

The Union

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Fiction

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The morning of the day before they exchanged vows – a steamy Sunday in mid-August 2012 – Mahnaz Mazaheri and Gideon Rosenthal decided to get married. To be clear, Gideon had proposed five months earlier, on Nowruz no less, at the Skydeck of the Willis Tower. They had stepped out onto The Ledge, an all-glass balcony precariously suspended one hundred and three stories above the ground, and Gideon had (very cautiously) dropped to one knee. Mahnaz, bowled over by the gesture and exhilarated by the glorious vista of the Chicago cityscape at sunset, had accepted as soon as her trembling lips could form the word “yes”.

However, prior to this moment, this steamy morning of the day before they exchanged vows, they had made no progress toward determining the date or location of their wedding. The engagement, through no fault of their own, had thus far been choppy, quite like piloting a fishing boat through a hurricane.

Mahnaz, a first-generation Persian-American, was the daughter of rather devout Tehrani Muslims. Her parents, Shirin and Babak, had, like so many Persians, emigrated to the United States shortly after the Iranian Revolution. Babak was a Sorbonne-educated philosophy professor at the University of Tehran and, as a left-leaning modernist, was persona non grata after the

ascension of the Ayatollah. Shirin, at the time of their migration, was, by day, an administrator at the Ministry of Energy and, by night, a locally popular folk singer. Certain artists, she among them, as well, were regarded with mistrust by Iranian conservatives.

Had both taken vows of silence, at least pertaining to political speech, they might have been able to persevere within the new and reconfigured Iranian society. However, Babak was nothing if not political: his post-overthrow contributions to a Paris-based intellectual journal generated buzz and were fervently condemned by regime hardliners. Anticipating arrest, he wrote one final, scorched-earth manifesto, smuggled it to the editor of the journal, then headed straight to the airport with Shirin. They flew to Los Angeles, where they applied for asylum. That was in March of 1980, during the hostage crisis at the American embassy.

In 1983, their savings dwindling, Mahnaz's parents relocated to Nashville. Babak, who was fluent in English, in addition to French and Farsi, had, at long last, secured an associate professorship at Vanderbilt. Shirin, however, knew no English prior to her arrival in the States and was slow to acquire the language. She was unable to find employment until the following year, when she connected with a Persian furniture importer in nearby Brentwood, Tennessee, who needed an operations manager.

Mahnaz came into the world a few years later, wide-eyed, curly-haired, and quiet except for a single squawk when the obstetrician spanked her newborn bottom. However, she was by no means a reticent child. Stubborn as they come, from the moment she could crawl she challenged her parents on almost every rule they put in place. Dietary restrictions, fashion conventions, religious observances – she simply would not accept her parents word for any of it, although, typically, after some back and forth she would relent. Babak and Shirin, with a degree of desperation, endeavored to preserve many of the cultural norms of their youth in Tehran and, at

the same time, protect their children (younger brother Mazdak joined them in 1988) from the various perils of an upbringing in an urban American setting in a region of the country that did not embrace Muslims, generally, especially after 2001.

Gideon, on the other hand, was born into a Conservative Jewish family who lived in the North Shore of Chicago. Both parents, Ben and Myriam, were doctors, an orthopedist and a dermatologist respectively, and had known each other since childhood. In the seventies, their fathers were simultaneously board members for the Rodfei Zedek synagogue in Hyde Park, Chicago, a circumstance that brought young Ben and Myriam together. One might even fairly infer that their union was arranged, although their courtship was mutually enthusiastic.

Born in 1986, Gideon grew up in a distinctive, L-shaped residence on the water, equipped with a small, private tram to transport people to and from the beach. He attended New Trier High School, the overly-endowed, gold standard among public schools in the Midwest, and, generally, had a successful and unproblematic youth. A loyal son, he dutifully abided by the doctrinal strictures of his family's faith until he left home for college – the University of Southern California – where, as a freshman, among other rites of passage, he indulged in a three-month, vigorously sexual relationship with a bleach-blonde atheist from Long Beach. Subsequently, he traded in his yarmulke for a surfboard and began identifying as a Reform Jew.

