

# LIKE A LOVE STORY



ABDI NAZEMIAN

LITTLE TIGER  
LONDON

## SEPTEMBER 1989

*“It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6, or 7 to discover that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians, and although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.”*

*—James Baldwin*

# REZA

There should be a limit on how long any human being has to wear braces. Also, there should be another name for braces. Mouth invaders, maybe, or teeth terrorists. Although I suppose an Iranian boy these days shouldn't even *think* the word *terrorist*, so I take that back. Maybe I should just call them friends. They've accompanied me as we moved from one country to another. But it's been three years now, and I'm done. Tomorrow, I start my senior year of high school, in a new school, in a new city. This is it. My last chance to not be invisible.

I'm watching two television shows at once on the largest TV screen I have ever seen. Everything in this home, and in this country, is jumbo sized. It isn't even a normal television. It's a projection screen. Abbas says the quality of the image is a lot better. And the image can split, so you can watch multiple things at the same time. As if the split screen television weren't stimulating enough, he also has an endless VHS collection and closet full of board games. The only games my dad ever played were called "How fast can I empty this bottle?" and "How many times

can I leave my family and come back, only to leave again?" My mom wants me to call Abbas "Baba" or "Daddy," but that's never going to happen. No man with this many versions of Monopoly could ever be my father.

I'm watching *The Golden Girls* on the television, and in a smaller box at the bottom of the television, I'm watching *The Neverending Story*. I grab ahold of the edge of my braces, the part that digs into my gums, and pull. Hard. I yank on those braces like I am playing tug-of-war with them, and soon they start tearing off. I feel a sharp pain, and with it, sudden freedom. It feels right. Maybe freedom always comes with pain. That's what my dad used to say about the revolution. There's blood too, lots of it. I see it on my nails, now ruby red like my mother's.

My mom, who is at her desk reading *Architectural Digest*, sees me and screams.

"Reza, what have you done?" she asks. "Are you out of your mind?"

I look at her as the taste of blood clogs the back of my throat. She removes a tissue from a gold box and approaches to help clean me. But as she's about to touch my face, I push her away and grab the tissue.

"I can clean it myself," I say. I hear the edge in my voice and immediately feel guilty. I wish she knew the truth—that I'm trying to save her. Just in case my blood is toxic. Just in case you can get it from having too many thoughts of boys in locker rooms.

“You really are out of your mind,” she says, with enough tenderness to make me feel guilty again.

I want to tell her that of course I am. What else could I be after what our family has been through? But instead I just say, “I think I need an orthodontist.”

We moved so recently that I don’t even have doctors here yet. My mom sighs, unsure of what to do. I can feel the wheels in her head turn as she whispers to herself. Then she finds the yellow pages and starts flipping through them until the ruby-red fingernail of her index finger rests on the image of a smiling man.

“He looks capable,” my mom announces.

“Hard to tell,” I say. “All these guys have crooked teeth.”

My mom smiles finally. Almost even laughs. Her own teeth are, of course, perfectly straight and gleaming white. There’s something unspoken here; that she doesn’t want to call Abbas and disturb him at work. She doesn’t want him to know that his new stepson is the kind of deranged kid who rips out his own braces. She likes to deal with problems privately and quietly. That’s her way.

“I can’t handle this right now,” my mom says. But she rushes me to the orthodontist, proving that she can, in fact, handle this right now. That’s the thing about her. She always can handle it right now.

As I lie on the orthodontist’s chair, listening to the doctor and my mother chat, my mind zones out. I do

this sometimes. I'm afraid of speaking, of saying the wrong thing, of revealing something about myself I shouldn't. So I listen. And if I listen too long, the voices become hazy, like I'm hearing them through an ocean. When I was a kid, I would sink into the bathtub every time my parents would fight. Or more specifically, when my dad would yell, and my mom would appease. I could still hear them from below the water, but they sounded far away. And I felt safe. Well, almost.

*There was so much blood, Doctor. Should I call you Doctor?  
I have so many Persian patients. I love your people.*

*Can we be done by the time my husband gets back from  
work?*

*And so beautiful. Do all Persians have such long eyelashes?*

The orthodontist puts on his blue gloves, which makes me feel a little better. I wish the whole world could wear a giant latex glove around itself, like a shield of armor. It would not be so different than Iran was, with women in their chadors. They thought those chadors were protecting men from their impure thoughts. Maybe latex around everyone would protect me from mine.

"You have such a quiet child," the dentist says. "My own kids won't stop talking."

"I'm not a child," I say, coming out of my haze. "I'm seventeen. I should be allowed to make my own decisions."

