Twitter Thread by Brandon Stanton



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(1/11) “There is a moment I’ll never forget. My mother was teaching a class at our home, and my father hit her in front of the students. It was humiliating..."

(1/11) “There is a moment I’ll never forget. My mother was teaching a class at our home, and my father hit her in front of the students. It was humiliating. She was an esteemed teacher in our town. After it happened, I asked her: ‘How could you possibly stay with him?’ She replied: ‘Boys will be boys. It’s a woman’s job to hold the home together.’ It’s the same story taught to every Pakistani girl. We are raised from a young age to believe that our purpose in life is to find and keep a husband. We are taught to cook, and clean, and never complain. It’s different for boys. They are allowed to grow, and work, and find their own way. But a daughter has just one path: to marry as quickly as possible. I always wanted more from life, even as a child. I wanted to create something. I wanted to be somebody. But there was nowhere to look for inspiration. The internet didn’t exist back then. And even on our television shows— women who wanted more than a family were depicted as villains. Maybe if a girl had perfect grades, then she could become a doctor or lawyer. But that wasn’t me. My grades were only average. I remember when I was sixteen years old, I secretly recorded my voice and mailed the tape to a local radio station. I thought maybe I could host my own program. But my mother found the package and removed it from the post. Then a few months later I had my first meeting with a matchmaker. My mother coached me to keep my head down. She warned me not to be clever, and to answer every question with a single sentence. But none of the questions were about my personality. All of them were about my cooking, and cleaning, and sewing. At one point I got aggressive. I told the matchmaker that I had no interest in marriage. But she only laughed at this. ‘I hear that from every girl,’ she answered. ‘But they always fall in love with their husbands. Because marriage is a beautiful thing.’ For the next several months I rejected every suitor who came to our home. I kept hoping that my parents would change their mind. They were liberal people. Both of them were educators. But during my 12th grade year they took a pilgrimage to Mecca. And when they returned, things got even worse.”

(2/11) “Suddenly the science and literature books disappeared from our home. They were replaced by Islamic books, all of which were written by men. The rules were tightened..."

(2/11) “Suddenly the science and literature books disappeared from our home. They were replaced by Islamic books, all of which were written by men. The rules were tightened. Our dress code became very strict. And if I ever tried to question these things, I could be hit in front of my younger siblings. More and more matchmakers began coming to our home, and the pressure to marry became relentless. I tried my best to focus on my studies. My aunt was working as a private tutor, and she would sometimes help me prepare for exams, so most afternoons I would escape to her house. It was there that I first met Waqas. He was one of my aunt’s students. He had a patchy beard, and an untucked shirt, and a shy demeanor. He seemed serious about his studies, but there was a mischievous smile. One afternoon I noticed that he had given my aunt a book. It was a very bad book—some cheap teenage romance. So when he returned for his next session, I offered him something more refined. My choice was a famous novel called Raja Gihd, and I suggested that we read it together. The book was about a girl who falls in love with her teacher. We agreed to read ten pages at a time, and afterward we would meet to discuss. During these meetings we would talk about much more than the story. We’d discuss life, and society, and human emotions. It became the only chance I had to exchange my ideas with anyone. And Waqas took my opinions seriously. Sometimes he’d bring his diary with him, where he’d copied a lot of poems from different poets. Occasionally he’d read them out loud to me. Many were philosophical. And some were romantic, but I never felt like I was being courted. Perhaps because he was a year younger than me. Or maybe because he was from a different caste. But it never seemed possible for the two of us to ever be more than friends. After several months of meeting together, Waqas had to leave for college in Lahore. At the end of our final discussion, he asked me to write a poem in his diary. It was the first poem I’d ever written. And it was a poem of departure. I wouldn’t see Waqas again for 1.5 years.”

(3/11) “After high school I enrolled at a local boy’s college. I was one of fifteen girls at the entire school. And even though my grades were nothing special, I was very involved in student organizations..."

