

# Azadi

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(3,890 words)

Raana's apartment was small, and when her father, who was a tall man, entered it for the first time, it seemed even smaller. Mr. Alizadeh wasn't trying to be imposing. In fact, in the five hours he had been in her apartment Raana had been astonished by his attempts to behave the way he thought an American father might behave: he offered to make his own tea, asked if she needed help with dinner, and even helped to set the table. Mahin, Raana's mother, turned and looked at her husband several times during the course of the evening as though he had suddenly sprouted horns.

The day had been agonizing for Raana. It wasn't just the anticipation of seeing her parents after three years and having them in her new apartment for the very first time – it was the fact that she had become someone else altogether since they had last visited. She had become a full-fledged adult – a tax-paying member of society with a stable job and a gym membership. The longer she lived in the United States, the less her parents knew about her. All day long Raana had been feeling like she didn't know herself either; like an alien being had inhabited her body.

She had spent the entire morning chopping walnuts and squeezing fresh pomegranates to make *fesenjun*, which was one of the trickiest of Persian dishes to make. She had never made it before, and she had gone into the kitchen at ten-minute intervals throughout the day to check the sauce like a neurotic housewife. She tasted the *fesenjun* so many times that its odor had permeated her skin.

She had already resolved that as soon as dinner was over, she would tell her parents about Abe. Both parents complimented her on her *fesenjun*, and while they ate, they told her about their flight and filled her in with news of Iran. She thought they would sit together in the living room after dishes were cleared, but her mother went upstairs to unpack the suitcases. Raana could not tell her father about Abe without her mother present; it was uncomfortable enough just being alone with him for such a long period of time. She asked him if he wanted an after-dinner drink, and he asked for a glass of vodka with lime juice. She was careful to prepare his drink just the way he liked it: the vodka poured over two cubes of ice, no water, and both halves of the lime plopped into the glass. She brought it out to him and sat down beside him on the couch.

It was difficult for Raana to initiate a conversation with her father – his opinions on most matters were strong and she always worried that she would start an argument. She was thankful when he began talking, asking her a series of practical questions she

could answer easily: How was her job? What was her neighborhood like? Where was the nearest grocery store?

When her father pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, extracted a cigarette from it, and threw the pack on the coffee table, Raana picked it up and studied the cover.

“Azadi,” she said. “Freedom. That’s kind of an odd name for cigarettes, don’t you think?”

“Yes. A lot of things are called Azadi in Iran now, ever since the Revolution, and all of them are ridiculous. The university near our house is called Azadi, although the women who go there must wear the full hejab. The park on Shemiran Road is now called Azadi, which is funny because the *Pasdar* and the *Gasht-e-Ershad* patrol it at all times of day and night looking for people to arrest. Azadi Square is where so many people were killed in the uprisings against the Shah. That’s the best one. But here in America everyone likes the word ‘freedom’ too, and sometimes it is also applied to things that aren’t exactly free. Don’t you agree?”

“I guess so. But it’s not the name I’m worried about, Baba-joon. It’s what’s inside the cigarettes.”

“Do you think Winston and Marlboro are any better just because they have shiner packaging? At least they don’t spray pesticides on our tobacco in Iran. Of course, every now and then I do find a piece of plastic rolled inside one of my cigarettes.”

“Baba, that’s not funny. When was the last time you went to a doctor?”

“*Azizam*, I’m going to live as long as I am meant to live. Let me have my pleasures while I’m alive. Now that I’m retired, there’s not much for me to do in Iran besides smoke. Anyway, with the air in Tehran being as polluted as it is, I’m probably better off inhaling cigarette smoke. It will filter out the car exhaust and the other fumes I might otherwise inhale.”

“I’m not trying to interfere in your life, Baba-joon. I just want you to be healthy, that’s all.”

When Raana’s mother came back into the living room, she put her hand gently on her husband’s head and said, “Come on, Navid. We need to go and sleep off our jet lag. We’ve been traveling for thirty-four hours.”

Telling them about Abe would have to wait until tomorrow.



She had met Abe a few months ago when they had both starred in the local Town and Gown Theatre’s production of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, Raana as Mary Magdalene and Abe as Judas. Although she was a decent singer and her alto voice was just in the right range for Mary Magdalene’s songs, she knew she had been chosen mostly because of

her long dark hair and her olive complexion. As much as she hated to admit it, she knew she also shared a few personality traits with the biblical Mary – before the demons were driven out of her. They had the same basic dichotomy in their characters: tough on the outside but vulnerable on the inside; domestically inclined but fiercely independent; part nurturer and part loose woman. All in all, she was right for the role. But to cast an Iranian in a musical that paid homage to the dawn of the Christian era seemed almost like a joke, especially in the post 9/11 era.

