

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

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OVERVIEW

“NO PLACE LIKE HOME” is the gritty tale of one daughter’s sacrifice. Narrowly escaping the clutches of the Taliban, her wealthy family resettles in New Zealand where their father struggles to make ends meet as a taxi driver. All she wants is for them to be happy again. But the combination of homesickness, financial pressure and lack of recognition for his medical qualifications makes him increasingly abusive, both physically and emotionally.

Turning to prostitution to secretly help pay the bills, she begins to feel empowered, sexually liberated. She’s making friends at university. Enjoying life. But she can’t reconcile this newfound hedonism with her beliefs. And staying one step ahead of an overly protective father and zealous admirer causes great anxiety. She sets a date to quit the game but is exposed before she can. Her family decides an honour killing in the name of Allah is just, only to realise her true motivations when it’s too late.

This is a drama riddled with contrasts and contradictions – introverted father and extroverted daughter, east versus west, rich versus poor, abusive doctor and Muslim prostitute – that brings into question Muslim attitudes to women, society’s attitudes to prostitutes, and the ability of refugees to assimilate into new cultures.

CHARACTER SET-UP

We meet our main characters, SAFIA and her father DANISH ANWAR along with the rest of their family at a refugee centre. The immigration officer asks what brings them to New Zealand and we cut back to...

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN. One month ago. The Anwars are celebrating their mother’s birthday in a restaurant. It becomes obvious that Safia is her father’s daughter. She lives for his approval even if it means doing things she doesn’t really enjoy, like the piano lessons that she agrees to as ... a fire erupts in the street outside. Danish knows he should turn a blind eye but, being a doctor, drags the wounded Kiwi peacekeeper inside to perform a life-saving tracheotomy.

The family settle back into their normal routines as best they can. We see Danish as a good father, firm but fair. One who helps his children with their homework and plays football in the courtyard.

Then three weeks later, he receives a tip off that the Taliban has charged him as a western sympathiser. The family race to pack what belongings they can as the ragtag rebels shoot their way past private security. A car chase through the streets of Kabul ensues until they finally stumble upon the safety of a Kiwi checkpoint.

It’s a lucky escape but little can they imagine the suffering that is to follow...

STORY

The Anwars arrive at the rundown villa they are to share with two other refugee families. It's quite a come down from their place back home. Danish tells them not to worry – they'll be back on their feet in no time.

Fast-forward three years. Same house. Danish staggers out of bed and sets off for another day in his taxi. In montage, we see the shit he has to deal with: the road rage, traffic jams, rich passengers complaining about their lot in life, bitchy dispatchers. His demeanour has changed. He's no longer the kind, gentle man in the restaurant.

Returning home, Danish sees HADEEL, his wife, waiting anxiously at the door with mail. It's a letter from the Royal College of General Practitioners. The family gathers round, preying for good news. But the college refuses to recognise his qualification. Danish flies into a fit of rage, striking his wife viciously across the face as she tries to console him. The son, NAMIR, cowers under the table – he already has one black eye and doesn't need another one.

The next day at the park, Safia breaks down crying in front of her mother. Why can't they just go back to the way things were in Kabul? Hadeel tries to explain the situation from her husband's point of view. To make matters worse, their savings have almost dried up, making Danish stress about Safia's university fees. She wants to quit medicine school and get a job to support them but Danish is too proud to let her.

Sitting in a tutorial at university, Safia meets JENNY, a confident young woman decked out in designer gear. They seem an unlikely match but quickly become friends. Over coffee, Safia asks how can she possibly afford such a grandiose lifestyle. Swearing her to secrecy, Jenny confesses to working part time for an elite escort agency. Safia tries to act worldly to mask her shock.

Walking through the campus, she stops at a stand for Women's Refuge. There's a brochure on counseling for domestic violence offenders, which she grabs while no one's looking. Safia wouldn't dare raise the subject with her father, but what if he happened to stumble across it?

After hearing more yelling at home, she decides to slip the brochure inside a free community newspaper for Danish to find. But it's Namir who collects the paper. The brochure falls out. Danish enters to see it lying on the kitchen table and demands to know who put it there. Everyone's frightened. Danish prepares to king-hit Namir with the phone book when Safia steps forward. We cut to see her in the shower, sporting a massive bruise on her ribs.

Back at university, she decides to google the elite escort agency. Maybe Danish will calm down if she can take care of the bills? Safia agonises over the possibility of becoming an escort for several weeks before calling the madam, KIRSTEN, for an interview. Much to her surprise she finds a warm, caring professional women in a New York-style apartment filled with antiques. She's incredibly nervous. Kirsten attempts to put her at ease, pointing out the stunning designer wardrobe, hotel-only visits for discretion, and the fact she never has to do anything she doesn't want – as

well as the \$350 an hour a girl like her can make.

Unable to decide, Safia confides in Jenny who points out she'll need an alibi for her earnings. Together they dream up a fictitious scholarship complete with \$500 a week living allowance. Jenny knows a graphic designer who can forge the paper work, while one of her older clients, a slightly eccentric member of the local thespian society, can play a very plausible professor if need be.

Danish is immensely proud when Safia shares the good 'news'. The old Danish returns, at least temporarily, and he insists on a family celebration.