(3/11) “After high school I enrolled at a local boy’s college. I was one of fifteen girls at the entire school. And even though my grades were nothing special, I was very involved in student organizations. During my freshman year we had a giant flood in Pakistan, and many of us were searching for ways to help. My idea was to produce a play. We would stage the performance at a local theater, and all proceeds would go to victims of the flood. I organized everything myself: I wrote the script, I found the actors, I scheduled rehearsals at our home. It was the most powerful that I’d ever felt. And everything was coming together. But a few weeks into our rehearsals, the neighbors began to notice strange boys coming and going from our home. One morning my father called me into the living room. ‘The neighbors are gossiping,’ he said. ‘You are embarrassing our family.’ Then he made me promise that I would cancel the play. Every day he would ask me, and every day I would lie to him. We held our rehearsals in secret. We kept selling tickets. And on the day of the performance, there were 1500 people in the audience. The play was about a girl who’d lost everything in the flood. There were some songs, and some comedy, and a little drama when the government refused to help. Everything went perfectly. And when the final curtain came down, there was a big speech about how Sidra had organized the whole thing. The entire audience stood up and clapped. From backstage I could see my father’s friends—even the ones who had told on me. And there was Waqas, sitting in the front row, clapping harder than anyone. He came backstage and told me all about his life in Lahore. He said that he’d discovered something called ‘the internet,’ and he was planning to start a business. Then he asked if I would join him in Lahore and become his business partner. He told me: ‘With someone like you on the team, people will take us seriously.’ It finally felt as though my talents were being recognized, and the next day I asked for my parent’s permission. But they refused. ‘It’s time to stop this foolishness,’ my mother said. Then she gave me an ultimatum: ‘Either become a teacher, or get married.”

(4/11) “I felt cursed. Why hadn’t I been born a boy? I had all these ideas, and all these dreams, but nobody would ever recognize them. I spent the next few weeks laying on the sofa, thinking about my life..."

(4/11) “I felt cursed. Why hadn’t I been born a boy? I had all these ideas, and all these dreams, but nobody would ever recognize them. I spent the next few weeks laying on the sofa, thinking about my life. And eventually I got so depressed that I think it scared my father. One morning he poked his head into my room, and said: ‘I have a meeting in Lahore. If you can be ready in five minutes-- I will take you with me.’ My mother came along for the ride. But nobody spoke very much. And when we arrived in the city, they dropped me off at a cheap female hostel. It was the only place I could afford to stay. There were no windows. My mattress was on the floor. And I was sharing a room with three other girls, but none of this bothered me. Because I finally had my freedom. Waqas and I began working on our company right away. We named it ‘Social Media Art,’ and our plan was to help companies establish a presence on social media. But this was less than ten years after 9/11. There were still many sanctions on the economy. And Facebook was banned in Pakistan, so it wasn’t easy to find clients. We used KFC as our office because it was the only place with free WiFi. We were sharing a single laptop. All day long we’d email companies, asking for a meeting. At the time we were surviving off $100 a month that I earned from my tutoring gig. It was a very difficult life. Nobody wanted to hire us, and it seemed like we had no path. But at the end of each day we would watch YouTube videos from American entrepreneurs. And we’d read articles in the Harvard Business Review, about people who went from zero to millions. We kept reminding each other: ‘Everyone starts this way. It takes years to be successful.’ But it could be difficult to maintain that confidence. My parents were giving me no emotional support. Sometimes I’d get so lonely that I would call back home, and they’d ask me: ‘Why are you doing this to us? You need to quit these random things.’ When I hung up the phone, Waqas would sometimes see me crying. He’d come over and hold me. ‘Don’t worry,’ he’d say. ‘Everyone starts this way. We are going to make it. We will find a way to be successful, and everyone will understand.’”

(5/11) “Waqas had begun to view me as more than a business partner. This was obvious to me. And maybe I was interested too, but I knew it wasn’t possible. Waqas was younger than me, and from a different caste..."