Ben and Myriam were not thrilled with this development, to understate the matter. When Gideon returned home for summer break before his sophomore year, the family, including his older sister Laura (a devout Conservative), engaged in a sort of extended, rancorous negotiation that culminated in Gideon agreeing to observe the Sabbath and to attend services on all holidays, even Purim. In exchange he would no longer have to go to a Conservative synagogue or keep

kosher. He was satisfied with the outcome, but his parents felt cheated. “Better to lengthen a dog’s leash than to lose him in the forest,” his father concluded.

Mahnaz and Gideon met on the third day of their first year at Northwestern Law in 2010. The class social committee had organized a happy hour meet-and-greet at Lizzy McNeill’s pub. The two young people approached the bar at the same time, and, to their mutual surprise, simultaneously ordered soda waters with cranberry. Although they had both let loose a bit during their undergraduate days, neither young person consumed alcohol anymore. Recognizing this commonality, they initiated a conversation about the traditional reasons for their abstention; Gideon’s parents had discouraged drunkenness as a violation of Jewish communal norms, while Mahnaz’s parents strictly forbade imbibement as a matter of Muslim law. This turned into an hours-long, in-depth conversation about everything from their childhood phobias (Mahnaz: mice; Gideon: thunder) to their shared appreciation for Liam Neeson films to their begrudging recognition that having overbearing parents was one of the primary reasons for their success to date.

“I always gave my parents a hard time,” Mahnaz admitted to Gideon that night, “but I think my train would have derailed a long time ago had they not screwed my wheels on so tight.”

“We’re on the same page,” said Gideon.

“Birds of a feather,” she noted with a chuckle.

The two young people experienced the spark of attraction the moment they encountered each other that night. Gideon was taken by her bottomless, serious eyes, her effortless intellectuality, and her voluminous mane of black hair that hung in a single braid to the middle of her back. Mahnaz appreciated his solid structure, his irreverent wit, and the fervid manner in

which he listened to her even when she was rambling, as she often was. Both had hoped to meet someone significant during law school but had not expected to be smitten the very first week.

Although they did not physically consummate their relationship for nearly a month, Gideon and Mahnaz coupled up immediately. They sat next to each other in the two courses they shared that first semester. They shared notes and studied together in the library, then, soon, at Gideon's condo. When he was accepted to Northwestern, his parents bought him an immodest two-bedroom residence in Streeterville that presented unobstructed views to the north and east and, best of all, included two parking spots. As Mahnaz had a less appealing living situation – a cramped two-bedroom in Old Town with an irritable roommate – she all but moved into Gideon's place within three weeks of their first encounter. Then, during the winter break, she *actually* moved in with him.

Gideon's parents did not learn of the relationship, much less the cohabitation arrangement, until well into Gideon's second semester of law school. They rarely visited his home as they had their own "in-town" residence just blocks away, where the family regularly convened for Shabbos meals. However, one afternoon shortly before Passover, his mother unexpectedly sent him a text message informing him that she and her close friend Darla were in the lobby and wanted to visit. He delicately attempted to send her away, but she followed up with a firmer request which he could not deny.

Gideon quickly collected Mahnaz's loose items (she was out for dim sum with friends) and stuffed them in the master bedroom closet. However, it was a fruitless attempt to conceal the truth. There was an apparent feminine touch to the decor of the condo – in particular, potted plants and candles, which Gideon would have never sprung for on his own – along with a wall in

the second bedroom of framed photographs of the couple carousing with friends and enjoying each other.

Darla – who was nose by both reputation and nature – cooed, “I didn’t know that you had a girlfriend, Gideon. She’s quite the looker!”

This caught mother’s attention. She stepped over, examined a few of the snapshots, then followed up with, “I didn’t know either. You have some explaining to do, my sweet son.” Her tone was halfway between bitter and patronizing.

Gideon opened his mouth to say something but was at a loss for words.

Darla sniped again. “Is she Jewish? She has an exotic look.”

“Very exotic,” his mother added dryly. “What is her name?”

Gideon could not come up with a way to evade this question. “Mahnaz,” he said abashedly.

“Sounds Middle Eastern to me.”

“Why don’t we get into it some other time, Mom?”

“Now is not good?”

“Well, no. There is, uh, so much to tell you about her and I have to study and surely Darla doesn’t want to listen to my blatherings.”

To Gideon’s surprise, Darla cut him some slack. “Oh, let’s not harass the boy, Myriam. It will come out when it comes out.”

Gideon’s mother relented with a sigh and a sideways glare.

