



In Sickness and in Health

Sometimes life needs a rewrite.
Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon
heal *The Big Sick*.



This summer's best superhero movie came disguised as a romantic comedy. Swinging past hoary tropes, repelling cultural stereotypes, leaping over clichés in a single bound, *The Big Sick* revived the rom-com genre by making it real. The writers approached their task honestly; after all, they lived it.

Kumail Nanjiani met Emily V. Gordon when she inadvertently heckled him with a “Woo hoo!” during his stand-up routine at a club in Chicago. Flirting with her afterward, Nanjiani, who’s Pakistani-American, wrote her name in Urdu. She fell for it, and they started dating. At the same time, Nanjiani was struggling with his traditional parents’ wishes for him to settle down with a nice Muslim Pakistani woman after an arranged marriage.

At a tenuous point early in the relationship, Gordon, a marriage and family therapist, fell ill with a mysterious illness, and was put into a medical coma until the doctors could figure out what was attacking her body. Giving up a comedy tour, Nanjiani kept vigil at her bedside, where he met her parents for the first time, and realized he loved their daughter. He vowed to himself that if she woke up, he’d ask her to marry him.

Spoiler alert: she did, he did, and they did.

You can’t make this shit up. But with enough work, you can write an irresistible script about it.

The couple put the work in. Back in 2012, Nanjiani, an actor, comedian, and staff writer on the shortlived *Michael & Michael Have Issues*, met Judd Apatow on a podcast at South by Southwest. Apatow is a prolific nurturer of writing and acting talent (see *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, co-written with star Steve Carell, *Trainwreck*, written by star Amy Schumer, *Girls*, created by star Lena Dunham, et cetera, et cetera). He asked if Nanjiani had any

movie ideas. A real-life love story was the one that stuck.

Apatow advised him to skip an outline, and just get everything down. That vomit draft was about 170 pages long, and “not good by any actual objective metric,” Nanjiani says. “However, it’s a good exercise, because you really are able to articulate the whole thing for the first time.”

ART IMITATES LIFE

After they married, Gordon went from counseling to writing, at first freelancing on women’s websites and creating content for Disney’s YouTube channel. The couple were accustomed to giving each other notes on their work, so as he wrote, Nanjiani sent pages to Gordon. But he noticed that the notes she was giving him were different this time. “They weren’t just writer’s notes, they were like, *Oh, this is a person that has a completely different perspective on these events*,” he remembers. “I realized I can’t do the story on my own; we have to do it together.”

It took Gordon a few days to agree. She was initially hesitant to reveal their personal life in such a public manner. “I was swayed by the idea that yes, nobody else could tell this story.”

She was nervous when they approached Apatow with this credit twist, but he was immediately on board. “That’s the greatest thing about Judd,” she says. “He’s like, ‘Obviously, that’s the way it’s going to be.’”

The two sit on the couch in the guesthouse behind their home in Los Feliz, on a brief stop from a press tour that’s whirled them through Europe and is about to send them off to Australia. Their 10th wedding anniversary fell on the day that the film opened wide in the US. By any actual objective metric, *The Big Sick* is a

WRITTEN BY **LISA ROSEN**
PORTRAITS BY **JILLY WENDELL**



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big indie hit.

But back at the beginning of the process, the script was a big unformed mess. With Apatow and producer Barry Mendel, the writers used that first draft to hammer out an outline. Then the pair started writing scenes separately. Very separately—at one point she banished him to the guesthouse to work. They sent scenes back and forth to rewrite, working on whatever sections called to them. “I would jump around,” Nanjiani says of his methods. “*Oh, this would be a fun scene to write today.*” So it wasn’t necessarily in order.”

Even though they took dramatic license with their personal story, much of it hewed close to the truth. They even used their names, thanks to Apatow. “*Trainwreck* was heavily fictionalized, but Amy [Schumer’s] character’s name is Amy” in that film, says Nanjiani. “Judd likes to have that level of realness.”

“Although Paul Rudd never plays a guy called Judd in their movies,” Gordon points out, musing: “Then he’d be Judd Rudd.”

Nanjiani adds, “Paul Judd.”