(5/11) “Waqas had begun to view me as more than a business partner. This was obvious to me. And maybe I was interested too, but I knew it wasn’t possible. Waqas was younger than me, and from a different caste. Neither of our parents would allow the match. But he was persistent. Nobody ever paid attention to me like he did. If we ever had some extra money, he’d bring me little gifts. And he always brought me water in a glass-- never a cup. Every time we rode a bike together, he would wait until I was completely set. He’d make sure that my head was covered. And that my dress was pulled away from the wheels. These seem like small things-- but nobody had waited for me to be set before. Waqas had been very close to his mother growing up. They used to read stories together from a woman’s digest, and I think that’s where he got his ideas of romance. Sometimes he’d want to give me hugs. Or hold hands. Or read poetry. But there was a shyness there, for both of us. Because in our culture these things are forbidden. One time we were walking in the park and he stopped to buy me flowers from a roadside vendor. But he was too nervous to give them to me, so he carried them all the way home. Then he threw them off the balcony. We never discussed the status of our relationship, but both of us could feel a closeness. We were bonded by our journey. Both of us were defying our parents. Waqas had dropped out of school without telling anyone, so neither of us could afford to turn back. But after a year of rejection we had begun to lose hope. We were looking for clients in the strangest places. One afternoon we met with a group of craftsmen in a small village. They were making leather shoes on the floor of a two-room workshop. It wasn’t the nicest environment-- but the product was good. So we told them how the Internet could revolutionize their business. At first they were skeptical. It was clear to me that they had never worked with a woman before. They wouldn’t even look me in the face. And they insisted I take a chair, even though everyone else was sitting on the floor. When we left that day, I asked Waqas to arrange one more meeting. But this time I would come back alone.”

(6/11) “I returned to the workshop a few weeks later. Once again the craftsmen offered me a chair, but this time I refused. I sat next to them on the muddy floor, and said: ‘Teach me everything you know...'"

(6/11) “I returned to the workshop a few weeks later. Once again the craftsmen offered me a chair, but this time I refused. I sat next to them on the muddy floor, and said: ‘Teach me everything you know.’ I wanted to learn it all: how to measure, how to make a pattern, how to tell the quality of leather. These men had been making shoes since they were kids, and I’m not sure they’d ever met someone so interested in their craft. They probably expected me to stay for thirty minutes, but I was there until the sun went down. And I came back seven times after that. In the end we agreed to collaborate on a collection. We would design the shoes together, and then market them on the internet. Waqas built our website while I focused on production. At first I trusted the experience of the craftsmen. But when our very first samples came in—I wasn’t satisfied. The quality was not the highest level. So I became much more involved. But I was careful not to criticize. It was more of a learning energy: ‘We can do better. We can figure this out.’ I’d insist on more stiches per inch. And better finishing. I’d bring in pictures of high quality, Italian shoes. And whenever the men told me that something couldn’t be done, I’d find a YouTube video showing how to do it. After several attempts we were able to produce a shoe of the highest standard. It was no different than what was being sold in expensive stores. We called our collection ‘Hometown Shoes.’ And after we launched our website, the first order came in right away. It was from a person in France who’d been following our story on social media. Because we had no way of accepting credit cards, he sent us $85 through Western Union. It was a very big moment for us. We had finally discovered a business that would work. But our excitement only lasted until we got to FedEx, and learned that shipping would cost $120. We were torn about what to do. We considered giving the man a refund, but we had been reading so much about customer service. So we ended up shipping the shoes. It was not a promising start. We'd lost a lot of money on our very first sale.”

(7/11) “All of our customers came through word of mouth. First it was friends. Then it was friends of friends. After a year we were selling about 50 shoes per month..."

(7/11) “All of our customers came through word of mouth. First it was friends. Then it was friends of friends. After a year we were selling about 50 shoes per month. We were happy to have any business at all, but it wasn’t nearly enough to survive. And every week seemed like it would be our last. Our final hope was to launch a Kickstarter campaign. Our campaign launched on a Monday night. We set the goal at $15,000. Then we emailed the link to everyone in media and went to sleep. When we woke up the next morning, our goal had already been reached. Many blogs had decided to write about us, so orders were flowing in from all over the world. Waqas received so many calls from his family. Every day they would congratulate him on our progress. They’d say: ‘We are watching. And we are praying for you.’ But my parents never saw it. It was always: ‘We’ll look tomorrow.’ But they never did. At the conclusion of our campaign, we were the largest Kickstarter in the history of Pakistan. We sold over 600 pairs of shoes and raised $107,000. Finally I received a call from my mother. She said: ‘Now that you’ve raised all this money, it’s time for you to get married.’ Waqas wasn’t ready. He wanted our business to be stable. But I couldn’t bear the pressure any longer. I threatened him a bit. I told him it was going be him or somebody else, and he finally agreed. A normal Pakistani wedding lasts for five days, but we held our ceremony in a single afternoon. I went to the salon. Waqas took a bath. And afterwards we went to work. We didn’t have a honeymoon. There was no time to celebrate. Or take a rest. For the first time ever we had some momentum, and we were terrified to lose it. One of the first things we did was apply to an accelerator program in San Francisco called Y-combinator. It was the most famous program in the world. The admissions process was more selective than Harvard, and they’d helped launch companies like AirBnB and Dropbox. On our application we wrote that we intended to build an online platform for craftsmen all over South Asia. We knew it was a long shot. But we also knew that if we were somehow accepted, we’d be able to scale our company in the United States.”