Two nights later was the Seder and Mahnaz was not invited. Gideon had candidly explained the situation the week prior: “My family will have an *extremely* hard time accepting

that I am with a Muslim, and the worst possible moment to introduce you is during Passover. I am so sorry.”

Mahnaz replied, “I understand completely, because the same can be said of my family in regard to you. Eid al Fitr is coming up and inviting you is not even within the realm of possibility.”

Although the circumstances were nearly identical, each young person was slightly hurt by the other’s unwillingness to smash aside the cultural obstacles to their relationship. It was, in a way, like an emotional game of chicken; each was waiting for the other to make the first move.

That year, for whatever reason, the Seder gathering was smaller than usual – a fact for which Gideon was grateful considering that his love life was likely to be a salacious topic of conversation. His parents hosted his paternal grandparents, his aunt, uncle and three cousins on his mother’s side of the family, and, of course, Laura and her husband Jason and nine-month-old son Joey. They all fit comfortably around the massive Brazilian rosewood table in the formal dining room.

Somehow, Gideon escaped scrutiny until the end of the evening, when Bubbe (Grandma) and Zayde (Grandpa) began inquiring about his law school experience. The young man explained that he had not officially decided upon a focus area for his future practice, but he was leaning toward human rights law.

“What would that entail?” asked Zayde.

“Well, I think I would litigate civil cases against governments and corporations who violate the rights of individual stakeholders.”

“A very righteous pursuit,” noted Bubbe.

“You could start with your girlfriend,” Mother interjected.

Gideon felt his eyes widen involuntarily.

“What’s this?” asked Bubbe.

Laura, who was in the process of bottle-feeding the baby, stopped what she was doing and leaned forward. “Did I hear something about a girlfriend?”

“Yes, you did,” Mother replied with a sing-song tone.

“Who has a girlfriend?” Father asked.

“Gideon.”

“Well...”

“Oh how wonderful!”

“She’s exotic.”

“I wouldn’t really describe her that way...”

“How exotic?” inquired Laura.

“Middle Eastern,” Mother stated as if it were a scandal, which it was.

“Israeli?” asked Father.

“Well...” Gideon was struggling.

“She didn’t look Israeli to me.”

“You met her, mom?”

“I saw a photo of her. She lives with Gideon.”

The table seemed to erupt, everyone commenting at once.

“Living together but not married? I don’t like the sound of this,” said Bubbe.

Zayde spoke up. “Oh, let the boy be. It’s the Twenty-First Century.”

“I don’t care what century it is, honey. I care about my grandson’s reputation.”

“Wait,” said Laura. “Is she Israeli or not?”

All eyes were on Gideon. He blinked slowly, then admitted, “She’s Persian.”

“Persian!”

“Persian?”

“A Persian Jew! How wonderful!” said Zayde.

Gideon did not correct the misinterpretation, instead offering a wan, close-lipped smile.

“What is her name?”

“Mahnaz.”

“Beautiful name,” Father said.

“Very beautiful.”

“Why isn’t she here?” Laura interrogated, a look of suspicion in her eyes.

“She, well, she’s got other things going on.”

“Where is she from, dear?” asked Bubbe.

“Nashville.”

“A southern girl to boot,” Mother said sardonically.

“Persians can’t be southern.”

“They can be southern.”

Jason, who had been silent so far, reasoned, “Persians can be anything. Just like Jews.”

“Jews are Jews,” Laura snapped.

“And heathens are heathens, aren’t they,” Mother declared causing everyone to quiet down momentarily.

Gideon sank into his chair.

Perhaps in an effort to save his drowning brother-in-law, Jason announced, “We have some news as well.”

“I don’t know if we can handle more news,” Father quipped.

Mother said, “Don’t tell us you’re moving away.”

“No, mom,” Laura said. “I’m pregnant again.”

There was another unanimous commotion, during which Gideon took the opportunity to slip away from the table. He walked to the powder room, then past it, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

He decided to ride the tram down to the beach. Surely, the family would notice his absence, but that did not matter. He needed some breathing room.

As he looked out toward the lake, the crisp breeze seeped inside his button-down shirt, causing him to shiver. The moon and the stars were well-defined against their stark black canvas and the lake lapped like a natural metronome against the rocky shore.

