

A Christian *and a Muslim* Walk Into *a Wedding*

AN
UNLIKELY
PAIRING

Their differing religions were a major hurdle on the road to love, but *Sumia Levy* and her husband, Aslam, made it to the altar – and beyond.

Aslam was a year ahead of me in university, and one of the top achievers in his class. We first got to know each other when I recruited him to help my father with his animation business. They went on to start a company together – in a sense, he was the son my dad never had. At that stage, I had no interest in Aslam at all. But after my graduation, I joined their company, and that's when Aslam and I became friends.

Hearts in Tune

We were both in relationships at the time, and used to have regular discussions about the nature of love. Then, in the same week, early in 2008, we both became single. It hadn't been planned, but the change in status affected our interactions. Our conversations became longer and deeper, and we developed a habit of chatting every day after work. By March, it was undeniable: We had developed feelings for one another. The transition from colleagues to partners was smooth, as we had already built up a solid friendship. Within months of dating, however, it was evident that our differing religions posed a problem. As our relationship became more serious, it grew harder to ignore this contrast. For three years, we both decided not to practice our religions, but when we started discussing marriage, the issue came up again. We knew we needed to resolve it by finding one

religion we could both subscribe to. As the only son of devout Muslims, Aslam could possibly be disowned if he abandoned his faith. On the other hand, my family had grown to love and accept him, as a friend and as my partner. When Aslam started coming to our house for meals, my mom even switched to buying meat at a halaal butchery. One of us had to make a sacrifice. I knew Aslam was worth it, so I decided to convert to Islam. This meant I had to give up my successful career as a lingerie model and, after being called Suzanne for 25 years, I took a new, Muslim name – Sumia. But I dedicated myself to Islamic classes, and I've even learnt to speak some Arabic.

A Bride's Dream

Aslam and I were married in March 2010, in Cape Town. Though I had converted to Islam,



ABOVE: Sumia and Aslam on their wedding day, 2010.

we managed to incorporate some of my background into the day's proceedings. Because my Christian family wasn't comfortable going to a mosque, the traditional Muslim ceremony was held at Aslam's uncle's house. Although it wasn't quite a church aisle, my father walked me into the room. I was wearing a classic off-white gown, and, in keeping with Islamic custom, I wore a gorgeous jacket that covered my arms and chest. It was important that I appear modest, but having been a model for so long, I still wanted to look stylish. I changed the jacket later in the day, and felt so pleased when people said it looked like I had a whole new wedding outfit. The little compromises and accommodations that Aslam and I agreed to made the day beautiful and emotional. Some family members who didn't support our relationship chose not to attend, so Aslam and I were very touched to see those who did come.

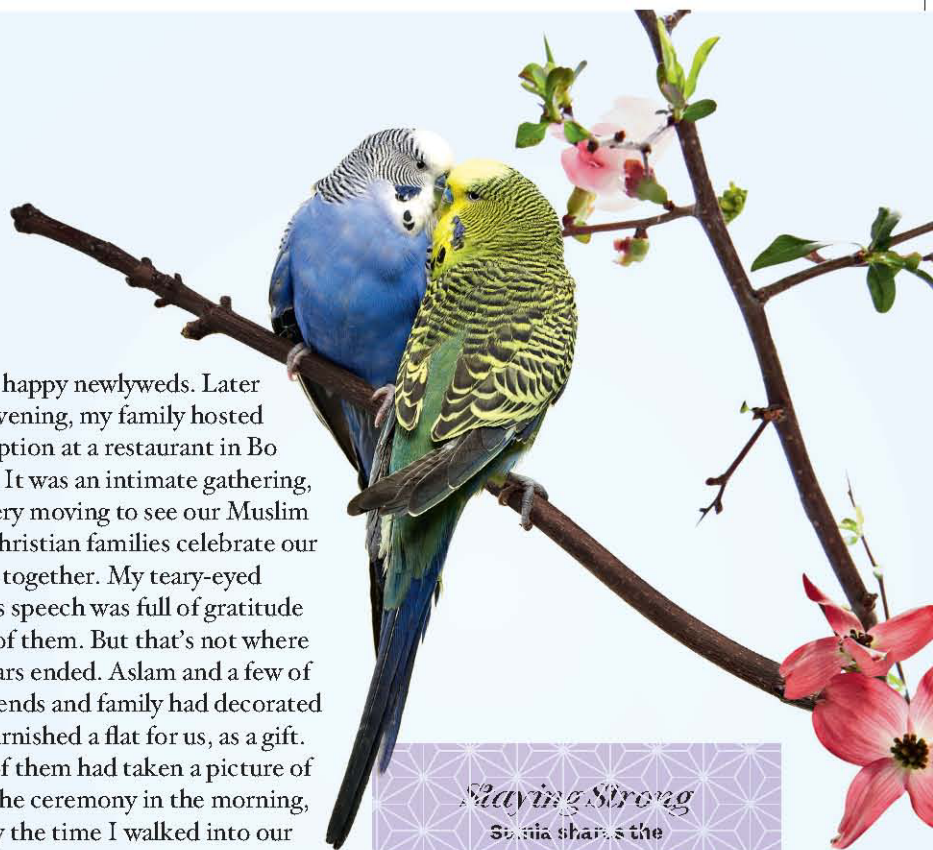
After the morning ceremony and brunch, we had a photoshoot at Camps Bay. We ran barefoot, wore matching outfits and had tremendous fun over those four hours. It was our chance to be

