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DARIUS  
THE GREAT  
IS NOT OKAY

ADIB KHORRAM

August 2018 • \$17.99 (23.99 CAN)

Young Adult • Fiction

Ages 12 and up • Grades 7 and up

320 pages • ISBN 9780525552963

Dial Books



DIAL BOOKS  
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
375 Hudson Street  
New York, NY 10014



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[CIP tk]  
Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 9780525552963

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Design by Mina Chung  
Text set in Chaparral Pro

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# DARIUS THE GREAT IS NOT OKAY

ADIB KHORRAM



DIAL BOOKS



## THE CHIEFEST AND GREATEST OF CALAMITIES

Steam belched and hissed. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck.

Smaug the Terrible was furious with me.

“What does it mean, ‘filter error’?” I asked.

“Here.” Mr. Apatan wiggled the hose where it fed into Smaug’s gleaming chrome back. The blinking red error light went dark. “Better?”

“I think so.”

Smaug gurgled happily and began boiling once again.

“Good. Were you pushing buttons?”

“No,” I said. “Just to check the temperature.”

“You don’t have to check it, Darius. It always stays at two-twelve.”

“Right.”

There was no use arguing with Charles Apatan, Manager of the Tea Haven at the Shoppes at Fairview Court. He was convinced, despite all the articles I printed out for him—he refused to read web pages—that each and every tea should be steeped at a full boil, whether it was a robust Yunnan or a fragile gyokuro.

Not that Tea Haven ever got such fine teas. Everything we sold was *enriched with antioxidants* or *enhanced with natural super-fruit extracts* or *formulated for health and beauty*.

Smaug, the Irrepressibly Finicky, was our industrial-strength

water boiler. I named it Smaug my first week on the job, when I got scalded three times in a single shift, but so far the name hadn't stuck with anyone else at Tea Haven.

Mr. Apatan passed me an empty pump-action thermos. "We need more Blueberry Açai Bliss."

I shoveled tea from the bright orange tin into the filter basket, topped it with two scoops of rock sugar, and tucked it under the spigot. Smaug, the Unassailably Pressurized, spat its steaming contents into the thermos. I flinched as boiling water splattered my hands.

Smaug, the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities, was triumphant once more.

As a people group, Persians are genetically predisposed to like tea. And even though I was only half Persian, I had inherited a full-strength tea-loving gene sequence from my mom.

"You know how Persians make tea?" my mom would ask.

"How?" I would say.

"We put hell in it and we damn it," she would say, and I would laugh because it was funny to hear my mom, who never used colorful metaphors, pretend to curse.

In Farsi, *hel* means "cardamom," which is what makes Persian tea so delicious, and *dam* means "to steep."

When I explained the joke to Mr. Apatan, he was not amused.

"You can't swear at the customers, Darius," he said.

"I wasn't going to. It's Farsi. It's a joke."

"You can't do that."

Charles Apatan was the most literal person I knew.

❖ ❖ ❖

After I replenished our strategically located sample thermoses with fresh tea, I refilled the plastic cups at each station.

I was categorically opposed to plastic sample cups. Everything tasted gross out of plastic, all chemical-y and bland.

It was deeply disgusting.

Not that it made much difference at Tea Haven. The sugar content in our samples was high enough to mask the taste of the plastic cups. Maybe even high enough to dissolve them, given enough time.

The Tea Haven at the Shoppes at Fairview Court was not a bad place to work. Not really. It was a significant upgrade over my last job—spinning the daily special sign at one of those take-it-and-bake-it pizza places—and it would look good on my resume. That way, when I graduated, I could work at an artisanal tea store, instead of one that added the latest superfood extract to whatever dismal fannings the corporate tea blenders could find at the steepest discount.

My dream job was Rose City Teas, this place in the Northwest District that did small-batch, hand-selected teas. There were no artificial flavorings in Rose City's tea. But you had to be eighteen to work there.

I was stuffing the cups into their spring-loaded dispenser when Trent Bolger's hyena laugh rang through the open doorway.

I was completely exposed. The entire front of Tea Haven was composed of giant windows, which, though tinted to reduce sun exposure, still offered a full and enticing view of the wares (and employees) inside.

