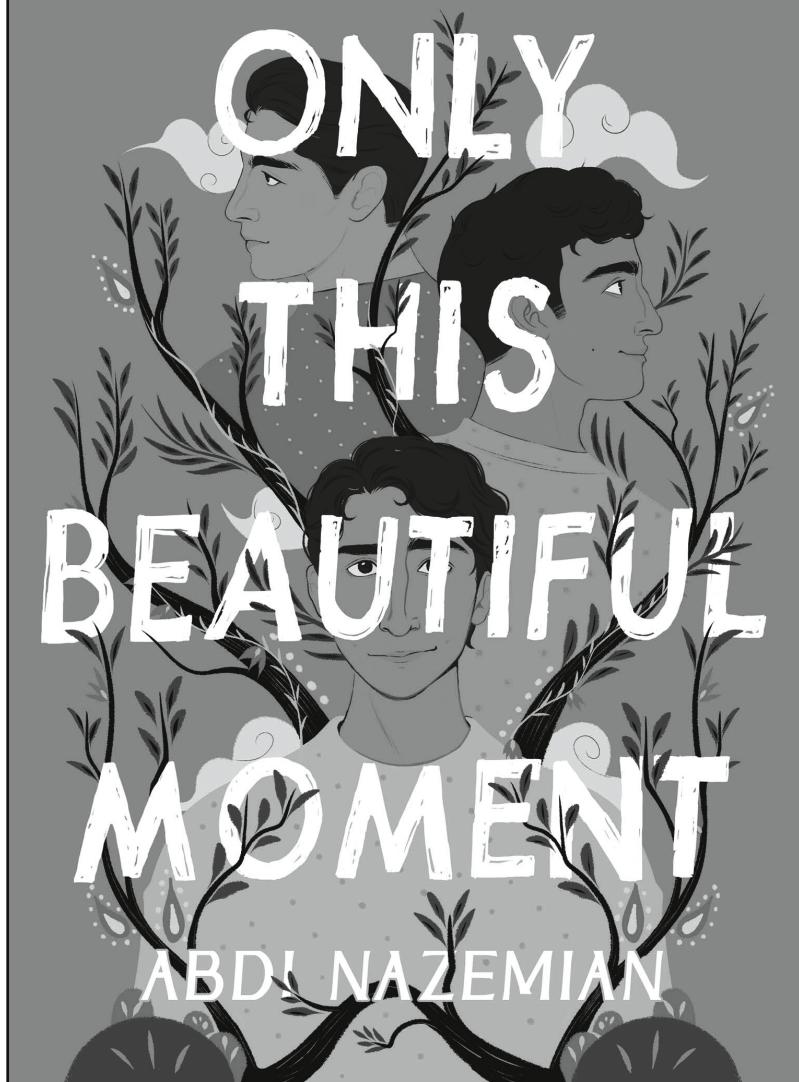


"A stunning intergenerational coming-of-age story"
Kirkus, Starred Review



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LOS ANGELES TO TEHRAN

Being gay on the internet is exhausting. That's what goes through my head as I de-gay my social media. Gone are all my opinions about *Drag Race* and whether straight actors should be allowed to play gay roles. Gone is every picture I've ever posted of me and Shane kissing or holding hands or ironically painting rainbow flags on our chests (ironic because we're not the kind of gays who post thirst traps, not because we don't respect our flag). When I'm done deleting everything, all that's left is a void. It's like I have no past. Just possibility.

There's a knock on the door. "Mahmoud," my dad says from the other side. He'll never call me Moud, no matter how many times I ask. He just doesn't want to acknowledge the real me.

"You can come in." Ever since my dad walked in on me and Shane studying on my bed together, he won't enter without being explicitly told to. We were fully clothed, by the way. We had open copies of

trigonometry textbooks in front of us. And my dad was *still* shocked. Maybe because our feet were bare and our toes were touching. Maybe because Shane was wearing a T-shirt that read *Make America Gay Again*. Maybe because despite having come out to him two years before, he had neatly compartmentalized that conversation away into the part of his brain where he stores the things he never talks about. Like me being gay. Like my mom being gone. Like my grandfather being sick. Deny, repress, avoid.

Well, he eventually told me about that last one. He had to before it was too late. I guess, given my dad's history of emotional evasion, I shouldn't have been surprised that he hid my grandfather's cancer from me until the very last minute. Hiding pain is a deeply Iranian thing, and my dad is deeply Iranian.