Gideon’s family had spent many a summer night out here on the land’s edge under the shimmering heavens. Often they had picnic dinners and, for dessert, s’mores over a fire pit. As children, Laura and Gideon would insist upon sleeping in a tent on the beach at least once per week. Father would join them, the three pressed together in sleeping bags like human burritos, and they would read aloud from Harry Potter books and laugh until late at night. On occasion, Mother would join them for the overnight, squeezing into the overstuffed tent with an abundance of pillows and a quilt. Happy times. Simple times.

Gideon thought about the dinner table conversation and recognized that he was painted into a corner. Lies of omission and prevarications would only exacerbate the predicament. The time had come to bite the bullet. It wouldn’t be pleasant, but at least it would be quick. The alternative would be a festering wound that his mother would pick at for weeks to come.

He called Mahnaz. She answered after two rings.

“Hey, G.”

“Hey.”

“Are you surviving?” she asked.

“Barely. The cat is out of the bag.”

“What cat exactly?”

“The one named Mahnaz.”

She chuckled. “What do they know exactly?”

“They know we live together. They know that you are Persian. My mom already suspects that you aren’t Jewish.”

“Oh boy. This is going to be messy, huh?”

“Yep,” Gideon exhaled.

“How have you handled it so far?”

“Well, I escaped for a bit. I’m down at the lakeshore right now while they make a fuss over Laura’s baby announcement.”

“What? She’s having a baby?”

“Yes, thank God.”

Mahnaz chuckled again. “In that case, this might be the perfect time to spill all the tea. Use the diversion to your advantage.

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“See? We’re birds of a feather. Tell your family that.”

“I’m not sure that will be enough, my love.”

“Did you just call me ‘my love’?”

“Too much?”

“No, I like it. I like it a lot,” Mahnaz said. “Say it more often.”

“If you insist, my queen.”

“Now that’s too much.”

“Noted.”

When Gideon returned to the table, the family was digging into a platter full of pastries and a tub of vanilla ice cream. Mother sipped coffee from a porcelain cup and eyed her son as he sat back down.

“Where’d you go?” asked Laura.

“Nowhere. Just had a phone call.”

“Was it Mazzy?”

“Mahnaz.”

“Right, Mahnaz.”

“Yes, it was her.”

Gideon leaned forward and snatched a piece of baklava. As he bit into it, Mother spoke up.

“So, is your girlfriend at Seder with her family, Gideon?”

Gideon took a deep breath and glared at mother. It was not a sincere question, but one intended to make him squirm. He decided, then and there, that there would be no more squirming.

“No, Mahnaz is Muslim, as I am sure you have already deduced, Mom.”

“What’s this?” asked Bubbe.

“My girlfriend, Grandma. She is Muslim, not Jewish.”

Bubbe furrowed her brow and pushed away her dish of ice cream.

“Why?” Laura asked.

“Why what?”

“Of all of the women in the world, why would you pick a Muslim?”

“Do you think I have control over what my heart desires?”

“Yes. You do. We all do.” This comment prompted a strange look from Jason, who had been tucking the baby into his carrier.

Gideon shook his head and poked his dessert with a fork.

Father cleared his throat. “Well, no one said that he is going to marry this young lady.”

“How do you know I won’t marry her?”

“Stop being dramatic,” said Mother.

“I’m not being dramatic. You all are being dramatic. Who are any of you to judge Mahnaz or judge me for that matter?”

Mother raised her eyebrows and looked to Father, who had nothing further to contribute in the moment.

After a long silence, Zayde spoke up. “I for one am happy that my grandson has found someone to love. Not everyone is so lucky. There are many lonely people in this world. Perhaps Gideon’s sweetheart will convert to our faith one day, and if not, we must all find a way to love her as well.”

“Hear, hear,” Jason said and was promptly smacked on the arm by Laura.

Driving home, Gideon was more downtrodden than he had expected to be. This outcome, a family divided along ideological lines, was not unanticipated – and could have been worse – but deep in his heart he was hoping that his evident passion for Mahnaz would overwhelm the objections to their relationship. While Zayde and Jason seemed to be on board, Father was

somewhere in the middle and the women had not given an inch. The final comment on the issue had come from Bubbe, who said, “I don’t understand how two people who were raised to view the world so differently can possibly be compatible.”