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(8/11) “The interview for Y-Combinator was a disaster. My internet was so slow that Waqas was forced to put me on mute. We knew this would be a giant red flag, since we were claiming to be a technology company. And we were already planning to try again next year. But later that night we received a call, telling us our application had been accepted. It felt like we were dreaming. But there was no time to celebrate, since classes were scheduled to begin in one month. There ended up being a problem with my visa, so I didn’t arrive in San Francisco until the very last minute. The orientation was held in a giant auditorium. There were hundreds of people, and everyone seemed to know each other. It was difficult not to doubt ourselves. Most of the attendees had gone to Harvard or Stanford, and some were building their 2nd and 3rd start-up. We carried a shoebox with us everywhere and sold shoes to the other attendees. Many people couldn’t understand our accent, but everyone seemed interested in our story. Every Tuesday we’d meet together as a group, and each company would report on its progress. We’d talk about the challenges we faced and the things we’d been able to accomplish. It seemed like every other company was focused on growth. They’d report how their revenues had grown 5 percent, or 10 percent. But Waqas and I were just trying to survive. We were struggling to fulfill the orders from our Kickstarter campaign, and each day brought a new problem with our production back in Pakistan. At the end of three months there was a big event called Demo Day. It was our final exam of sorts. Investors were invited from all over the world, and each company was given five minutes to present their vision on stage. We rehearsed our presentation for weeks. Our friends helped us with the design. And on the day of our presentation we felt very confident. But after it was finished, only two investors requested a meeting. And neither of them were ready to invest. We were the only company in our group who didn’t raise money. And to make matters even worse, it had been a formal event. Many of our classmates had dressed up. But none of them were wearing the shoes we had sold them.”

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(9/11) “Our visas were set to expire in three months. In order to renew them, we’d have to show progress. But our sales were flat. And we’d failed to raise any money. So we thought for sure we were going home. We tried not to despair. We said: ‘Look where we are. We can’t squander this chance.’ We reached out to Pakistani investors, and they wrote us small checks. This bought us a little bit of time. But we had to face some hard truths. From the very beginning, our focus had been making leather dress shoes. But nobody wanted to wear them. Even in the business world, fashion was becoming more casual. So we had to start over. We had to begin from zero and find out what people wanted. So we pretended to be college students working on a project. We went to shoe stores and interviewed the managers. Then we interviewed the customers. We learned that people were looking for shoes they could wear every day—not just on special occasions. We researched the highest quality materials, and we put all of our findings into a document called ‘Ideal, Everyday Shoe.’ Then we gave all our notes to a talented designer. Together we built a prototype, and we called them 'Atoms,' because we’d gone to the atomic level in search of quality. And to be honest we wanted a five-letter name like ‘Apple.’ Our final hurdle was to test the product on customers. We sent out emails to our entire network. We wrote that we’d invented a shoe for ‘Hackers and Painters,’ but that we only had one size. So we were looking for people with size 10.5 feet. Twenty volunteers agreed to meet at our apartment. Everyone got a cup of Pakistani chai, then one-by-one we took them downstairs to try on a pair of shoes. Our first volunteer was an entrepreneur named Jason. He had a reputation for wearing high quality clothes. When we handed him the shoes, he began to study them carefully. My heart was racing the entire time. Then he put them on slowly, stood up, and began to walk across the room. His eyes got very big. ‘Oh, my God,’ he said. Then he jumped in the air, and he said it again: ‘Oh, my God.’ I looked at Waqas, and he was smiling. I was smiling too. Because both of us knew we were onto something big.”