They did change their parents’ names though. They also talked them through the story, so everyone knew what to expect



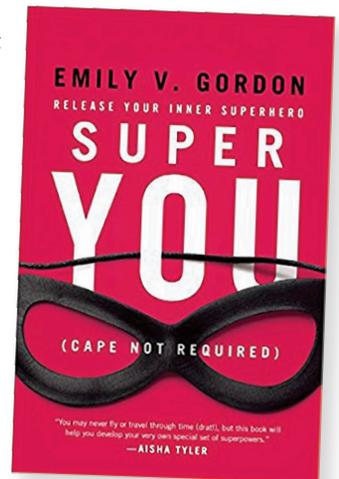
on screen. “My mom kept saying, ‘I just want the characters who are us to be nice,’” Gordon says. “And I was like, that’s not how movies work.” She explained the importance of conflict and plot so thoroughly that now, when watching movies together, her parents point out all the character arcs.

BREAKING THROUGH

The two spent three years writing the script part-time while working on other projects. During that period, Nanjiani says proudly, “She wrote a book!” Gordon’s *Super You: Release Your Inner Superhero* uses the superhero’s journey as a way toward self-empowerment.

She also wrote on several TV series, including NBC’s *The Carmichael Show* (created by Nicholas Stoller and Jerrod Carmichael & Ari Katcher). Nanjiani was cast in HBO’s *Silicon Valley* (created by Mike Judge & John Altschuler & Dave Krinsky). Together they created a long-running live comedy show, *The Meltdown with Jonah and Kumail*, which led to the Comedy Central series of the same name.

The pair sent Apatow a draft every few months, meeting up for notes whenever he had the time. They remember seeing Schumer in her car in the Apatow office parking lot, working feverishly on *Trainwreck* drafts. “We’d kind of laugh at her,” Gordon remembers, “and she’d say, ‘Yeah you think it’s funny now, just wait.’ She was completely right.”



“Where I relish that shit, the digging in, because I think it’s fun,” says Gordon, sounding every bit the former therapist. Those skills were put to good use; Nanjiani says her writing reveals character traits “without people saying, ‘I’m angry.’ The characters feel consistent, and flesh and blood,” rather than



just a collection of quirks.

Gordon, in turn, was impressed with Nanjiani's ability to put humor in places she'd never expect would work. With her therapy background, she's all too accustomed to people using jokes to avoid emotional truths. "And so it's still my nature to think, if they're getting to the bottom of something here, they shouldn't make a joke, because that's deflecting! But that's also how Kumail's character works." In the movie, that is.

"When I write, I put in jokes even if I'm not trying to," Nanjiani says. "Sometimes it's not appropriate, and sometimes there are too many, but when I'm writing, I'm not like, 'There should be a joke here.'" And the more inappropriate, the bigger the laugh, as a conversation between Kumail and Emily's father about 9/11 can attest.

ONE WEDDING AND AN AIRPORT

Given their predilections, "People generally think that I was the joke guy on the script and Emily was the emotional person. It really didn't work out like that," says Nanjiani. "Both of us did both."

One of the funniest moments comes from a scene Gordon invented. Kumail wakes to find Emily (played by Zoe Kazan) slipping out of bed late at night, and quietly getting dressed. She tells him she has to go out immediately for diner coffee. He offers to go with her, but, increasingly frantic, she tells him she wants to go alone. When he keeps pressing her, she finally admits the truth, yelling that she has to, well, "take a huge fucking dookie," but his quintessential dude's bathroom has no matches or air freshener.

The scene is a key example of the film's romantic inventiveness, depicting a relationship's progression in a way that nobody has before, but that anyone can relate to. "We kept talking about, what are milestones that aren't the obvious ones, like 'Here's a house key,'" says Gordon. "It's a nice moment to show that you're getting to the point where you have to acknowledge the other person's humanness. There's a billion moments that go into that, but you have to boil it down to one, because it's a movie."

Nanjiani loves rom-coms. (He estimates that he's seen *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, written by Richard Curtis, 50 times.) Gordon, not so much. "I actually used to do a workshop in Brooklyn about why rom-coms are ruining our



WGAW writer Zoe Kazan plays Emily in *The Big Sick*

love lives," she says. "So we came at it from many different directions, of loving them but also hating the expectations that they put on women specifically, and we all worked together to subvert them."

"We were able to use their tropes to keep people off balance," Nanjiani says. "Rom-coms have such a traditional structure, so if it's supposed to be three beats of a specific thing that happens, we were able to do two of them, have people think a third thing is going to happen, and then do something else."

Case in point: The numerous Pakistani women that Kumail's mother keeps trying to set him up with, in her mission to arrange his marriage. In a standard rom-com, the women would all be obviously wrong for him, their scenes merely a running joke. And that's how it starts in *The Big Sick*. But then Kumail, and we, encounter prospective bride Khadija. When he rejects her in turn, she could be speaking for all the other women when she chastises him for misleading everyone. In showing her vulnerability, the writers make clear that she's nobody's punch line.