I silently wished for the sun to bounce off the window,

blinding Trent and cloaking me from what was sure to be an unpleasant encounter. Or, at the very least, for Trent to keep on walking and not recognize me in my work uniform of black shirt and bright blue apron.

It did not work. Trent Bolger rounded the corner and instantly got a sensor lock on me.

He grabbed the doorframe and swung himself into the store, followed by one of his Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy, Chip Cusumano.

“Hey! D’s Nuts!”

Trent Bolger never called me Darius. Not if there was a suggestive nickname he could use instead.

Mom always said she named me after Darius the Great, but I think she and Dad were setting themselves up for disappointment, naming me after a historical figure like that. I was many things—D-Hole, D-Wad, D’s Nuts—but I was definitely not great.

If anything, I was a great target for Trent Bolger and his Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy. When your name begins with *D*, the sexual innuendos practically write themselves.

At least Trent was predictable.

Trent Bolger was not technically a bully. Chapel Hill High School—where Trent, Chip, and I were sophomores—had a Zero Tolerance Policy toward bullying.

It also had Zero Tolerance Policies toward fighting, plagiarism, drugs, and alcohol.

And if everyone at Chapel Hill High School tolerated Trent’s behavior, that meant he wasn’t a bully.



Right?

Trent and I had known each other since kindergarten. We were friends back then, in the way that everyone is friends in kindergarten, before sociopolitical alliances begin to cement, and then, by the time third grade rolls around, you find yourself spending every game of Heads Down, Thumbs Up with your head down and your thumb up, completely ignored by your entire class until you begin to wonder if you've turned invisible.

Trent Bolger was only a Level Two athlete (Level Three at best). He played something-back on the Chapel Hill High School junior varsity football team (Go Chargers). And he was not particularly good-looking, either. Trent was almost a head shorter than me, with close-cropped black hair, blocky black glasses, and a nose that turned up sharply at the end.

Trent Bolger had the largest nostrils of anyone I had ever seen.

Nonetheless, Trent was disproportionately popular among Chapel Hill High School's sophomore class.

Chip Cusumano was taller, better-looking, and cooler. His hair was long and swoopy on top, with the sides shaved. He had the elegant sort of curved nose you saw in statues and paintings, and his nostrils were perfectly proportioned.

He was also nicer than Trent (to most people if not to me), which of course meant he was far less popular.

Also, his real name was Cyprian, which was an even more unusual name than Darius.

Trent Bolger shared his last name with Fredegar "Fatty" Bolger, a Hobbit from *The Lord of the Rings*. He's the one that

stays home in the Shire while Frodo and company go on their adventure.

Fatty Bolger is pretty much the most boring Hobbit ever.

I never called Trent “Fatty” to his face.

It was a Level Five Disaster.

I had avoided letting anyone at Chapel Hill High School know where I worked, specifically to keep that knowledge from falling into the hands of Trent and the Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy.

Chip Cusumano nodded at me from the doorway and began to examine our line of brightly colored steeper mugs. But Trent Bolger headed straight for my station. He was wearing gray swishy shorts and his Chapel Hill High School Wrestling Team sweatshirt.

Trent and Chip both wrestled in the winter. Trent was junior varsity, but Chip had managed a spot on the varsity roster, the only sophomore to do so.

Chip had on his team sweatshirt too, but he wore it with his usual black joggers, the kind with stripes down the sides that taper around the ankles. I never saw Chip in swishy shorts outside of gym class, which I assumed was for the same reason I avoided them.

It was the only thing we had in common.

Trent Bolger stood in front of me, grinning. He knew I couldn’t escape him at work.

“Welcome to Tea Haven,” I said, which was the Corporate Mandated Greeting. “Would you like to sample one of our fine teas today?”

Technically, I was also supposed to produce a Corporate Mandated Smile, but I was not a miracle worker.

“Do you guys sell tea bags?”

Across the store, Chip smirked and shook his head.

“Uh.”

I knew what Trent was trying to do. This was not Chapel Hill High School, and the Tea Haven at the Shoppes at Fairview Court did not have a Zero Tolerance Policy toward bullying.