As for Abe, he was perfect for the part of Judas in all the practical ways. To begin with, he had the most astonishing singing voice Raana had ever heard. The first time she heard him belting out “Heaven on Their Minds” in rehearsal, she was spellbound. He was also the physical embodiment of the Judas character: dark and brooding, with a chiseled face and a head full of chestnut-colored curls. The director insisted that he perform “Damned for All Time” wearing nothing but a tattered loincloth, and every time Raana watched him rehearse the song she had a hard time taking her eyes off his torso. He was lithe and a little bit boyish, with angular shoulders and muscles that were healthily but not excessively toned. He moved like some kind of wild cat, in a graceful but calculated way. Watching him made Raana’s stomach flutter and her palms sweat. This reaction was the subject of lots of bad poetry, but she had no trouble identifying it as sexual arousal.

Abe was also a Jew by birth, a fact that he shamelessly played up when he auditioned for the part of Judas. And then, in an abrupt about-face, he pointedly announced to Raana during their first conversation that he was a hard-core atheist. Every time she heard him sing “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” after that confession, she wanted to laugh out loud at the understatement. The irony of Raana and Abe’s casting wasn’t lost on either of them; in fact the catalyst for their first hook-up was precisely their mutual recognition of that irony. It happened one night after rehearsal when they cast members all went out for drinks and she and Abe found themselves seated next to each other at the bar.

“So,” he said as he clinked his glass of bourbon against hers, “I wonder what God thinks about a lapsed Jew from Georgia playing the part of Judas?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I’m more curious about what Allah thinks about a Muslim woman from Iran playing Jesus’s prostitute lover.”

“Yeah, good question. Do you think those two are buddies up there? You think they agree on shit like that? Or maybe he’s the same guy with some serious identity issues?”

“Or maybe he’s not a guy at all. Why is it that you Americans, even if you’re not Christian, always imagine God as looking like an American man – like a huge John

Wayne sitting up in the clouds? I mean, must you always be so literal? Why don't people have more imagination?"

Abe chortled. "Or maybe he – or she, or it – doesn't exist at all. Are you non-literal enough to imagine that?"

They opened their eyes at the same time the next morning and lay in silence for several minutes watching the intermittent flicker of the commuters' headlights blinking in through the venetian blinds. They could hear the muffled sounds of car engines in the distance, mixed with the more immediate sound of morning birds chirping from the tree outside the bedroom window. Raana was slightly hung over and could tell that Abe was too. It felt momentous to be waking up next to him, but she decided to make light of it.

"So, what happened last night? Did you take advantage of me when I was under the influence? Do I still have my virtue?"

"Which virtue would that be? You seem to have so many! One of them, I'm told, is that you make a killer bacon-and-egg breakfast."

"Wow, that's pretty cheeky for someone who barely knows me. Besides, neither one of us is supposed to eat pork. You, Jew, me, Muslim. Hello?"

"According to which one of those men in the sky? Could it be the same one who says we shouldn't sleep together without clearing it with the government first? Or maybe it's the one who says we have to convert each other if we're even going to date? Hey, it just occurred to me that that would be really cool! You convert to Judaism and I'll convert to Islam. Oh, wait..."

When she looked at him and saw the mischief in his eyes, she knew she had fallen for him.



On the morning of his second day in his daughter's apartment, Mr. Alizadeh was craving what he liked to call a "cowboy" breakfast: bacon, eggs, hashbrowns, toast. He was fond of classic Westerns and adored the whole Western aesthetic, which had always baffled Raana. Her father's style, as she remembered it from her childhood in Iran, featured European-style tailored suits with tapered waists, immaculately pressed shirts, and expensive shoe – the kind of clothing many Americans, especially cowboys, would have thought of as effeminate. She sometimes wondered whether her father's obsession with cowboys was another one of his sardonic mind games. But it occurred to her that maybe there was something about the cowboy life – the ruggedness, the open land sweeping up toward distant mountains, the campfires at night – that reminded him of his childhood in Iran.

More than the food, her father loved the ritual of preparing a sumptuous meal in the morning and eating it in a leisurely fashion. During the years when he was working in a government office in Tehran, he often had to eat breakfast in a hurry, grabbing a piece of *naan* and *paneer* and downing it quickly with *chai* before rushing off to fight the traffic. A big American breakfast seemed like a reward for a life of hard work.