Two weeks later, Mahnaz attended Eid al-Fitr prayers at the Masjid As-Salaam in Nashville, then gathered with her parents and brother and several other families at the home of Dr. Moghaddas, a faculty member at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine. She spent most of the evening chatting with Dr. Moghaddas’s wife and teenaged daughter. The girl, who would graduate the following year, had many questions about Chicago as both Northwestern and the University of Chicago were high on her wish list. Mahnaz was happy to describe her experience and, in general, strongly endorsed the city. When Mrs. Moghaddas stepped away, Mahnaz nudged the girl and said, “I’d pick Northwestern. U. of C. is a snoozer.”

At the end of the night, Mahnaz’s family retired to her parents’ home. They sat in the living room as Baba played some Miles Davis on the Bluetooth speaker system. It was nearing midnight when Mama asked Mazdak about his girlfriend Naeema, who he had linked up with during his undergraduate studies at Boston University.

“She’s good. Nothing much to report.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly good,” Mama noted.

“No. There is nothing negative. We are doing very well.”

“How are you dealing with the distance?” Mahnaz asked. Having graduated the previous May, Mazdak recently landed a high-pressure job on Wall Street. Naeema remained in Boston to begin her PhD in psychology.

“It’s not a big deal really, just four hours by train. I see her almost every weekend.”

“I like that girl,” said Baba. “What about you, daughter? Any romance in Chicago?”

“Well, since you asked, I am seeing someone.”

“Wonderful,” said Mama. “Tell us about him.”

Mahnaz took a deep breath. “The first thing you should know is that he is Jewish.”

“Jewish?” Baba echoed, his brow furrowed.

“Yes. Jewish.” Mahnaz watched her family as the revelation sunk in. Mazdak lowered his eyes. The pigment seemed to drain from her parents’ faces.

“Why would you do this?” Baba asked.

“Do what?”

“Why would you betray us like this. Always rebelling. Always fighting against our wishes.”

“But it’s not about you, Baba.”

“Of course it is about me. It is about this family! Do you understand how much your mother and I sacrificed to keep you safe and to raise you properly? This is how you repay us?”

Mahnaz pressed her lips together and looked to her mother, whose face was stony and inscrutable.

“Baba, there is no place in this world for hate. We have to embrace those who are not like us. A Jew and a Muslim coming together is a good thing, not a bad thing!”

“It is not about hate, for us, Mahnaz. We hate no one. We have love for everyone. But we also understand the reality of the world.”

“How serious are you about this young man?” Mama asked.

“Well... serious. Very serious.”

Mama and Baba looked at each other. Mazdak remained motionless.

“You might marry him?”

“It’s not out of the question.”

Mama took a deep breath. Baba got to his feet and began pacing in small circles.

“Marriage is not only about the union of two souls. It is about the union of two families,” he said. “Your generation does not understand this. It is about expanding a community, one that shares values and spiritual principles. When rebellion is more important than tradition, that is when big problems arise.”

“God help me, Baba. This is not about rebellion. It’s about love.”

“Love can be a form of rebellion.” Baba stared at his daughter for a long moment, then strode out of the room.

Mahnaz looked to her mother, who said, “You have upset your father.”

“He has upset me, Mama! Don’t my feelings count?”

“Some things are more important than feelings, Mahnaz.”

Mahnaz occupied her childhood bedroom that night. In recent years, Mama had redecorated in some ways but not fully. On the wall, where there were once posters of pop musicians that Mahnaz had fawned over, there were now black-and-white family photos from the old country. Stricken with insomnia, Mahnaz stared at them and tried to imagine what it would have been like to come of age in the Islamic Republic. She pictured a colorless and repressive society, one depleted of simple pleasures, one in which the duty of every woman was prescribed by irascible, sex-deprived fanatics who had no real of understanding of the purpose of life. She knew that things were different, looser, before the Ayatollah, but she found it hard to believe that they were *wholly* different. A society could not turn upside-down overnight, could it? And, if not, then what exactly were Mama and Baba attempting to preserve? Was tradition inherently valuable, as her parents seemed to believe?

Some time before sunrise, Mahnaz wrapped herself in a blanket and slipped downstairs and out to the porch swing. She wanted to call Gideon, who must have been sleeping but would undoubtedly wake up to speak with her, bless his soul. After a moment of consideration, she decided not to be so needy.