“No. We only sell mesh strainers and biodegradable sachets.”

“That’s a shame. I bet you really like tea bags.” Trent’s grin crept up one side of his face. He only ever smiled with half his mouth. “You just seem like the type of guy who would really enjoy them.”

“Um.”

“You must get tea-bagged a lot, right?”

“I’m trying to work, Trent,” I said. Then, because I had the tingly feeling that Mr. Apatan was somewhere close by, carefully watching and critiquing my customer service, I cleared my throat and asked, “Would you like to try our Orange Blossom Awesome Herbal Tisane?”

I refused to call it tea when it did not contain any actual tea leaves.

“What’s it taste like?”

I pulled a sample cup out of the stack, filled it with a pump of Orange Blossom Awesome, and offered it to Trent, using my flat palm as a sort of saucer.

He downed it in one swallow. “Ugh. This tastes like orange juice and balls.”

Chip Cusumano laughed into the empty tea tin he was exam-

ining. It was one of our new spring-patterned ones, with cherry blossoms on it.

“Did you brew it right, Darius?” Mr. Apatan asked behind me.

Mr. Apatan was even shorter than Fatty Bolger, but somehow he managed to take up more space as he stepped between us to fill a sample cup of his own.

Fatty winked at me. “Catch you later. D-Bag.”

D-Bag.

My newest suggestive nickname.

It was only a matter of time.

Trent nodded at Chip, who grinned and waved innocently at me, as if he hadn’t just played accomplice to my humiliation. They jostled each other out the door, laughing.

“Thank you for visiting Tea Haven,” I said. “Come again soon.”

The Corporate Mandated Farewell.

“Did he just call you tea bag?” Mr. Apatan asked.

“No.”

“Did you tell him about our mesh baskets?”

I nodded.

“Hmm.” He slurped his sample. “Well, this is right. Good job, Darius.”

“Thanks.”

I had done nothing worthy of praise. Anyone could brew Orange Blossom Awesome.

That was the whole point and purpose of Tea Haven.

“Was that a friend of yours from school?”

Clearly the nuances of my interaction with Fatty Bolger, the World's Most Boring Hobbit, were lost on Charles Apatan.

"Next time, have him try the Blueberry Bliss."

"Okay."

## TRUCK NUTS

The bike rack for the Shoppes at Fairview Court was located at the far end of the shopping center, right outside one of those clothing stores that catered to Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy like Fatty Bolger and Chip Cusumano. The kind that had pictures of shirtless guys with abdomens that could only be expressed in integers.

Five different kinds of overpowering cologne waged war in my sinuses as I passed the store. When I made it out into the parking lot, the sun was still up, barely, but the mercury lights had come on. The air smelled dry and vacant after weeks of rain.

I had been riding my bike from Chapel Hill High School to the Tea Haven at the Shoppes at Fairview Court ever since I got the job. It was easier than getting a ride from either of my parents.

But when I got to the bike rack, my bicycle was gone.

Upon closer inspection, that was not technically true—only part of my bike was gone. The frame was there, but the wheels were missing. The bike slumped against the post, held on by my lock.

The seat was missing too, and whoever had taken it had left some sort of blue blob in its place.

Well, it was not a blue blob. It was a pair of blue rubber testicles.

I had never seen blue rubber testicles before, but I knew right away where they had come from.

Like I said, there was no Zero Tolerance Policy toward bullying at the Shoppes at Fairview Court. There was one toward stealing, but apparently that didn't cover bicycle seats.

My backpack sagged on my shoulders.

I had to call my dad.

"Darius? Is everything okay?"

Dad always said that. Not *Hi, Darius*, but *Is everything okay?*

"Hey. Can you come pick me up from work?"

"Did something happen?"

It was humiliating, telling my father about the blue rubber testicles, especially because I knew he would laugh.

"Really? You mean like truck nuts?"

"What are truck nuts?"

"People hook them on the hitch of their truck, so it looks like the truck has testicles."

The back of my neck prickled.

In the course of our phone call, my father and I had used the word *testicles* more than was healthy for any father-son relationship.

"All right, I'll be there in a bit. Did you get the goldfish?"