That exchange could easily have been cut; it doesn't move the story forward, Nanjiani says. "It's just there so then it recasts all the women you've seen earlier," letting his character



see he's been unfair to all of them. It also gives him one more chance to choose to be an obedient son rather than risk the loss of his family, and even undercuts the judgment of arranged marriage. "He'd have a great life if he ended up with Khadija," says Gordon. "He just happens to be in love with Emily."

Another old rom-com trope is the big finish—the hero's grand gesture that wins the heroine back. The writers call it the *Say Any-*

thing moment, a nod to the classic rom-com by Cameron Crowe.

"When Kumail shows up at Emily's welcome home party, that's supposed to work," Gordon says. "She's supposed to say, 'Oh, my God, that's so lovely!' We didn't want that to happen."

While dodging the genre clichés, they finally understood where they came from. Rewatching some old favorites, "I was like, why are they always fucking going to the airport?" Nan-

jiani says. "And then while we were writing this, we were like, 'There should be higher stakes at the end—what if she's about to get on a plane, and he goes to the airport...?' This is how it happens! You need a ticking clock, and you can't have stakes of life and death, so you have to get someone to the airport."

"Another version of that was that Kumail was getting married to someone else," Gordon says. "Emily didn't interrupt the wedding, but Kumail realized, *I must go.*"

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KUMAIL (CONT'D)

Do you know what happens to people when they love marry? They get kicked out of the community. My cousin Salman married a Scottish woman! And nobody is allowed to talk to him anymore. He's a total fucking outcast! They took all his pictures down. I can't lose my family. I can't never see them again. This whole faking and lying thing is just part of my culture. Since I was 7, I've been pretending to believe. I've been pretending to cry when I should cry and pray when I should pray. You know how lonely it is to be in a room full of hundreds of people who all believe the same thing... and you don't?

EMILY slows down.

EMILY

Kumail, I understand the fear of being an outcast and--

KUMAIL

--No actually you don't understand. My whole fucking life is negotiating a 1400 year old culture. You ate too much cheesecake in middle school. It's not the same thing.

EMILY is taken aback.

EMILY

You didn't deserve to know that.

KUMAIL

I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I just need to keep all this weirdness in my life separate and under control and you really have nothing to do with any of that. I didn't mean for you to get involved in it.

EMILY

(holding back tears)
That's not how relationships work Kumail. A meteor could hit the earth tomorrow and this would all be over. You don't have any control, Kumail. None of us do.

(MORE)

TRUE DIRECTION

When Apatow thought the script was in good enough shape to move forward, Nanjiani sent the draft to his friend Michael Showalter to get his thoughts on it. Showalter's primary note: Let me direct this.

Showalter is a longtime writer and actor. (Nanjiani wrote on his 2009 series, *Michael & Michael Have Issues*.) He'd only directed two films previously, but his 2015 feature, *Hello, My Name is Doris*, which he co-wrote with Laura Terruso and directed, traversed dramatic and comedic territory similar to *The Big Sick*. Also, Nanjiani had been featured in *Doris*, so the two already knew they could work well together.

Reached by phone in New York, Showalter says, "I think the love story and Emily's sickness is very

A script page from an earlier draft of *The Big Sick*

compelling, there's a lot of inherent drama there," he says. "But so was the religious, racial, ethnic component. This is a story about American identity in a lot of ways, and what does it mean to be American. That was a big hook for me, an opportunity to show a main character who looks like Kumail, and is in every way hilarious and engaging, and I was very excited by the idea of him in the lead role."

Much has already been made of the film's release in this, the First Year of Trump. The writers seem weary of discussing it further. Suffice it to say the timing only adds to the resonance, and its painful humor.

Showalter spent a year working with the writers to shape the script. "I have a pretty classic structural approach, which I think is very different from the way Judd and Barry work," Showalter says. "They're more novelistic in their thinking; I tend to be very mathematical."

He broke the story down into act breaks, and showed the writers the midpoint of their story. Kumail brings Beth and Terry, Emily's parents (played by Holly Hunter and Ray Romano), back to Emily's house the night before she goes into surgery. Briefly alone in Emily's room, Kumail finds Polaroids of the two of them.