There was no bacon in the refrigerator, so Raana offered to go to the Super-Walmart down the street to buy some. Her father immediately offered to go with her. He loved shopping in the United States and loved shopping at Walmart most of all. Raana usually avoided big box stores altogether, and she dreaded the thought of going to Walmart with her father. He would want to wander down every aisle of the store to study the items on display. He was especially fascinated by gadgetry: bag sealers, jar openers, knife sharpeners, and other such items that didn't exist in Iran. A trip to Walmart with her father meant hours in the housewares section of the store.

She hoped her father's hunger would move him along more quickly this morning, but he appeared to be in no hurry. They arrived at the store at about 8:45, and by the time they left it was almost 11:00. Today's Walmart expedition yielded an LED flashlight, an electronic key finder, a large bag of disposable razors, a battery charger, a package of boxer shorts, two pairs of jeans, a flannel shirt, and a cheap "10-gallon" cowboy hat made of imitation straw. He didn't intend to really wear the hat, he told Raana, but he thought it would be amusing to his friends back home.

"We can have the bacon tomorrow," Mr. Alizadeh said in the checkout counter. "It's time for lunch now. How about if we pick up your mother and I treat the two of you to McDonald's?"

Raana wanted to remind her father that she didn't eat fast food, but she knew he would somehow manage to talk her into it. She could have a salad.

"Whatever you want to do, Baba-joon."

The tight booth and red and yellow colors of McDonald's didn't seem like the appropriate atmosphere for telling her parents about Abe, so she decided to wait until the afternoon. She knew that when they got home her father would want his nap. The afternoon nap was a sacred tradition to Navid Alizadeh. Even in the years when he had only a tiny window of free time when he came home at mid-day, he insisted on putting on his pajamas and closing his eyes, claiming that even a few minutes of sleep would restore him.

He did not put on his pajamas this afternoon, but instead slept fully clothed in the new jeans he had bought at Walmart and had put on before going to McDonald's. He slept for two full hours, and Raana could hear him snoring loudly from the bedroom. He was in a good mood when he woke up, and it was a pleasant afternoon, so

they decided to sit on the back patio of the apartment to have their afternoon tea. Navid drank two cups of black tea and smoked four cigarettes. He father's good mood wasn't going to last forever, Raana thought, so it was now or never.

When she was rehearsing how she would present her relationship with Abe to her parents, it had dawned on her that the Farsi word *eyb*, which meant "defect," was pronounced exactly the same as Abe's name. She decided she would preempt the inevitable jokes by avoiding the nickname altogether, and instead telling her parents his name was Ibrahim. The name was common among both Muslims and Jews, and it was, after all, his real name.

"My friend Ibrahim is coming over this evening to meet you," she said. Then she added, "He is my boyfriend, actually."

"Is he Jewish?" Mr. Alizadeh asked immediately.

"Yes," Raana said. She wanted to ask, "So what?" but she stopped herself.

"What does he do?"

"He is training to be an actor."

"It doesn't matter that he is Jewish," her father said. "But the lack of job — that matters, Raana-joon. You don't want to have to support your husband, do you?"

"First of all, he's not my husband, and probably never will be. Secondly, he has a job. Two jobs, in fact. He's actually supporting *me* right now." This was true. Abe was working as a tutor on weekends and performing at the Shakespeare Tavern six nights a week, all while finishing his degree.

"Do you need some money, *azizam*?" Offering money was always Navid Alizadeh's way of circumventing difficult conversations with his daughter.

Raana tried to hide her exasperation. "No, Baba-joon, I'm fine. I have a full-time teaching job, remember?"

Raana knew that her job as a fifth-grade teacher was not respectable in her father's eyes. Abe's acting career was even more shameful — she might as well have told her father that he was a thief. She was reminded of the Great Chain of Being popular in medieval times, where everything in the universe, from mollusks to angels, was rank-ordered.

Abe was on his best behavior when he showed up that evening, as Raana knew he would be. He arrived at the door in a clean polo shirt and khaki trousers, a bottle of expensive whiskey and a bouquet of flowers in his hand. Raana ushered him out to the patio, where the kabab that Mahin had made earlier was cooking on the grill. After the introductions were made, Mr. Alizadeh poured a whiskey for himself and another for Abe. He sat down in a chair facing Abe and looked at him with a smile.

"So, I'm told you want to go to Hollywood to become an actor?"

“I don’t have such big dreams, Mr. Alizadeh,” Abe responded, pronouncing the surname perfectly. “There are other ways to make money in acting. Too much competition in Hollywood.”

“There are many Jewish people in Hollywood, correct? I’ve heard that the whole place is run by Jews.”

“I really don’t know much about who runs Hollywood,” Abe said. “I’ve never been there.”