“Dad, I'm alone. You can come in.”

He opens the door and peeks in. He hasn't shaved, which for him is a sign that he's not doing well. He thinks we look like terrorists when we don't shave. “We have to go back to the Pakistani embassy,” he says. “Your passport is ready.”

“Oh, wow.” Something about the knowledge that there's an Iranian passport with my name and picture on it stops me cold, like a piece of paper has already changed me. I'm still staring at my computer, at the blankness of my social media profiles. I guess I expected the process of

wiping away all those memories to be traumatic. Technically, I'm giving up my freedom out of fear that some Iranian authority might punish me for it. But it's the opposite. Because the memories that matter feel stronger inside me the moment they belong only to me and not to some data center in the cloud. In a strange way, by giving up what should be a piece of my freedom, I feel more free. I wish I could talk to my dad about this, but I don't talk to my dad about anything. I wish I could talk to Shane about it too, but I already know he's going to be pissed.

I close my computer and stand up. "Put a coat on," my dad says.

"It's Los Angeles. It's never cold." Not entirely true. It's a crisp November day.

He stares me down, and I find a coat. It belonged to my grandfather. He gave it to me the last time we saw each other in Geneva. He said he was shrinking and I was growing, so it was time to pass his clothes on to me.

Iranians don't have an embassy in the United States, so we have to use a wing of the Pakistani embassy. There are a few families entering at the same time as us, and as they do, the women throw on their head coverings, preparing to enter a world with different rules.



Iranian passport in hand, I ask my dad to drop me off at Shane's house. He just nods and heads up the hill. He still refers to Shane as my *friend*, even though he knows we're more than that.

Mrs. Waters opens the door when I buzz. "Moud!" she says, that permanent ring of optimism in her voice. She gives me a hug, then waves at my dad, still parked in the car. "Hello, Mr. Jafarzadeh."

My dad rolls his window down a couple of inches. "Hello, how are you?" he asks politely. My dad is always well-mannered in public, more concerned with what strangers think of him than his own son.

"No complaints. You want to come in?" she asks.

"No, no," he stammers. "I have a lot to do before our trip." He adds a "thank you" before driving off.

Mrs. Waters leads me inside, an arm around me. "Trip?" she asks. "Where are you going?"

"Oh," I say. "It's complicated." It's really not complicated. I'm going to Iran to see my grandfather before he dies. The complicated part is that I haven't told Shane about it because I'm scared of how he'll react.

"Is everything okay?" she asks, and the warmth in her voice immediately makes me long for a new parent. Would my mom have checked in on my feelings the way Mrs. Waters does? Would she have responded differently to my coming out?

"Yes," I say. "Well, no, actually. My grandfather is sick."

“Oh, I’m so sorry. The music teacher in Iran?” I’m shocked that she knows this. Shane really tells her everything.

I nod. “I haven’t told Shane yet, so ...”

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be a great support to you. He’s upstairs recording.”

Mrs. Waters squeezes my hands and stares at me misty-eyed. She’s already shown more emotion over Baba’s illness than his own son has.

I open the door to Shane’s bedroom as quietly as I can. I know how seriously he and Sonia take their podcast, *Down with America*.² It does have a surprisingly high number of subscribers for a show recorded by two teenagers in a bedroom.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not down with it,” Shane says. “We don’t buy music anymore, so we’ve forced our favorite musicians into creating makeup lines and perfumes, which then distracts them from doing the exact thing we want them to do, which is make more music!”

“I mean!” Sonia says, incredulous. “No one is *holding them hostage* and telling them to become a brand.” A small piece of me bristles at the word *hostage*, which always reminds me of the Iran hostage crisis. “And how much time do you think a pop star really spends on their makeup brand? They’re just licensing their name. Let’s get real.”

“I am real,” Shane says, smiling at me. “And our listeners know how I feel about the word *real*, and

the implication that anything in this world is fake. Everything is authentic, especially artifice.”

“Anyway, maybe it’s a good thing your favorite singers aren’t making as much music as they used to. Less opportunities for them to enjoy a little cultural appropriation.”

“We’ve already covered that in another episode,” Shane says. “For now, we want to hear from you, our listeners.”

“Celebrity brands. Are you down with them, America?”

“And now, I’m going to give my boyfriend, Moud, who just walked in, a *real* big kiss as we play some listener responses to our last show about queer pain.”