"Um."

Dad breathed a Level Five Disappointed Sigh.

My ears burned. "I'll go grab them now."

"Hey, son."

Dad got out of his car and helped me load my wheel-less, seat-less bike into the trunk of his Audi.

Stephen Kellner loved his Audi.

"Hi, Dad."

“What happened to the truck nuts?”

“I threw them away.”

I did not need the reminder.

Dad pressed the button to close the trunk and got back in. I tossed my backpack onto the backseat and then slumped in the passenger seat with the goldfish suspended in their plastic prison between my legs.

“I almost didn’t believe you.”

“I know.”

It had taken him thirty minutes to come get me.

We only lived a ten-minute drive away.

“Sorry about your bike. Does security know who did it?”

I buckled my seat belt. “No. But I’m sure it was Trent Bolger.”

Dad put the Audi in drive and took off down the parking lot.

Stephen Kellner liked to drive much too fast, because his Audi had lots of horsepower and he could do that kind of thing: Accelerate to escape velocity, slam the brakes when he had to (in order to avoid running over a toddler holding his brand-new Build-a-Bear), and then accelerate again.

Thankfully, the Audi had all sorts of flashing lights and sensors, so it could sound Red Alert when a collision was imminent.

Dad kept his eyes on the road. “What makes you think it was Trent?”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to tell my father the entire humiliating saga.

“Darius?”

Stephen Kellner never took no for an answer.

I told him about Trent and Chip, but only in the broadest strokes. I avoided mentioning Trent’s references to tea-bagging.



I did not want to talk to Stephen Kellner about testicles ever again.

“That’s it?” Dad shook his head. “How do you know it was them, then?”

I knew, but that never mattered to Stephen Kellner, Devil’s Advocate.

“Never mind, Dad.”

“You know, if you just stood up for yourself, they’d leave you alone.”

I sucked on the tassels of my hoodie.

Stephen Kellner didn’t understand anything about the socio-political dynamics of Chapel Hill High School.

As we turned onto the freeway, he said, “You need a haircut.”

I scratched the back of my head. “It’s not that long.” My hair barely touched my shoulders, though part of that was how it curled away at the ends.

That didn’t matter, though. Stephen Kellner had very short, very straight, very blond hair, and he had very blue eyes too.

My father was pretty much the *Übermensch*.

I did not inherit any of Dad’s good looks.

Well, people said I had his “strong jawline,” whatever that meant. But really, I mostly looked like Mom, with black, loosely curled hair and brown eyes.

Standard Persian.

Some people said Dad had Aryan looks, which always made him uncomfortable. The word *Aryan* used to mean noble—it’s an old Sanskrit word, and Mom says it’s actually the root word for Iran—but it means something different now.

Sometimes I thought about how I was half Aryan and half Aryan, but I guess that made me kind of uncomfortable too.

Sometimes I thought about how strange it was that a word could change its meaning so drastically.

Sometimes I thought about how I didn't really feel like Stephen Kellner's son at all.

## THE DISTINGUISHED PICARD CRESCENT

**D**espite what boring Hobbits like Fatty Bolger might have thought, I did not go home and have falafel for dinner.

First of all, falafel is not really a Persian food. Its mysterious origins are lost to a prior age of this world. Whether it came from Egypt or Israel or somewhere else entirely, one thing is certain: Falafel is not Persian.

Second, I did not like falafel because I was categorically opposed to beans. Except jelly beans.

I changed out of my Tea Haven shirt and joined my family at the dinner table. Mom had made spaghetti and meat sauce—perhaps the least Persian food ever, though she did add a bit of turmeric to the sauce, which gave a slight orange cast to the oil in it.

Mom only ever cooked Persian food on the weekends, because pretty much every Persian menu was a complicated affair involving several hours of stewing, and she didn't have the time to devote to a stew when she was overwhelmed with a Level Six Coding Emergency.

Mom was a UX designer at a firm in downtown Portland, which sounded incredibly cool. Except I didn't really understand what it was that Mom actually did.

Dad was a partner in an architecture firm that mostly designed museums and concert halls and other “centerpieces for urban living.”