"Reza," my mom says. "When you are my age,

you will thank me. I promise you.” My mother has made many promises to me. That the revolution would never succeed. That my father would change. That I would grow into a good-looking man.

I don’t tell her that I will never be her age. I have known this from the moment we left Iran and landed in Toronto. I was eleven years old, and there was so little I knew about the world. But I knew that my dad would never change, and that my mom had finally found the strength to leave him. But there was something else I knew, something I knew from the moment I first went swimming with some other boys, and one of those boys’ swim trunks fell. I knew that I longed for other boys, to touch them, and hold them, and be with them. I hid that knowledge away, buried it. It was safe inside me. Then we landed in Toronto, and my mom and my sister made a beeline to the airport newsstand, giddy over the selection of fashion magazines, choosing which to buy, discussing Isabella Rossellini’s beauty.

*Does she not look vaguely Iranian?*

*Well, Iranians and Italians do not look so different.*

*No chadors. I can’t believe it.*

*She looks identical to her mother. You both look like your father.*

*I think I want to be the first Iranian supermodel.*

My eyes were glued to another section of magazines, and to the cover of *Time*. “The AIDS Hysteria.” My mom and my sister were so immersed

in analyzing Isabella's skin tone that I managed to covertly flip through the magazine, and inside I saw sickness, disease, lesions, young men dying. I knew that I liked it when boys' swim trunks fell. But the fact that this would kill me, this was something I did not know until that moment. Until *Time* magazine informed me that I would die soon.

I've been living in fear ever since.

"I just want to be able to smile this year," I plead, to both my mom and the orthodontist. Before getting the braces, my incisors were so high on my gum line that even when I smiled, they were invisible to the outside world. This horror was among the many reasons I never smiled, but let me be honest, I had many other reasons for not smiling.

"Is that too much to ask, to be able to smile without scaring people? To be able to start at a new school without being the four-eyed, metal-mouthed kid everyone makes fun of? To actually have someone ... like me?" I can feel my face burning.

My mother suddenly smiles. "Oh," she says. And then adding a few syllables to the word the way she loves to do, "Ohhhhhh." I have no idea what is going on in her overactive mind, but then she declares, "I understand. You want to have a girlfriend!"

She does *not* understand. She never does.

My mother turns to the orthodontist. "Is there anything we can do?" she asks. "We need your approval, of course."



I don't understand why she treats this orthodontist as her accomplice, and not as a man that we just randomly chose from the yellow pages. Or as a creep who likes talking about her beautiful eyelashes.

The orthodontist makes a deal with me. He will remove the braces if I wear a retainer every night without fail. I shrug in acceptance, and a small smirk of victory forms on my face.

When we get back home, I rush into my room, which is too big for me, and stand in front of the mirror. I run my tongue around my mouth, reveling in the feeling of smooth teeth. Maybe I'm a little fixated on my teeth, maybe I have spent too much time analyzing them, measuring with my ruler the microscopic movements they made day by day. But now that the braces are gone, I can already tell that this obsession only saved me from thinking about the sad state of the rest of my appearance: my thin, nondescript body (not tall enough to be lanky, not stocky enough to be athletic), my cheeks with their remnants of baby fat (which have been mercilessly pinched by my sister), and my thick mop of unkempt hair.

The pathetic state of my appearance is only reinforced when Saadi walks into my room without knocking. My sister may be in college now (or at least pretending to be in college, since no one trusts her to show up to class or read a book), but I have inherited a new stepbrother. He's six feet tall. He plays lacrosse,

whatever that is. He's the same age as me, but he's twice my size. He walks around the house in white boxer shorts and a white baseball hat, and he calls me "the little prince," since I'm named after the former shah of Iran, even though my dad hated him. I suppose that reveals a lot about how present my dad was in my life, even back when I was born. I think I hate the shah too. Maybe if he had been strong enough to stop the revolution, we would all still be living together in a place where people look like me.

He starts opening my drawers. "Where's my Fine Young Cannibals CD?" he asks.

"I, um, did not touch it." I keep my gaze fixed on the mirror, but in the reflection, I see him bending down to open a bottom drawer. For a moment, I compare his thick legs to my scrawny ones, but after that moment passes, I don't think of my legs at all. All that exists are his legs, his back, his shoulders. I hate myself. I wish I had braces in my mouth again so I could rip them out a second time. I wish I would die, and if there is an afterlife, I could find my dad there and tell him that I'm just as messed up as he was.

"Can you stop staring at me," he says. It's not a question, it is a command.