Raana had known her father would not be able to avoid bringing the conversation around to the issue of Abe’s Jewish heritage. She would try to steer him elsewhere, although she knew it was a lost cause. “Baba-joon, why don’t you ask Abe about what he studied in school?” she said. “He has a degree in history, which should interest you, since you are a scholar.”

“Oh, well then he should know about the history of the Jews in Iran. Did you know, Ibrahim, that Cyrus the Great actually freed the Jews who were enslaved in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC? I’m sure you know that he was the greatest leader of the Persian Empire. We revere him in my country.”

“No, I didn’t know that. Interesting.”

“When I was growing up there were many, many Jews in Iran. They had thriving businesses. I had Mahin’s wedding ring made by a Jewish goldsmith.”

Raana looked at Abe and could tell that he was faltering for something to say in response. But her father didn’t give him a chance to formulate his thoughts.

“Muslims are not the way your media depicts them,” Mr. Alizadeh continued. “We are tolerant people. We respect all people of the book. And by the way, we recognize that *your* book—your Torah—is older than ours by many centuries.”

Raana had known her father would deliver this narrative; she had heard it countless times before. He was not a religious man, and he wasn’t really anti-Semitic either. But like most Iranians, he couldn’t shake the ingrained notion that ethnicity was a core part of a person’s identity. Fortunately, she had prepared Abe for her father’s little discourse on Judaism, and he didn’t appear to be offended.

“I was just a child when the state of Israel was founded,” Navid went on, “but I was taught to respect what the Jews had made out of nothingness, in the middle of the desert. I have a lot of respect for your people. You must not blame me for the attitude of my government towards your people. I do not share that attitude.”

Raana was surprised by Abe’s answer. “I won’t,” he said, “if you won’t blame me for mine. I didn’t elect Netanyahu.”

“Of course you didn’t! And I’m guessing that you didn’t vote for Trump either. I certainly hope not! I don’t know which of the two is more diabolical, but I fear for the world with those two in power. They are criminals.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Abe said, his face brightening. On the topic of Trump, Abe was fully in his element. But Navid was still determined to steer the conversation.

“Trump is not consistent. On the one hand he makes hateful comments about the Jews and encourages the neo-Nazis, and on the other hand he allies himself with Netanyahu. This is because the two men hate the Muslims and will do whatever they can to punish us. And believe me, the people of Iran are suffering under Trump’s sanctions, which of course are applauded by Netanyahu. Children are dying because of the lack of medicine, just like they did in Iraq. It is not the children’s fault, I’m sure you will agree.”

Raana wanted to interrupt her father; to tell him that it was unfair for him to classify Abe as both a Jew and an American, responsible for the actions of both governments. It seemed especially unfair because Abe had no allegiance whatsoever to country or ethnicity; he shunned all labels and called himself a member of the “human family.” Just as she was about to come to Abe’s defense, Mahin called them to dinner.

Over dinner, Abe asked Mr. Alizadeh many questions about Iran, all of them well informed and carefully formulated. He avoided direct mentions of politics and instead focused on issues he knew he and Raana’s father would agree on: health care, the refugee crisis, wealth distribution. He had read a great deal about the underground scene in Iran – the rampant prostitution and heroin and methamphetamine addiction; the wild raves that were held in secret locations all over the city; the Gatsby-like parties that were thrown in the mansions of northern Tehran. When he asked Raana’s father about these dimensions of Iran, Navid frowned and nodded his head. “You are right,” he said. “These excesses are worse than they were in the Shah’s day.”

As she listened to her father and boyfriend, Raana felt tense. At any moment, the conversation could veer into dangerous territory. She suggested watching a movie, but her father didn’t want to. “I am enjoying the conversation,” he said, “and the night air is very pleasant.” Raana knew him well enough to know that what he was really enjoying was smoking and drinking so freely, which he could not do in the Islamic Republic.

Raana lost count of how many cigarettes her father smoked and how many whiskeys he drank, but when the pack of cigarettes was almost gone and the bottle of whisky was almost finished, Navid Alizadeh got up and left the patio.

It was not his wife, or even his daughter, who noticed how long he was gone. It was Abe.

It was Abe who went inside, walked toward the bathroom, and pushed the door open.

It was Abe who picked Navid's limp body off the floor.

It was Abe who called 911.

It was Abe who explained to the paramedic what Mr. Alizadeh had eaten for dinner, how many whiskeys he had consumed, and how many cigarettes he had smoked.

And when Navid Alizadeh awoke from his emergency by-pass surgery and looked at the faces of his daughter and his wife, the first words out of his mouth were, "Where is Ibrahim?"