Shane gets up and welcomes me in. As his lips meet mine, Sonia hits play on some tape from listeners. A strident voice fills the room. “I am not *down* with queer pain. I’m so sick of queer characters suffering in our stories. And let’s talk about how our stories are always centered on coming out to *straight people*. Especially parents. Aren’t we over that?”

“Yeah, Moud, aren’t you over that?” Shane asks, his lips gently kissing my neck.

“Stop,” I whisper. I know what he wants. He wants me to say I’m over my dad. He wants me to leave my dad all alone and move in with him and his parents, into an accepting home. He actually suggested that once when I was crying over my dad not acknowledging my sexuality. Like leaving my home would be that easy.

As he continues kissing my neck, I think of how much I love him. His power and authority. His fearlessness. He's the reason I came out in the first place. And also, I think of the language barrier between us. Sure, we know the same words. But we obviously approach things differently, and I often find myself defending my homophobic dad when Shane attacks him. I'm sure I would defend Shane if my dad ever attacked him, but he doesn't. He just never brings him up. Maybe the struggle isn't between me and Shane at all. It's between the side of me that feels a duty to defend my family, and the side of me that wants to unapologetically celebrate my sexuality.

What Shane keeps forgetting is that my dad is my only living parent. I said that to Shane once, and he said I could find a *chosen* family. That's what it really boils down to. Shane wants me to choose him. He and my dad aren't so different in some ways.

"So," Shane says. "What did you think?"

"What I heard was great," I say. "It always is. You guys are naturals."

"When are you going to be our guest?" Sonia asks.

"Oh," I say. "I'm not like you two. I wouldn't know how to express my thoughts on the spot like that. I'm just a listener."

"The world needs listeners." Shane smiles as he says, "Wait, I have a theory. Maybe in every successful relationship, there needs to be a listener and a talker. Like in ours, right?"

“You sound like my dads,” Sonia says. “They have this whole thing about how one of them is a bartender and the other serves hors d’oeuvres.”

“Sorry, what?” Shane asks. “I like my relationship theory better.”

“It’s kind of the same theory,” she counters. “The bartender stands in one place and waits for people to come to him, and the other person is working the room, passing out finger foods. And speaking of fingering, I told Becca I’d go see her.”

Shane and I both burst out laughing. To punctuate her point, Sonia flashes us two middle fingers as she leaves the room. Then she immediately adopts her sweetest tone when she says, “Bye, Mrs. Waters” while descending the stairs.

The air in the room is thick when it’s just the two of us. The passport in my pocket suddenly feels like it weighs ten pounds.

Shane pulls me in for a kiss, but he must sense my hesitation because he says, “What’s wrong?”

“It’s ... Well, can we sit down?”

“Moud, is everything okay?”

“Just let me figure out where to start.” I sit on his bed. There’s a copy of *The Velvet Rage* next to his pillow. His scent seems to waft up from the sheets when I sit on them, giving me a moment of strength. “So my grandfather is sick.”

“Wait, what?” He sits next to me, curling his legs around me. “How sick?”

“Really sick.” I hear the numb distance in my voice. “Stage four lung cancer sick.” I shake my head. “I always thought he’d make it to a hundred years old, but I guess that was wishful thinking.”

“But ... I don’t understand. How did he just find out?”

“He didn’t just find out. I just found out.” I hear the lie and immediately correct it. “Well, I found out a couple of weeks ago.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” I feel his legs stiffen around me. “That’s a very *your dad* thing to do.”

“Yeah, well, my dad hid my grandfather’s cancer from me for two years. I didn’t tell you for three weeks.”

“You said a couple of weeks. A couple is two weeks. How long has it really been?”

I push myself away from him and stand up. “Shane, my grandfather is going to die. Can we talk about that instead of how long it took me to tell you? I’m not good at talking about pain, okay? That’s like, a hereditary cultural thing for me.”

“That’s so unfair,” he says. “When you say it’s a cultural thing, you totally shut down my point of view.”

“Okay, whatever. I thought every successful relationship has a talker and a listener. Well, I’m obviously not the talker, so don’t punish me for being bad at talking.”

He bites his lip. He does that when he’s nervous.

“I’m sorry. You know I’m sensitive about being lied to. Of course I want to support you. What can I do?”

For starters, he can stop saying I lied to him when I didn’t. There’s a difference between lying and processing the truth, but that’s a conversation for another day. “You can support my decision to go to Iran,” I whisper, avoiding his gaze.