Most nights, we ate dinner at a round, marble-topped table in the corner of the kitchen, all four of us arranged in a little circle: Mom across from Dad, and me across from my little sister, Laleh, who was in second grade.

While I twirled spaghetti around my fork, Laleh launched into a detailed description of her day, including a complete play-by-play of the game of Heads Down, Thumbs Up they played after lunch, in which Laleh was “it” three different times.

She was only in second grade, with an even more Persian name than mine, and yet she was way more popular than I was.

I didn’t get it.

“Park never guessed it was me,” Laleh said. “He never guesses right.”

“It’s because you have such a good poker face,” I said.

“Probably.”

I loved my little sister. Really.

It was impossible not to.

It wasn’t the kind of thing I could ever say to anyone. Not out loud, at least. I mean, guys are not supposed to love their little sisters. We can look out for them. We can intimidate whatever dates they bring home, although I hoped that was still a few years away for Laleh. But we can’t say we love them. We can’t admit to having tea parties or playing dolls with them, because that’s unmanly.

But I did play dolls with Laleh. And I had tea parties with her (though I insisted we serve real tea, not imaginary tea, and certainly not anything from Tea Haven). And I was not ashamed of it.

I just didn’t tell anyone about it.

That's normal.  
Right?

At last, Laleh's story ran out of steam, and she began scooping spaghetti into her mouth with her spoon. My sister always cut her spaghetti up instead of twirling it, which I felt defeated the point and purpose of spaghetti.

I used the lull in conversation to reach across the table for more pasta, but Dad pressed the salad bowl into my hands instead.

There was no point arguing with Stephen Kellner about dietary indiscretions.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

Salad was inferior to spaghetti in every possible way.

After dinner, Dad washed the dishes and I dried them while I waited for my electric kettle to reach 180° Fahrenheit, which is what I liked for steeping my genmaicha.

Genmaicha is a Japanese green tea with toasted rice in it. Sometimes the toasted rice pops like popcorn, leaving little white fluffy clouds in the tea. It's grassy and nutty and delicious, kind of like pistachios. And it's the same greenish yellow color as pistachios too.

No one else in my family drank genmaicha. No one ever drank anything besides Persian tea. Mom and Dad would sniff and sip sometimes, if I made a cup of something and begged them to taste it, but that was it.

My parents didn't know genmaicha had toasted rice in it, mostly because I didn't want Mom to know. Persians have very

strong feelings about the proper applications of rice. No True Persian ever popped theirs.

When the dishes were done, Dad and I settled in for our nightly tradition. We sank into the tan suede couch shoulder to shoulder—the only time we ever sat like this—and Dad cued up our next episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Every night, Dad and I watched exactly one episode of *Star Trek*. We watched them in broadcast order, starting with *The Original Series*, though things got complicated after the fifth season of *The Next Generation*, since its sixth season overlapped *Deep Space Nine*.

I had long since seen every episode of each series, even *The Animated Series*. Probably more than once, though watching with Dad stretched back to when I was little, and my memory was a bit hazy. But that didn't matter.

One episode a night, every night.

That was our thing.

It felt good to have a thing with Dad, when I could have him to myself for forty-seven minutes, and he could act like he enjoyed my company for the span of one episode.

Tonight, it was “Who Watches the Watchers?” which is an episode from the third season where a pre-warp culture starts to worship Captain Picard as a deity called The Picard.

I could understand their impulse.

Captain Picard was, without doubt, the best captain from *Star Trek*. He was smart; he loved “Tea. Earl Grey. Hot.”; and he had the best voice ever: deep and resonant and British.

My own voice was far too squeaky to ever captain a starship.

Not only that, but he was bald and still managed to be confident, which was good, because I had seen pictures of the men on my mom's side of the family, and they all shared the distinguished Picard Crescent.

I didn't take after Stephen Kellner, Teutonic Übermensch, in many ways, but I hoped I would keep a full head of hair like his, even if mine was black and curly. And needed a haircut, according to Übermensch standards.

Sometimes I thought about getting the sides faded, or maybe growing my hair out and doing a man-bun.

That would drive Stephen Kellner crazy.