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(10/11) “It took several months to manufacture the collection. But we kept sharing our story on social media. And we kept sending out samples. By the time we were ready to launch, 45,000 people had signed up for our mailing list. On the first day of sales our website crashed. And by the end of six months we’d sold 12,000 pairs of shoes. Our company expanded to twenty-five employees. But despite our success, our insecurities still worked against us. We were still immigrants. And brown. We had spent so many of our formative years learning from Americans: listening to their interviews, reading their articles. But now we were running our own company. We had to stick with our own instincts, even when Americans disagreed with us. It hasn’t always been an easy road. It seemed that whenever we took a big step forward, a disaster would happen. We went through a round of layoffs. And the beginning of the pandemic was a dark time for us. Our money was nearly gone, and our investors would not commit another penny. That’s when I made the decision to produce a collection of masks. Everyone advised me against it. They told me to stick to shoes. But I developed the samples in secret, built the supply chain, and launched the collection myself. One year later we’ve sold 500,000 of them, and donated 500,000 more. Our shoe business has continued to grow, and once again investors are calling on the phone. That’s how it’s always been. Over the past ten years, every time it’s seemed like we’ve reached the end-- something wonderful happens. Last weekend Waqas and I took our first break in a long time. We took a train to the Hudson Valley. And for the first time ever—we had no plan. We gave ourselves a moment. A moment to celebrate how far we’d come. We visited a few art galleries. We joked about how we’d both developed taste. Then we went back to our room and pulled up some of our early websites. We had a good laugh at who we used to be. Just two kids from a small town in Pakistan, who escaped their conservative families. Who dreamed something together. And just kept going. The dream kept changing, but we kept going. And look at us now. Look where we are. And look who we’ve become.”

(11/11) “There was once a little girl who was brought up to be a dependent. But one day she started acting like she was in charge of her own life. And it raised doubts and fears in everyone around her..."

(11/11) “There was once a little girl who was brought up to be a dependent. But one day she started acting like she was in charge of her own life. And it raised doubts and fears in everyone around her. In the people of her town. In her family. And it also raised doubts inside of her. Those doubts are still there. Even with how far I’ve come, the fear is always with me. The fear of falling backwards, all the way back to my home. Sometimes I feel like there is so far to go. Until I’m finally safe. Until I’m free forever. But I’ve come so far. I know that. I’ve been able to impact my family back in Pakistan. Financially, of course. But more importantly I’ve provided an example. Now even the shyest of my female cousins are speaking to me about their dreams. One of my younger sisters is working as a fitness coach. And the other has built her own women’s health company. She’s selling sanitary pads, and is having a huge impact back in Pakistan. But the biggest transformation has been in my mother. She’s been promoted to headmistress of her school, and she’s thinking deeply about child development. She’s opening up computer labs. She’s pushing her female students to learn technology. To create their own space. And to be financially strong. She’s telling them all the things that I needed to hear as a little girl. The road was so lonely for me, and maybe I still carry some unconscious resentment. But my mother has apologized for not supporting me more. And consciously I have forgiven her. Recently she’s become vocal about her own story. She also came from a large family. She was the eldest daughter, and like me she was pressured to get married. She was just a young girl. And she was scared. So she grew into a mother who pushed that fear onto her daughters. And I understand that. She was a product of her time. The internet didn’t exist. There was no window to another world. No example to follow. No woman to show the way. I asked her recently: ‘Did you have dreams when you were young?’ And she said: ‘Don’t go there.’ But I pushed her. I said: ‘Go on, tell me.’ She was quiet for a minute. Then she said: ‘There were so many. But I’ve always wanted to be a pilot.’”

Atoms is giving $30 off their shoes to all the readers of this story. You can redeem the coupon by clicking here: https://t.co/bzAzmKKxQ7

A Note From Brandon:

I have received no compensation for this story nor do I have any stake in Atoms. I've paid full price for all my shoes. And beyond this—I insisted on paying full price when I ordered ten pairs as Christmas presents. These were the best received gifts I've ever given. My agent went on to buy an additional seven pairs in every color. And he also ordered two more pairs last night in case this story cleared out their warehouse. I chose to share Sidra and Waqas's story because it's inspiring, but also because they are two of the most humble and kind people I know. I care for them greatly and very much would like to see them succeed in their dreams. It is in this spirit that I'd like to announce that Atoms is giving $30 off their shoes to all the readers of this story. You can redeem the coupon by clicking here: https://bit.ly/3j43ccc