crazy, happy newlyweds. Later that evening, my family hosted a reception at a restaurant in Bo Kaap. It was an intimate gathering, and very moving to see our Muslim and Christian families celebrate our union together. My teary-eyed bride's speech was full of gratitude to all of them. But that's not where my tears ended. Aslam and a few of his friends and family had decorated and furnished a flat for us, as a gift. One of them had taken a picture of us at the ceremony in the morning, and by the time I walked into our marital home later that same day, there was a beautiful wedding picture hanging in our bedroom. Seeing how much love and attention had gone into preparing our first shared home was heartwarming, and it gave us a wonderful start to married life.

Into the Future

Today, Aslam and I have a beautiful daughter, named Aliya. We still battle with people who don't agree with our relationship, but our love perseveres. Even though I'm fully converted to Islam, we aren't fundamentalist. It was really important to my parents that

I still participate in family traditions, so I join them whenever possible, and I help my mom cook on Christmas Eve. I dress modestly, but sometimes I'll wear a scarf around my neck instead of over my head – I started doing this after Aslam said he missed seeing my hair. What I've gained from being with Aslam is true happiness. The day we became husband and wife, we united our hearts – and made a commitment to overcome all the challenges we might face. **Q**



Staying Strong

Sumia shares the lessons that have held her marriage together.

LOOK BEYOND LABELS

We've learnt to respect one another for who we are. Rather than focusing on what we need to change, we just want to keep improving our bond.

GIVE GREAT GRACE

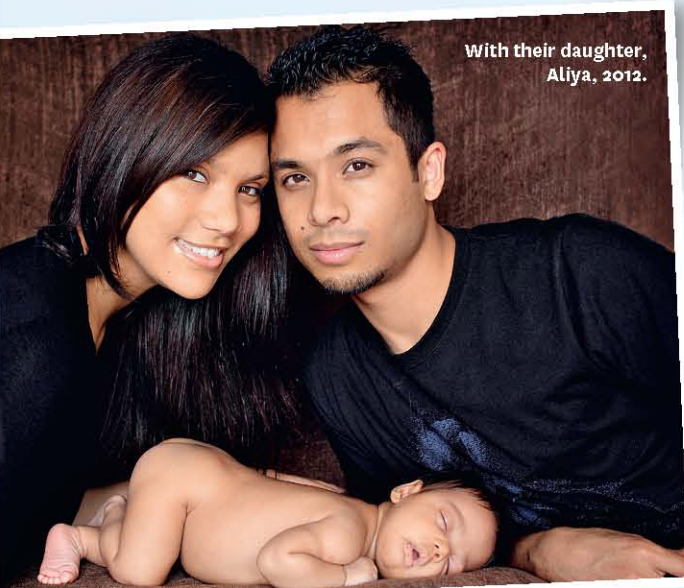
Aslam was very patient with me as I converted to Islam, because I found everything overwhelming. Learning to pray and wear a scarf was a challenge, so it helped that he was so supportive.

ACCEPT THERE'LL BE MISUNDERSTANDINGS

We come from different upbringings, and that can sometimes cause arguments. But we don't let these conflicts create walls between us. Instead, they inspire us to keep building deeper communication.

DON'T GIVE UP TOO EASILY

As a mixed couple and new parents, we've endured a lot of judgment from others. At times, this causes tension in our relationship, but we're committed to trying every possible way to overcome difficulties. We're prepared to work hard for our future as a family.



With their daughter, Aliya, 2012.