The home was situated near the crest of a hill, affording a view over the languid, residential layout of Oak Hill. The nasal trill of foraging nighthawks accented the otherwise noiseless atmosphere. Mahnaz recalled racing bicycles with Mazdak down the gradual slope of their quiet street on a summer afternoon fifteen years earlier. She won the race, but when she looked back to taunt Mazdak, she hit the curb, flipped, and sprained her wrist. Something of that humiliating, injurious moment seemed to resonate still.

The thud of footsteps descending the stairs, then Mazdak emerged out onto the porch. He took a seat next to his sister on the swing, and for a few minutes they stared into the predawn gloom and said nothing to each other.

Finally, she asked, “Why are you up?”

“Why are *you* up?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

“I went to the bathroom and saw that your room was empty. You know, it’s not even six in the morning yet.” He yawned and traced the direction of Mahnaz’s gaze. “What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know what I’m thinking.”

“Haven’t seen Baba that upset since we were kids.”

“I don’t know if I’ve *ever* seen him that upset.”

Mazdak hummed an acknowledgment then hung his arm across his sister's shoulders. "He's just looking out for you. Mama, too. They think that your relationship will end in disaster because of the acrimony between our two communities."

"Acrimony?" She was surprised by his use of that particular vocabulary. "It's all manufactured tribalism and it will continue into perpetuity unless open minds prevail."

"Yeah. I hear you."

"Do you, though?"

"Well, I hear both sides. And I understand both perspectives. My hope is for everyone to be happy, so I'll do what I can."

"What can you do?"

"I can marry Naeema."

"Do you *want* to marry Naeema?"

Mazdak blew on his hands and rubbed them together. "Actually, I do. I know we're young, but we know that we are going to end up together. It's just a matter of time. And it makes both of us really happy and optimistic."

"You shouldn't be with her to please Mama and Baba."

"There may be an element of that," he acknowledged, "but only a small element. And I happen to agree with Baba about the importance of community and of doing my part. I don't think it is wrong to take the happiness of your family into consideration, so long as it does not conflict with your own happiness."

Mahnaz cocked her head back and inhaled deeply. Her brother was wise for his years – wiser than her – something she found hard to admit. "You're the golden child."

"Don't say that. That's not my objective."

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. And it’s not a bad thing. The golden child is the one who holds everything together.”

He sighed. “I guess.”

Mahnaz pulled her feet up and tucked them under her thighs. She readjusted the blanket and spread the excess over Mazdak’s lap. “So, how do you think this is going to turn out?”

“The way these things always turn out: they’ll be upset and you’ll butt heads for a while, but in the end they’ll realize that they are creating an obstacle to your fulfillment and they’ll back off.”

“I don’t want them just to back off. I want them to embrace it.”

Mazdak chuckled. “Baby steps, sis. Baby steps.”

Two days before Gideon and Mahnaz exchanged their vows – a rainy Saturday evening in Chicago – the young couple hosted an online Zoom gathering for their families, a sort of virtual coffee hour. On the invitation that they emailed to the guests the week prior they encouraged all to “come prepared with open minds and your favorite espresso-based beverage.” As neither side had, as yet, tempered their perspectives, Gideon and Mahnaz expected the event to be sparsely attended. To their surprise, at the 6 PM start time, the meeting room was filled with a mosaic of nearly two dozen familiar faces, among them both sets of parents, Bubbe and Zayde, Laura and Jason, Mazdak, and a smattering of aunts, uncles, and cousins, some of whom lived elsewhere: Vancouver, Los Angeles, Miami.

Gideon offered brief welcoming remarks before turning the microphone over to Mahnaz who, as expected, had prepared a PowerPoint presentation.

“This first slide,” she explained, “shows the commonalities between the modern-day Jewish and Muslim communities. As you can see we both embrace Abrahamic religious

traditions; Islam, although it was established a few thousand years after the advent of Judaism, recognizes Noah, Abraham, and Moses as true prophets of God.”

At this point, Mahnaz flipped to a slide that showed a complicated ven diagram of sorts, illustrating the areas of overlap between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity along with a similar arrangement for the so-called “Aryan” faiths of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. She began to expound further on her thesis of “symbiosis” among the major religions, when her father Babak spoke up.

“My dear, may I say something?”

“Well, I was hoping to save questions for the end. I have six more slides...”