He says nothing. Just sits there biting his lip. I pull out the passport and show it to him. “Weird, right? I’m a dual citizen now.”

“But you weren’t born there.”

“Yeah, but my dad was. All you have to do is have an Iranian father with a Shenanameh, and you can get a passport.”

“A what?”

“It’s an identity card. My dad has one, since he was born there.”

“What if you just have an Iranian mother?” he asks, cross-examining me.

I shake my head. “Then you can’t get a passport, and you can’t inherit property, or ...” Sensing what he’s going to say, I add, “Look, I know there’s a lot that’s messed up about Iran, but—”

“But they kill gay people!” he blurts out, finally saying it.

“They don’t ... I mean, yes, they have, but they don’t always ... What I’m saying is that it’s rare and ...”

“Are you listening to yourself? You’re defending a regime that wants you dead.” He’s using his podcast

voice now, like he wants to teach me something. Maybe he thinks me defending my dad and defending the regime are the same thing. That it means I don't love myself enough or something.

"I'm not defending anyone. I just want to see my grandfather before—"

"I get that. Of course I do. But your whole relationship has been on WhatsApp, except for a few trips. And those were to Europe or Turkey, not Iran."

"Well, he's too sick to travel, so this is the only option. And Turkey is part of Europe."

"A *part* of Turkey is a *part* of Europe," he says. Then, softening, he pulls me back to the bed and envelops me in his arms. "Okay, wait. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your grandfather, and I'm sorry about my reaction. I just don't want you to ... you know ..."

"I'm not ..." I can't say the words. Of course I'm a little scared. Like everyone else, I've seen the photos of two gay teenagers being publicly hanged in Iran. Isn't that why I removed any sign of my sexuality from the internet?

"Shh," he says. "Let me just be here for you right now."

"Okay," I say, closing my eyes.

"When do you leave?"

"The day after tomorrow," I whisper, awaiting another round of shock.

"Oh, wow." I feel Shane stop himself from asking

why I waited until the last minute to tell him. He's not very good at repressing his urges, and I feel a wave of gratitude to him for doing it just this once. And a wave of gratitude to him for being him. Isn't he the reason I'm not still hiding who I am from my dad? The reason I've been able to accept and love myself? "What about school?"

"I can do an independent study so I don't mess up my senior year transcript," I explain. "I'll be back after the winter holidays, unless ..." I don't finish the sentence. There are so many things that could go wrong. Baba could die before the end of the year. I could be arrested and thrown in jail.

"I'm really going to miss you." I gaze into his eyes, and when he closes them, I kiss his eyelids.

"Me too," he says. "I guess we won't be together for New Year's Eve. It'll be weird, bringing in a new year without you."

"I'll be back way before the Persian new year. All is not lost."

"All is never lost." He smiles and lies down.

I lie next to him, my head on his chest. As I gaze up at the blankness of his ceiling, I'm reminded of the blankness of my social media. All the Shane and Moud history I erased. Like that video of the first time he played his ukulele for me, composing a melody just for us. He called it "Shane and Moud's Theme." He explained that in all great romantic films, the lovers have a melody that repeats in the score when

they're together. This was our melody. He told me to imagine it playing every time he kissed me, then he kissed me for the first time. We photographed it. Posted it. And now I've deleted it.

I should tell him about wiping my feed. I should say something. Because if there's one thing about me that annoys him, it's that I sometimes expect him to read my mind because I'm no good at putting my feelings into words. But I can't. Not when I'm staring at the Harvey Milk poster on his wall, the one with the words *Every gay person must come out* on it.

How do I tell my boyfriend, who believes that every queer person must be loud and proud, that I just went a little bit back in? And how do I tell my boyfriend, who expresses his every opinion online, that I already feel liberated by my online absence? That it feels good not to feel the pressure to engage in every debate and every meme. That I don't want to post another photo of a pop star and label it "gay rights." That I never really cared about stan wars, or mac 'n' cheese recipes, or who was Mom, or who snatched our wigs, or who centered what, or who platformed what, or what went viral, or who always understood the assignment, or who never understood the assignment, especially 'cause when it comes to social media, the person who never understood the assignment was me. I never understood why I needed to document my dull life. People love to begin by saying, "I don't

know who needs to hear this, but ...” And the thing is, usually no one needs to hear it.