I quickly look out my window at the city streets outside. At the base of a tree, trash bags are piled up, and I feel so nauseous that I can almost smell them.

"I was not looking at you," I scoff.

“Why do you talk like that?” he says.

“Like what?” I ask.

“So formal. Like you’re fresh off the boat. Loosen up. Weren’t you in Canada the last few years? Don’t they talk like normal people there? It’s 1989. You talk like it’s 1889.”

“I don’t know what normal people talk like,” I say. And this, I think, is exactly why I do not usually talk.

“Your family should’ve left Iran during the revolution like the rest of us,” he says. “I don’t know why you stayed.”

We stayed because my dad believed in the ideals of the revolution, even though my mother knew they were immediately corrupted. Also, because my mother was not ready to leave him yet.

“I said stop staring. You better not be a fag,” he says. “One per school is more than enough.”

My heart races. Is it because this hairy beast has figured out in a few moments what my mother has not figured out in seventeen years? Or is it because I now know something about my new school that I would never have imagined in my wildest dreams ... that there will be someone like me there?

“I’m not a...” But the word won’t escape my lips. I want to say it. I know that if I say it, he won’t think I am one.

He opens a drawer and pushes some of my underwear aside—starched white briefs, which, next to his boxers, seem like what a little boy would wear.

My room used to be his, before he got upgraded to what used to be the guest room. “I’m just shitting you,” he says. “I know you’re not. My mom says homosexuality is luckily a problem that Iranians don’t have. I guess we don’t have that gene or something. But Art Grant definitely has that gene.” He moves on to another drawer and finally finds what he’s looking for. “Here it is,” he says. Once he has the CD in his hand, he looks at me. “Hey, little prince, my dad asked me to take care of you at school.”

“Oh,” I say. “Um, I don’t know if that is necessary. I can take care of myself.” That’s untrue, but I am good at disappearing into the background.

“I figured,” he says. “You look like a strong, self-sufficient person.” There’s a hint of a smile on his lips. “I’ll be watching you from afar though, just to make sure you’re okay.” He smiles bigger now, and then adds, “I’ll always have my eye on you.” He says it like a threat, and I know it is.

When he leaves, I close the door and put a chair in front of it. I need privacy. I find the yearbook the school sent me. It’s on my bookshelf, where it sits next to the summer reading I had to do (Maya Angelou, Bram Stoker, George Orwell) and the Homer books I will be reading this fall. I quickly flip through the yearbook, scanning the small square black-and-white photos of my new classmates. Most of them look shockingly similar, the boys with their collared shirts and side-parted hair, and the girls with their ponytails

and pouts. I notice a girl named Judy who looks so different from the rest, with heavy eye makeup and a piercing gaze, and I think that it's nice someone else at the school doesn't belong.

But I'm looking for Art Grant. I go to the Gs, but at first I don't find him, until I realize Art must be a nickname. He's listed as Bartholomew Emerson Grant VI, and he's very hard to miss. His hair is shaved at the sides, and a soft Mohawk at the top sways toward the right side of his face, which is turned slightly, probably to reveal the earring in his left ear. He has a smirk on his face, like he knows exactly what people are thinking of him, daring anyone looking at this picture to call him a fag again, telling the Saadis of the world to go to hell. Even in black and white, his eyes look like a cat's, defiant, challenging you. My mom once told me that no matter where you stand, you'll think the Mona Lisa is looking right at you. That's how I feel about this picture. Like Art is looking right at me. Like he sees me.

I quickly close the book, overwhelmed by his image, but his face haunts me. I cannot stop thinking about him, and his shaved scalp, and his studded ear, and his devilish lips. I need to stop thinking about him, and I know there's only one way to do that. I lie back on my bed, close my eyes, and unzip my pants. I see Bartholomew Emerson Grant VI come to life, enter my room, climb into bed with me. He kisses me, undresses me, tells me not to be scared. But then

he's gone, and all I can see are images of dying men with lesions.

I hate myself. I hate these thoughts. I hate Bartholomew Emerson Grant VI.

I close my eyes tighter, and my breath quickens. When it's over, I breathe out all the air inside me, hoping that with the last bit of oxygen leaving my body, this sickness will leave me too. I know this is a phase. It must be. I grew out of needing my stuffed rabbit with me all the time. I grew out of hating eggplant, and of putting McDonald's french fries on every Persian stew my mom made. I will grow out of this. I must, because I cannot ruin my mom's new marriage. And because even though my mom can handle anything, I don't know if she can handle me dying.

I need to live, and to live, I can't ever be what I know that I am.