“I understand, but I think it is important to interject here. These features you are describing are fascinating and, in academic circles particularly, are worthy of extensive analysis. However, I might be speaking for most of us when I say that it is not very relevant to today’s gathering.”

“But, Baba, there is much more to this presentation. I sourced various excerpts from scripture which demonstrate parallel ideological themes. I did quite a bit of research in both primary and secondary sources that speak to the compatibility of both our beliefs and our cultures...”

Gideon’s father Ben chimed in. “I have to agree with Mr. Mazaheri. What concerns all of us is not an academic matter, but a human matter. This is about relationships, not theory.”

Gideon came to Mahnaz’s defense. “Dad, Mahnaz put a lot of effort into this.”

“Then I think we should have another of these gatherings to discuss her ideas. However, today we must focus on the issues that stand in the way of the success of your marriage.”

Gideon pursed his lips and looked to his fiancé. She shrugged resignedly, then clicked off the PowerPoint presentation. Without the slides, the screen became a grid of visages again, all looking on expectantly.

“How should we proceed, then?” Mahnaz asked stiffly.

“I think we should speak according to seniority,” said Ben. “The elders first.”

“I concur,” said Babak.

“Let them say their peace without interruption, then, when they finish, you can respond with your thoughts. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes,” Gideon answered.

“In that case, Bubbe and Zayde, why don’t you go ahead?”

Gideon and Mahnaz watched as Gideon’s grandparents successfully unmuted their microphone and leaned toward their computer. They seemed to have grown to resemble each other over the decades: white hair, angular noses, deep forehead creases over kind eyes.

Bubbe spoke first. “Thank you. First, I must ask a question. Do either of you intend to convert to the other’s religion?”

Gideon and Mahnaz looked at each other, then shook their heads no.

“In that case, I think what we need to do in this meeting and in the weeks and months to come is to establish a manner of communicating that is conducive to the coming together of our two families and to set expectations so that there is minimal friction between our traditions and ways of life.”

Many of the heads on the screen nodded in approval. Bubbe paused and then Zayde spoke. “You young kids probably think that these sorts of things are not important and that everyone should simply accept what is happening without reservation, but, unfortunately, that is

hard for people like your grandmother and me and your parents who have lived in a certain way with a certain outlook for so long. We must exercise patience on all sides of this equation.”

“That is fair,” Gideon said, then deferred to Mahnaz.

“I agree and I understand,” she said. “I just hope that everyone understands that, regardless of whether we have your full approval, Gideon and I are getting married.”

“We understand,” Zayde confirmed.

Bubbe opened her mouth to say something additional, but began to cry.

“Oh no!” said Gideon. “Please don’t cry, Bubbe. This is a time of happiness, not sadness.”

“I... I’m not sad...” Bubbe said. “I am just overwhelmed. I want what is best for you... for both of you... I want you to have nothing but happiness.”

Zayde put his arm around her.

“Aww,” said Mahnaz, then began to tear up herself. “We will be very happy and, I promise, we’ll do everything we can to promote peace and unity between our families.”

“We know you will, dear,” Zayde said.

Next Mahnaz’s parents took the microphone to say their piece. They seemed rather formally dressed for the occasion. Shirin wore a patterned, silk blouse and a gold necklace. Babak donned a tweed sport coat and tie. For the most part, Shirin let Babak speak on their behalf. He had pointed questions and concerns about what traditions would be honored within their household and how their future children would be raised.

Gideon responded. “We intend to incorporate both Jewish and Muslim traditions into our household so far as that is possible. We have already begun learning about each other’s faiths and we intend to continue with that process. I intend to develop fluency in Farsi. Further, we

have agreed it would be most appropriate if the children were raised Muslim with a special appreciation for their Jewish heritage.”

“And holy days?”

“We will celebrate the holy days of both faiths.”

Babak nodded with a degree of reticence and looked to his wife, who nodded slowly as well.

Next, it was Gideon’s parents’ turn. Myriam was dressed in black and, as expected, had much to say. Ben occasionally and briefly chimed in with a clarification or affirmation.

“I have two concerns, primarily,” said Myriam. “The first is for your soul, Gideon. We, Jews, are the chosen people. We are the Members of the Tribe. Our scripture is holy and God-given. Our traditions are ancient and sacred. You have already drifted away from Conservative principles. What happens if we lose you completely?”