As my dad and I have a WhatsApp video call with Baba during dinner, the world of social media already feels so far away. Shane feels distant too, like he belongs to a completely different world from the one my dad and Baba inhabit. “Nivea,” Baba says. “I need lots of Nivea. My skin is so dry, and they don’t have good cream here.”

“Write it down,” my dad says.

I swallow a bite of pizza before saying, “I’ll remember that he needs Nivea.”

“Trust me, there’s going to be more.”

Baba continues. “Toothpaste. Sensodyne. My teeth feel terrible.”

My dad gives me an I-told-you-so look as I start a new note in my phone and begin to list everything Baba wants us to bring to Iran with us.

“Advil,” Baba says. “Or Aleve, if there’s no Advil anymore.”

“There’s still Advil, Baba,” my dad says. “It’s America. They have an endless supply of painkillers to treat their endless supply of pain.”

“Good, then Advil. The strongest they make. And Pepto-Bismol. Not the chewable kind. I hate the taste. The kind you swallow.”

“Shall we just bring one of every item in the pharmacy?” my dad jokes.

Baba doesn't laugh. He just keeps listing what he needs. Foot cream, and hydrocortisone, and Valium.

“Valium is a prescription medicine, Baba,” my dad explains. “We can't get that for you.”

“Fine. Then get me an iPad. The latest model, please.”

I throw my dad an incredulous look. For a moment, we're united by how funny we find this moment.

“It's not for me. It's for Hassan Agha's son. Hassan Agha has been a huge help to me since I've been sick, and I'd like to do something nice for his son.”

“Are we allowed to bring all this into the country?” I ask.

“They won't confiscate anything,” Baba says. “The worst they'll do if they open your suitcase is tax you. They don't care about sanctions and morals, just money.”

“And how are you feeling, Baba?” I ask.

My dad's gaze tells me he doesn't like this question. We don't talk about feelings in our home, especially not when we already know someone feels bad.

“I'm in pain,” Baba says. “My wife is gone. My son and grandson live so far away. I spend most of my time with Hassan Agha, and I pay him to be here.”

My dad gives me another I-told-you-so look, like he wants me to be sorry for asking the question, when I'm actually pleased to have received an honest

answer. At least Baba speaks from the heart.

“We’ll be there soon, Baba,” Dad says curtly, before ending the conversation. “Now we need to finish our dinner.”

“Pizza from a box is not dinner,” Baba says. “I’ll show you a meal when you get here. We’ve already done all the shopping and marinated the meat.”

My dad uses a Persian expression of thanks that translates to “May your hand not hurt,” then hangs up. We don’t speak for the rest of dinner.



The night before our flight, I text Shane to come over. My dad’s at his office wrapping things up before our trip, so there’s no risk they’ll cross each other. I show Shane the contents of my suitcase when he comes into my room.

“That’s ... a lot of Nivea and Advil,” he says.

“Baba had a lot of requests, and I have one too.”

“Anything.”

“I just want to be careful going to Iran, and, well, did you notice I deleted almost everything from my social media?”

Shane shakes his head. “Why? Because you think they’ll see it and put you in jail or something?”

“I don’t know, Shane. I’m just being careful. But I realized, well, you’ve tagged me in a lot of pictures of us kissing and other super-gay stuff, and ...”

“Super-gay stuff?” Shane asks, pulling out his phone and scrolling through the photos he’s posted of us. “Like, the Pride Parade, the Chick fil-A protest, the Gaga concert, the Lana pop-up.”

“Well, yeah,” I say. “I’m just being careful.”

“You keep saying that,” he says.

“Because it’s true.”

“Isn’t it weird that you protested a chicken sandwich, but you’re gonna be visiting a country that—”

“Stop, please,” I plead. “This isn’t about politics. It’s about my grandfather. And even if it was about politics, then things are more complicated than boycotting everything we don’t like. I mean, our whole economy revolves around oil from countries with horrible human rights records. We arm countries who are dropping bombs all over the Middle East. What does protesting a chicken sandwich accomplish in the grand scheme of things?”

“There it is,” he says.

“There what is?” I ask.

“You never shared my values.” He deletes a post of us as he says this, then moves on to deleting another. “You’ve always agreed with me just to pacify me.” He keeps deleting the posts.

“You don’t have to delete everything. You can just untag me.” I speak as softly as I can, doing exactly what he just accused me of. Trying to pacify him.

“It’s okay. I don’t need to publicly celebrate

something you're ashamed of."