"Mike said, 'That is the emotional fulcrum of the movie; everything is leading up to it or a fallout from it,'" Nanjiani explains. "It's the point of no return. It's when he realizes, *Oh I love her and I made a huge mistake*. Up until then, he's been going to the hospital out of what he thinks is a mixture of concern and guilt. After that point, he knows why he's really there."

They then rearranged all other scenes accordingly, before hitting that rock bottom, and after. "Mike really helped us articulate our thinking about the character in those terms," Gordon says.

Showalter also helped them amp up the drama, and exaggerate plot turns. "I'd found that things in the mirror are closer than they appear," he says. "A tangible example would be that in the draft I first read, Emily and Kumail don't really break up before she goes into the coma. It's ambiguous, there's tension, and they have a big argument, but it's left unclear what their status is," which was closer to the couple's own experience. "And my instinct was that it would be better for the story if they were fully broken up. They were hinting at it, so then why not just go all the way?"

At the same time, they also upped the stakes for Kumail and his parents. In the film, he has been hiding Emily's existence from his parents, and hiding from Emily that they would disown him if he married a white woman. She discovers the photos of all those arranged dates, leading to a crisis, and the relationship abruptly ends. Not long after their fight, he receives the call that Emily's in the hospital.

At first reluctant to write a breakup of even their fictional selves, the couple soon recognized the strength of that choice.



"What's more awkward than having a casual boyfriend at your bedside?" says Gordon. "Having an ex-boyfriend there."

The move also saved the film from another typical romantic pitfall. "The breakup at the end of Act Two going into Act Three for rom-coms is always the most artificial thing," Nanjiani says. Instead, they got it over with early, and authentically.

"The best thing about Kumail and Emily," Showalter says, "aside from their being great, funny writers, is how willing they were to try *anything*. They were not precious about their story; they wanted to keep plugging away at it to find the best path. That really made the process go well."

EMERGENCY ROOM TO COMEDY CLUB

Navigating the odd tonal terrain between a romantic comedy and a medical drama took a lot of delicate maneuvering. The audience has to care about Emily's condition, while also going along for a funny ride—sometimes at the same time. An early plot point revolved around the characters realizing that Emily wasn't getting the proper care at the hospital, but it was discarded, "because if a hospital isn't good, and the doctors are not good, that's an uncontrollable level of fear," Nanjiani notes. "We really had to calibrate when do you feel safe about Emily, and when do you feel unsafe about her."

Nowhere is this more evident than when Beth and Terry go to a comedy club to watch Kumail perform. "It's a big comic diversion from what's really happened," Showalter says. "They go and have this long night out. Meanwhile, Emily's in the hospital. That was a scene I worried about. You have to wonder, *Why are they doing this? Wouldn't they be in the hospital with her, or just stressing out?* So, you have to figure out how to make this scene not just palatable, but also work. It has to do with explaining their psyche."

First, they had Emily's doctor tell the characters to go home, rest, and get something to eat. "'We're doing surgery tomorrow morning, she'll be fine.' That's the doctor giving both us the permission and the characters permission" to relax, Gordon says. "Like, don't worry, we're going to have a little bit of fun now, because Emily's fine and she's in good hands."

Getting the group to the club brought up another tangle of questions. "What kind of person wants to go see a comedy show while their daughter's in a coma?" Showalter says. "The answer is Ray Romano [Terry] wants distraction at all costs. It's the only way he can deal with his anxiety and fear about what's happened. Well, why would Holly Hunter [Beth] go with him? Because he doesn't want to do it by himself. But what's Holly Hunter doing? She's thinking about the surgery and looking online and trying to educate herself." She brings her tablet to the show so she can



The pair sent Judd Apatow a draft every few months, meeting up for notes whenever he had the time. They recall seeing Amy Schumer in her car in the Apatow office parking lot, working feverishly on *Trainwreck* drafts. “We’d kind of laugh at her,” Emily Gordon remembers, “and she’d say, ‘Yeah you think it’s funny now, just wait.’ She was completely right.”



continue her medical research.

Once there, a heckler tells Kumail to join ISIS. Before Kumail can shut him down, Beth responds like a wild animal, almost gleeful at the opportunity to be so out of control. The scene reveals so much, so efficiently: Beth and Terry's pent-up fear and helplessness, their shock at witnessing the casual racism Kumail routinely encounters, his obvious familiarity with same, and the irony of Emily's mother fiercely protecting him when, hours earlier, she wouldn't even allow him to sit beside her. It's also just deeply satisfying to watch the couple blow up at the hapless moron.