Captain Picard was delivering his first monologue of the episode when the *doot-doot* klaxon of Mom's computer rang through the house. She was getting a video call. Dad paused the show for a second and glanced up the stairs.

"Uh-oh," he said. "We're being hailed." Dad smiled at me, and I smiled back. Dad and I never smiled at each other—not really—but we were still in our magic forty-seven-minute window where the normal rules didn't apply.

Dad preemptively turned up the volume on the TV. Sure enough, after a second, Mom started yelling in Farsi at her computer.

"Jamsheed!" Mom shouted. I could hear her even over the musical swell right before the act break.

For some reason, whenever she was talking over the computer, Mom had to make sure the sound of her voice reached low Earth orbit.

“Chetori toh?” she bellowed. That’s Farsi for “How are you,” but only if you are familiar with the person you are speaking to, or older than them. Farsi has different ways of talking to people, depending on the formality of the situation and your relationship to the person you’re addressing.

The thing about Farsi is, it’s a very deep language: deeply specific, deeply poetic, deeply context-sensitive.

For instance, take my Mom’s oldest brother, Jamsheed.

*Dayi* is the word for uncle. But not just uncle, a specific uncle: your mother’s brother. And it’s not only the word for uncle—it’s also the relationship between you and your uncle. So I could call Dayi Jamsheed my *dayi*, but he could call me *dayi* also, as a term of endearment.

My knowledge of Farsi consisted of four primary vectors: (1) familial relations; (2) food words, because Mom always called the Persian food she cooked by its proper name; (3) tea words, because, well, I’m me; and (4) politeness phrases, the sort you learn in middle school foreign language classes, though no middle school in Portland has ever offered Farsi as an option.

The truth was, my Farsi was abysmal. I never really learned growing up.

“I didn’t think you’d ever use it,” Mom told me when I asked her why, which didn’t make any sense, because Mom had Persian friends here in the States, plus all her family back in Iran.

Unlike me, Laleh did speak Farsi, pretty much fluently. When she was a baby, Mom talked to her in Farsi, and had all her friends do the same. Laleh grew up with the ear for it—the uvular fricatives and alveolar trills that I could never get quite right.



When she was a baby, I tried to talk to Laleh in Farsi too. But I never really got the hang of it, and Mom's friends kept correcting me, so after a while I kind of gave up. After that, me and Dad talked to Laleh exclusively in English.

It always seemed like Farsi was this special thing between Mom and Laleh, like *Star Trek* was between Dad and me.

That left the two of us in the dark whenever we were at gatherings with Mom's friends. That was the only time Dad and I were on the same team: when we were stuck with Farsi-speakers and left with each other for company. But even when that happened, we just ended up standing around in a Level Seven Awkward Silence.

Stephen Kellner and I were experts at High Level Awkward Silences.

Laleh flounced onto the couch on Dad's other side and tucked her feet underneath her butt, disturbing the gravitational fields on the couch so Dad leaned away from me and toward her. Dad paused the show. Laleh never watched *Star Trek* with us. It was me and Dad's thing.

"What's up, Laleh?" Dad asked.

"Mom's talking to Dayi Jamsheed," she said. "He's at Mamou and Babou's house right now."

Mamou and Babou were Mom's parents. Their real names were Fariba and Ardeshir, but we always called them Mamou and Babou.

*Mamou* and *babou* mean mother and father in Dari, which is the dialect my grandparents spoke growing up Zoroastrian in Yazd.

“Stephen! Laleh! Darius!” Mom’s voice carried from upstairs.  
“Come say hello!”

Laleh sprang from the couch and ran back upstairs.

I looked at Dad, who shrugged, and we both followed my sister up to the office.

## MOBY THE WHALE

**M**y grandmother loomed large on the monitor, her head tiny and her torso enormous.

I only ever saw my grandparents from an up-the-nose perspective.

She was talking to Laleh in rapid-fire Farsi, something about school, I thought, because Laleh kept switching from Farsi to English for words like *cafeteria* and *Heads-Down, Thumbs-Up*.

Mamou's picture kept freezing and unfreezing, occasionally turning into chunky blocks as the bandwidth fluctuated.

It was like a garbled transmission from a starship in distress.