"I never said I was ashamed." I pull him in for a kiss. "I'm not ashamed."

Just then, my dad pulls up to the curb. We both hear it, and we both stop. "You want to hide me so your dad doesn't catch us together again?" he asks.

"Shane, no," I say. "You know I'm out to him. Just like you wanted."

"You didn't do it for me," he says. "You did it for you. And you've kept me and your dad apart ever since."

"Because he won't even acknowledge that I came out to him."

"Then come out again. Maybe once wasn't enough. Don't you want him to know you?"

I feel the tears welling up inside me. "Of course I do. You know that. But it's not that easy for me. Your parents figured out you were gay, and they love you. You didn't even have to come out."

He looks away from me. There's guilt in his voice. "You're right. I'm sorry. I should go."

"Are we okay?" I ask.

"Yeah, sure," he says. "Why wouldn't we be?"

I kiss him again, but there's no passion in it. We run into my dad as I walk him out.

"Oh, hello," my dad says.

"Hi, Mr. Jafarzadeh." Shane extends his hand, and my dad shakes it. "I'm very sorry to hear about your father."

I can sense my dad's discomfort, discussing something so personal. "Yes, thank you," is all he manages to say.

"Well, I was just here to say goodbye." Shane looks at me, the love back in his eyes.

"Then goodbye," my dad says. I wish he would offer Shane just a little warmth.

I walk Shane out to his car. We don't say much to each other. There's nothing left to say, especially not with my dad watching us. I promise Shane I'll WhatsApp him from Iran, and he tells me again how sorry he is about Baba. The last thing he says is, "Take care of your emotional immune system, okay?"



We fly through Dubai. The flights are long, and I'm too full of nervous anticipation to sleep. But my dad's eyes are closed for both flights. Maybe he's sleeping. Or maybe he's just avoiding talking to me. The only thing he says to me the whole way there is, "Most people used to fly through Frankfurt, but that ended because of the idiotic sanctions."

When we land in Tehran, the women who weren't already wearing a head covering throw one on. And then we line up to exit the plane, into a place that has defined my whole life. I'm hit with a wave of emotions as we enter the airport. The thing that hits me hardest is that everyone looks like me, and

I realize I've never had that experience. I've always stood out because of my brownness, but here I blend in. It feels strange, and safe.

Then I'm hit by a wave of fear, because I might look like everyone else, but I *know* I'm different. And what if the wrong person finds that out? Like the guy holding a gun as we make our way to the immigration line. He looks like he's my age, but he holds the weapon like an expert. He wouldn't hurt me, would he?

Dad hands our passports to the immigration officer, and I can feel my heart beat out of my chest as the officer looks us over. "What's the reason for your visit?" the officer asks.

My dad solemnly says, "My father is ill."

"May God protect him," the officer says. Then, handing our passports back to my dad, he smiles and says, "Welcome home."

Those words linger in the air as we make our way to baggage claim, where Baba and Hassan Agha wait for us. Baba is in a wheelchair, Hassan Agha behind him. Hassan Agha might be smiling, but it's hard to tell with his giant horseshoe mustache. Baba waves to us, a welcoming smile on his face. His body's been shrinking fast the last few years, but his head has stayed the same size. His hair is a shock of white. His big dark eyes glimmer with life and mystery. And his smile still brightens the room.

I think of those words again. *Welcome home.*

I realize that I may be coming to a foreign country, but my dad isn't. He's coming back to the place he was born in, the country that raised him.

"Does it feel like coming home?" I ask him.

He shakes his head, like he disapproves of my asking about his feelings. "It all looks different," he says.

I didn't ask how it looks. I asked how it feels. I want to shake him and demand answers. *How does it feel to be back? How did it feel to leave then? Why won't you talk to me? Why won't you tell me who you are?*

SAEED

1978

TØHRAN

“Come on, double six,” Baba whispers as he shakes his dice cup like it’s an instrument. My father turns everything into music. “Parvaneh, come here. I need you.” On cue, Maman enters, holding a blueprint in her hands. Without being asked, she blows into Baba’s dice cup.

“I’m done for,” I say with a rueful smile.

Maman moves behind me. She puts a hand on each of my shoulders and kisses the top of my head. “Don’t worry, I’ll blow on your dice too. I have enough luck for both of my favorite men.”

Baba rolls his dice. As expected, he rolls a double six. He removes four chips off his side of the board with an impish grin. “Your move, son.”