"It took us a long time to get to that," Showalter says. "That sequence, more than any other, has a ton of widgets in it. How do you make an audience disbelieve that in reality they'd just all be freaking out the whole time? We talked about it a lot, and we argued about it, and we spun the knob and looked at it in a million different ways, and we all together hammered this out—Ray and Holly as well. We all equally figured out how to make this very important sequence effective."

Arriving back at Emily's apartment afterward, the now-bonded group breaks out the liquor and junk food. Kumail admits to Beth that he screwed up with Emily. Beth tells him she won't be able to sleep. "It's like, 'We had a couple hours of distraction, but now I'm back to remembering what this is all about,'" Showalter says.

BIG LOVE

Later in the film, when tensions are screwed tighter and all comedy is temporarily lost, Kumail argues with Emily's parents about whether to transfer her to a more highly rated hospital. "We didn't want anybody to be 'right' in that scenario," Gordon says. "That entire thing really ended up in the script so Kumail could take a stand



ALL IS LOST (75)
BOMBS
MONTREAL
AUDITION
DARK NIGHT (75-85)
KUMAIL,
JERRY, BRENDA
AND DOCTORS IN
EMILY'S A.D.M.
KUMAIL
LOSES HIS
SHIT AT THEM
ALL DRESSES
EVERYONE DOWN
KUMAIL
ALONE W/
EMILY
"I GET IT NOW"
KUMAIL
"YOU'RE RIGHT
I DON'T BELIEVE
HE LEAVES."
I NEED TO
GET MY SHIT
TOGETHER.
YOU WERE RIGHT.
BREAK INTO #3 (85)
KUMAIL AND
EMILY MEET
BY ACCIDENT
AT COFFEE SHOP.
KUMAIL
COMES OUT
TO PARENTS
KUMAIL GOES
TO ASK EMILY
OUT FOR A
CUP OF COFFEE.

against Emily's parents."

"That's the issue with something like this," says Nanjiani. "In writing a movie, there's a problem, and at some point the characters figure out how to solve the problem." But they can't solve Emily's illness. "So the frustration that the characters feel has to be part of the story." Everyone who's been through that kind of hospital vigil recognizes the toll it takes; many have shared that connection with the writers. "I had not anticipated this," says Nanjiani, whose Twitter feed is full of strangers telling similar stories.

One part of their unbelievable tale that didn't make it into the movie? Onscreen, Emily doesn't fall for Kumail's Urdu name-writing gambit. "It helped to develop this character a little bit, not showing me as such a sucker for someone who speaks another language," says Gordon. "Of all the things to be taken in by...," she shakes her head in mock ruefulness.

Says Nanjiani, "In real life, Emily was calling me on my bullshit, so even though in that specific instance she didn't, it was actually emotionally truer to our story to change that."

The writers consciously decided not to tie the plot up in a bow. "The movies that stay with you are the ones that don't feel fully resolved," Nanjiani believes, citing such favorites as *The Graduate* (written by Calder Willingham and Buck Henry), *Before Sunset* (screenplay by Richard Linklater & Julie Delpy & Ethan Hawke, story by Linklater & Kim Krizan), and *Kramer vs. Kramer* (written by Robert Benton). "You think about them when they're done, and you think about them the next day." They wanted their film to have that tender uncertainty as well. "So, me and my parents, her parents, me and Emily, we wanted them all to be in different stages. You're seeing that there are many more steps to take. We didn't want any of the storylines to feel like they ended."

In real life, the couple got married three months after Gordon recovered. (Her rare condition, Adult-onset Still's disease, is manageable.) She switched careers, the two moved to New York, and Nanjiani's parents threw them a Pakistani wedding. But who would have believed any of that? "In reality, a lot of the storylines did wind up so adorably that it's too much for a movie," Gordon says.

No airport necessary. **WB**

ACT THREE
FINALE (85-110)
KUMAIL WAKES
UP NEXT
MORNING
AND HER HOSPITAL
BED IS EMPTY.
HE RUNS OUT
TO SEE THAT
SHE'S NOT IN
COMA ANymore
SHE'S WHEEL
CHAIR HE LEAVES.
MEANWHILE KUMAIL IS
EMILY IS GETTING
REHABBING ANTI-JIZZ
EMILY WITES
HIM TO A BBQ
HE SAYS "I'VE
GOT SOMETHING
TO DO THAT DAY
BUT I'LL TRY TO
MAKE IT IF I
CAN."
KUMAIL COMES
OUT TO PARENTS
THERE'S ANOTHER
GIRL THERE.
GRANDHOG'S DAY