoke to the reporter. Then the reporter put a camera and microphone in my face.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked, trying to be cute.

"Yes, I am cold," I responded, suddenly worried that my pasties might have popped off, "but my discomfort is nothing compared to the suffering that the circus animals endure." Not bad, I thought when it was over. The reporter only asked a few questions and I did a pretty good job staying on topic and describing the cruelties in detail. Other than this interview, the protest was covered in a few local papers.

Then there was this website.

A conservative, right-wing online news agency that was not even at the protest picked up the story and gave it more coverage than any other media outlet. A few nights after the story's publication, I got a call on my cell phone while driving home from work.

"Are you the same Jabeen Akhtar who works at EPA?"

My hands shook. It was a reporter from that website. He had obviously researched me and found my work for the Agency. What was he trying to do with it?

"You did a provocative demonstration as a public employee. Our readers would find this very interesting. How long have you been at EPA?"

I told him nothing, but it didn't matter.

Two days later, flashing in red at the top of their webpage under the banner of 'BREAKING NEWS' was the headline, 'Naked Circus-Protester Works for US EPA.' Saddam Hussein had just declared a hunger strike. Iran had vowed to resume its uranium enrichment. Our Vice President just shot a man he thought was a duck. Yet I was their breaking news?

On sites like Yahoo News, the article was headlined as

A few years ago, new writer on the block, Jabeen Akhtar found herself semi-naked, painted like a tiger, in a cage, in downtown Charlotte, North Carolina. As an exclusive for *Grazia*, she narrates the true story behind one of the strangest days in her life

the second most prominent article about the EPA. Almost immediately, dozens of Internet sites picked up the story, saying I was "outed." Bloggers provided links to my projects, gave my office address and provided the contact information of my co-workers. I started receiving dozens of E-mails and phone calls at work from strangers. I felt stalked, threatened. I was terrified.

But it didn't end there. All over the Internet, I was being trashed – called a sinner, a nut, a whore. People voted for me to be fired on an online poll. Everyone commented on my Muslim name, saying Islamic fundamentalists were going to target me for bringing shame to the religion by appearing naked in public. I even imagined, possibly too grandiosely, the news being picked up by fundamentalist media abroad. It would read, "This is what happens when you educate a Muslim woman in the United States."

My boss was in a meeting that day. I left her a note that I didn't feel well and had to go home. That was Valentine's Day.

The next morning, I collected myself, walked straight into her office and told her the news. "You were within your rights as an American citizen," she responded. "You didn't do anything anti-EPA. You weren't even arrested. You won't be fired." I don't think I was breathing until she said that last part. I felt very, very lucky.

Still, I became obsessed with what was being said about me online. I had to learn to stop Googling my name. I had been advised by attorney friends to keep track of everything in case the situation spiralled out of control. They argued I could sue the website (even their advertisers) for slander or harassment. But this was wearing on me. I was tired of the dread I felt every morning when I cracked open my laptop.

After about two weeks, the story started to disappear from websites. My life eventually returned to normal, and I soon started to forget the entire incident. Then one night while watching TV, I saw a commercial for the circus I protested against. I watched as their elephants stood on miniature chairs and bowed to the cheering crowds. My heart broke as I remembered the undercover video.

Other people wanted to make this story about me. But it was never about me. It was always about these animals. Even I needed to remember that. ■



In her debut novel, *Welcome to Americanistan*, Jabeen Akhtar introduces us to a bizarre world where you can go from being a promising aide in a US senator's office to a terrorist on FBI's watch list, overnight

In a modern world, as a modern woman, Pakistani-American author Jabeen Akhtar followed a hunter into the woods at 5 am to distract him from killing any deer. "I'll never be the silent, neutral type. I'm a modern woman, I have a lot to say and nothing's going to stop me from saying it," she says.

Akhtar was born in London in 1974 and immigrated to the US in 1976 with her family. She worked for the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for almost seven years, before she quit to write. In her debut novel, *Welcome to Americanistan*,

her protagonist Sameera Tanweer is almost as expressive as she is, except that *her* form of expression leads to a break-up and lands her on the FBI's terror watch list. Besides chronicling Sameera's breakdown and eventual reboot, the novel is an engaging peek into her family, humorously and honestly written, without any nostalgia tinged memory keeping. This is Sameera's story, and her connections to the country of her parents might be tenuous but it's not confused in the way that stereotypes from novels from the diaspora usually are. "I've never been conflicted over my ethnicity, my parents were too busy working to care about finding anyone a spouse, and I never had a trip back to Pakistan that could be described as an 'odyssey.' These diaspora novels are beautiful stories, but I believe many of them are falsely romanticised portrayals of the lives of South Asian immigrants and turn us into one-dimensional mythical creatures to be observed, not related to," she says.

Welcome to Americanistan, Penguin, ₹ 499