Safia joins the escort agency. She has everything she needs – including a supportive madam and security driver – yet she bails out of her first two bookings, riddled with self-doubt. Given a last chance by the madam, we follow her in the limousine to the hotel. She's nervous, paranoid. What if it the client is someone she knows? He turns out to be a businessman from Hong Kong. Decent. Somehow she makes it through the hour and heads home.

Walking up the shared driveway, Safia encounters SANJAY, a neighbour, who makes another lewd pass at her. She asks him to stop following her. He vows to one day have her in his arms.

By chance, Sanjay spies Safia meeting her driver TONY the next day. He can't believe how stunning she looks in her black Gucci dress and decides to follow, jealous that she might be on a date. Lacking any subtlety, he pulls up next to her at the lights. Safia panics and instructs Tony to drive around the block until they lose him.

As the months pass, Safia becomes increasingly seduced by the money she's making; money she spends on partying with Western friends, clothes and jewellery that she hides from Danish. She even abandons her headscarf. Life away from home, away from Danish, is good.

But it's getting worse for Danish. Young men on a late night bender vomit in his cab. Disgusted by the binge drinking culture and liberal attitudes to sex, he turns to the same fundamentalist beliefs of those who chased him from his homeland.

When Safia arrives home one day he is waiting. From now on she must wear the burqa everywhere she goes, something she didn't even do in Kabul.

Customers at the local dairy stare at her like she's a terrorist. She feels humiliated.

Hadeel finds some of Safia's expensive make-up and designer clothes while putting away her laundry. Danish wants to know where she got the money for them. Safia lies, telling him they are hand-me-downs from Jenny that didn't cost a thing. But Danish doesn't care for excuses and burns the clothes while lecturing her on the behaviour of pious Islamic women.

Later, he asks Sanjay to keep an eye on her.

Safia begins to spend less time at home, telling her parents she is studying when

really she is working for the agency or out with friends. She feels empowered rather than victimised as an escort and starts to fall for one of her regular clients. But seeing a photo of his family reminds her why she is there and she begins to feel guilty. Dirty. This is not the life she planned. But she feels trapped so long as her father is denied his true vocation.

Some weeks later she decides to quit. But she's far from relieved that the end is in sight. In fact she's even more paranoid of being found out. Sanjay seems to be everywhere. She sees him in the street and ducks into alleys. He walks into a hotel restaurant where she is having dinner with a client and they leave separately for the room upstairs.

The girls at the escort agency surprise Safia with a farewell dinner on the eve of her final day at work. Kirsten makes a speech about how much she'll be missed. "If you ever need a place to stay all you have to do is ask."

One more booking at the Sheridan and this chapter of her life will be closed forever.

Sanjay walks down a hotel corridor. Safia hears a knock on her door. Dabbing Coco Chanel on her neck, she opens the door to find ... Sanjay staring straight at her. He smirks, "Now I know what you really want." He throws \$500 down on the bed. Her heart sinks and she slaps him across the face. Infuriated that he can't even pay to have her, he storms out.

Sanjay wastes little time in informing Danish of the shame Safia has brought his family. The two men race to the hotel. Breaking through the door to Room 411 they find ... nothing. Sanjay calls Kirsten, demanding to speak to Safia but she refuses. Jumping back in their taxi they speed to the address they have for the escort agency and thump on the front door. Tony lets them in to avoid any indiscrete scenes. Sanjay and Danish start shouting, calling Kirsten a filthy whore. Tony coolly grabs Sanjay by the throat and slams him against the wall with his 200kg frame, suggesting he show more respect. They leave none the wiser.

Safia is safe in a place where they can't touch her – Kirsten's bach up north. Jenny's there for support. Still, she's frightened. The texts and missed calls from her family mount. And she knows Jenny can't stay forever. Jenny urges her to run away to Sydney, where she can be free and live the life she wants. But she can't leave the family she loves.

Left on her own, she feels vulnerable and isolated. Fast-forward three weeks. Looking like she's barely slept, Safia grips firmly to her mobile. Hadeel's number pops up. On the seventh ring she answers. They speak for hours, mother to daughter. More days of talking go by. Safia decides to return home, following assurances from both parents that all is forgiven.

Tony comes to collect her for the drive back to Auckland. Nearing home he asks if she'd like him to come inside, just to make sure everything's okay. She smiles and declines, not wanting to antagonise her parents.

It's early evening in winter and already dark. Tony drops her off 100 metres from the

house and kisses her on the forehead. Walking up the driveway she thinks it strange there are no lights on. They knew she'd be home about now. Unlocking the front door, she's hopeful more than anything. A small light flicks on. Hadeel sits emotionless in her rocker. Namir closes the door behind her. Stepping out of the shadows, Danish looks at her, wielding a machete. A hand muffles her scream from behind. She struggles but it's no use. This is a brutal, cold-blooded honour killing.

The sun rises. Hadeel works through Safia's belongings in silence. We expect sorrow but see none. Danish picks up a black rubbish bag and asks if that's everything. Just this coat, she says, throwing it to him.

A journal falls out and she picks it up. There are entries for the past 200 days. Over the next 16 hours Hadeel comes to realise her daughter's unselfish motivations, her sacrifices and struggles. A mother begins to wail uncontrollably. Tears running down her cheeks, she falls to her knees praying to her god for forgiveness.

Black fills the screen:

More than 5,000 women die in honour killings every year

- United Nations