Gideon sat back and thought carefully before responding. Then: “Neither of us intend to abandon these things. If our families embrace us, surround us with their love, accept us, then you will never lose us. It is that simple.”

Myriam sat quietly for a long moment. She looked as if she were about to respond, then her face twisted with emotion and she quickly excused herself and stepped away. Ben watched her go before returning his attention to the meeting. “Your responses seem reasonable to me,” he said. “We love you and we hope for the best.”

Most of the other attendees took the opportunity to share their thoughts over the next hour, and they were generally very supportive. After the last speaker finished, Gideon brought the session to a close by saying, “I love Mahnaz more than any of you may realize at this point. Her happiness is more important than my own, and central to that happiness are the well-wishes

of both of our families. I hope that this gathering has demonstrated that all of us have good intentions and, I hope, has broken the ice a bit so that, someday soon, we might be more than just in-laws, but loving members of a united tribe.”

“Hear, hear!” said Jason, raising his coffee mug.

Other members of the family raised their cups and tumblers, and soon all were sharing a coffee toast. “Hear, hear! Mazeltov! Mabrouk!”

Both Mahnaz and Gideon were emotionally drained after the meeting. It was as if something monstrous had been exorcised, but also as if something menacing still lurked below the surface. They decided to take the evening to silently process what had transpired and to decompress. They laid down on the couch, holding each other tightly, and fell asleep by nine-thirty.

When Gideon arose at 7 AM, Mahnaz was already awake, cooking breakfast. He hugged her from behind as she poked at a panful of scrambled eggs.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you more.”

“I made parfaits.”

“Parfaits?”

“Check the fridge.”

Gideon opened the refrigerator and withdrew two large glasses filled with layers of yogurt, granola, strawberries, and blueberries. “Impressive,” he said. “How long have you been awake?”

“Since five.”

“Insomnia?”

“A bit.”

Gideon brewed and poured coffee. Mahnaz served plates of eggs topped with cheddar cheese and herbs. They sat at the kitchen table and held hands while they ate.

“I’ve been thinking about the wedding,” said Mahnaz.

“Oh?”

“I think we should invite as many people as possible. I think we should force our families to integrate, seat them at mixed tables, organize activities that require them to intermingle.”

“I think that’s a great idea. Maybe we could have an interfaith dance-off.”

Mahnaz giggled. “Perfect.”

“What did you think about last night?”

“Actually, it went better than expected.”

“I agree,” said Gideon.

“But it won’t make all of our problems disappear.”

“I agree with that as well. It will be a bit of a minefield for a while. We’ll have to watch our step...”

“... but also set boundaries. Respect goes both ways.”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

“Birds of a feather,” said Mahnaz with a wink.

After breakfast, the couple went for a walk on the lakeshore. By mid-morning it had already broken through ninety degrees and the beaches were starting to fill up. When they reached North Avenue, they decided to take a dip. They stripped down to their swimsuits and ran into the surf.

They waded out until the water came to their chests. Mahnaz paddled over to Gideon and wrapped her arms around his neck and lifted her legs so that he would cradle her body. “Hold me like a baby.”

He laughed and did her bidding.

They kissed and swayed with the rhythm of the waves and looked south toward the skyline – Lake Point Tower and the John Hancock and the stack of surrounding high-rises.

“This is refreshing,” she said.

“Why don’t we do this every weekend?”

“We can. What’s stopping us?”

“Inertia,” said Gideon.

“Inertia. Hmm. Everybody needs a little push.”

She pressed her face against his chest and took a deep breath. He kissed her hair, then rested his chin on the crown of her head.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“We should get married soon.”

“How soon?”

“I’m thinking tomorrow.”

Mahnaz snickered. “Not sure we can find a caterer or a venue in time.”

“No. The wedding will be later. As big of a celebration as you want. I think we should just go to the courthouse and get married tomorrow. Lock it in. Forget about everybody else. Just you and me.”

“You and me? I can think of a few people that might not sit well with.”

“I think we need to make clear that this is our prerogative. You know, set the precedent that we do not require permission, that we are forging ahead.”

“Like renegades, huh?” she said.

“Exactly. Renegades.”

Mahnaz closed her eyes and hung her head back so that the sun beat down on her face. She smiled then puckered her lips for a kiss. Gideon chuckled then pressed his lips to hers.