I hold up my dice cup for Maman to blow into. When I shake the dice, it sounds nothing like music. Baba may have taught me how to hit the right keys on a piano or pluck strings on the tar, but he’ll never teach me how to be an artist. That’s not who I am.

Peyman says all children must become the opposite of their parents in at least one important way, and I think he's right. Except sometimes I feel like the opposite of my parents in *every* way. I roll a two and a one. "Oh, come on," I yell in mock exasperation. "I'm never going to catch up now."

"Come to my side again, Parvaneh." Baba smiles slyly. "Your luck only seems to work for me."

"Don't you dare, Maman," I plead.

Just in time to save her, the doorbell rings. I move to stand up, the old wooden chair creaking under me. "Keep playing, I'll get it," Maman says.

"If it's my student, will you ask him to wait in the study?" Baba asks as he rolls a three and a two, then grimaces.

"Well, well, well," I say. "Looks like your luck's running out."

I hear Maman open the door and greet Peyman warmly. Their footsteps head toward us, the rhythm changing when they move from the creaky wood floors to the colorful rug that depicts a story from *The Shahnameh*. "Who's winning?" Peyman asks when he enters. He's wearing a black peacoat and holding a large covered tray.

"We're tied one game each," I tell him. "But Baba is about to go down. What's in the tray?"

"Homemade *yakh dar behesht* for you." Peyman hands the tray to my mother.

Maman peeks inside before placing the tray down

on the long wooden dining room table. “Please tell your mother she doesn’t need to cook something for us every time you come over.”

“I can tell her, but she won’t listen.” Then, with a meaningful gaze toward me, Peyman says, “We should go, Saeed. We don’t want to be late.”

“Where are you going?” Maman asks.

“Please tell me you’re going to have some fun,” Baba says. “You’re young. Youth is meant to be enjoyed.”

“Should we keep the board here and finish tomorrow?” I ask.

Baba nods as he stands up. He turns a light on, and the bulb illuminates the calligraphy on the lamp. “You changed the subject,” Baba says. “Where are you two off to?”

“We’re going to the library,” I say. “To study with some friends.” I don’t look at either of my parents. I hate lying to them, but what choice do I have? If they knew where I was going, they would stop me. My parents are open-minded about almost everything. They encourage me to go out and enjoy the city’s bustling cafés and discos. The one thing they forbid me from doing is taking part in the protests spreading across the city.

“You’re eighteen years old and all you do is study,” Baba says to me. Then, turning to Peyman, “You seem like a fun kid. Can’t you convince our son to let loose and enjoy his youth once in a while?”

Peyman laughs. “I wish my parents were more like you. They’re always telling me to study more, work harder, think of my future.” Peyman does let loose, often. But unlike me, he has an uncanny ability to balance school, protests, and nightclubbing without ever losing his focus.

“Study *more?*” Maman asks with a smile. “You two are already going to the best engineering university in the country. You’ve even been taking summer classes.”

The doorbell rings again. “That must be my new student,” Baba says. He starts to make his way to the front door, then stops and turns back to us. “Your mother and I don’t want you to party all the time. Or to study all the time. Or to do anything all the time. What we want is for you to find balance. When you don’t have balance ... when you’re laser-focused on one goal ...” The doorbell rings again. Baba seems lost in thought.

“Babak,” Maman says gently.

He snaps out of his reverie and continues to the front door to greet his student.

As they make their way to Baba’s study, Maman grabs my coat from the dining room chair and throws it around me. She straightens the collar. “Should I get you a scarf?” she asks.

“I’ll be okay,” I say.

“It’s already getting cold at night.” Maman looks me in the eye with discomfiting tenderness.

The sound of Baba's tar floats toward us, casting its magic spell over our home. Then there's a brief pause, followed by the sound of the tar being played by the new student, who turns those strings into a screeching instrument of torture.

"Oh, wow." Peyman grimaces in playful shock, which makes Maman and me both laugh. "I think we've found the key to convincing the Shah to change his policies," Peyman says. "We just force him to listen to the worst tar player in the world until he gives in."

Maman shakes her head as she laughs. "You'd be surprised at how quickly Babak turns a terrible musician into a decent one."

I want to say that she might be surprised at how quickly a mass of young students can do that with our government. But I can't say that. Because she can't know that we're headed to a protest. I wish I could explain to my parents that when I'm at a protest and my voice is raised in chorus with my fellow students, I feel alive in a way I rarely do.