"Maman," Mom said, "Darius and Stephen want to say hello."

*Maman* is another Farsi word that means both a person and a relationship—in this case, mother. But it could also mean grandmother, even though technically that would be *mamanbozorg*.

I was pretty sure *maman* was borrowed from French, but Mom would neither confirm nor deny.

Dad and I knelt on the floor to squeeze our faces into the camera shot, while Laleh sat on Mom's lap in her rolling office chair.

"Eh! Hi, maman! Hi, Stephen! How are you?"

"Hi, Mamou," Dad said.

"Hi," I said.

"I miss you, maman. How is your school? How is work?"

"Um." I never knew how to talk to Mamou, even though I was happy to see her.

It was like I had this well inside me, but every time I saw Mamou, it got blocked up. I didn't know how to let my feelings out.

"School is okay. Work is good. Um."

"How is Babou?" Dad asked.

"You know, he is okay," Mamou said. She glanced at Mom and said, "Jamsheed took him to the doctor today."

As she said it, my uncle Jamsheed appeared over her shoulder. His bald head looked even tinier. "Eh! Hi, Darioush! Hi, Laleh! Chetori toh?"

"Khoobam, merci," Laleh said, and before I knew it, she had launched into her third retelling of her latest game of Heads-Down, Thumbs-Up.

Dad smiled and waved and stood up. My knees were getting sore, so I did the same, and edged toward the door.

Mom nodded along with Laleh and laughed at all the right spots while I followed Dad back down to the living room.

It wasn't like I didn't want to talk to Mamou.

I always wanted to talk to her.

But it was hard. It didn't feel like she was half a world away, it felt like she was half a universe away—like she was coming to me from some alternate reality.

It was like Laleh belonged to that reality, but I was just a guest.

I suppose Dad was a guest too.

At least we had that in common.

Dad and I sat all the way through the ending credits—that was

part of the tradition too—and then Dad went upstairs to check on Mom.

Laleh had wandered back down during the last few minutes of the show, but she stood by the Haft-Seen, watching the goldfish swim in their bowl.

Dad makes us turn our end table into a Haft-Seen on March 1 every year. And every year, Mom tells him that's too early. And every year, Dad says it's to get us in the Nowruz spirit, even though Nowruz—the Persian New Year—isn't until the first day of spring.

Most Haft-Seens have vinegar and sumac and sprouts and apples and pudding and dried olives and garlic on them—all things that start with the sound of *S* in Farsi. Some people add other things that don't begin with *S* to theirs too: symbols of renewal and prosperity, like mirrors and bowls of coins. And some families—like ours—have goldfish too. Mom said it had something to do with the zodiac and Pisces, but then she admitted that if it weren't for Laleh, who loved taking care of the goldfish, she wouldn't include them at all.

Sometimes I thought Dad liked Nowruz more than the rest of us combined.

Maybe it let him feel a little bit Persian.

Maybe it did.

So our Haft-Seen was loaded with everything tradition allowed, plus a framed photo of Dad in the corner. Laleh insisted we had to add it, because *Stephen* begins with the sound of *S*.

It was hard to argue with my sister's logic.

"Darius?"

"Yeah?"

“This goldfish only has one eyeball!”

I knelt next to Laleh as she pointed at the fish in question.

“Look!”

It was true. The largest fish, a leviathan nearly the size of Laleh’s hand, only had its right eye. The left side of its head—face—(do fish have faces?)—was all smooth, unbroken orange scales.

“You’re right,” I said. “I didn’t notice that.”

“I’m going to name him Ahab.”

Since Laleh was in charge of feeding the fish, she had also taken upon herself the solemn duty of naming them.

“Captain Ahab had one leg, not one eye,” I pointed out. “But it’s a good literary reference.”

Laleh looked up at me, her eyes big and round. I was kind of jealous of Laleh’s eyes. They were huge and blue, just like Dad’s. Everyone always said how beautiful Laleh’s eyes were.

No one ever told me I had beautiful brown eyes, except Mom, which didn’t count because (a) I had inherited them from her, and (b) she was my mom, so she had to say that kind of thing. Just like she had to call me handsome when that wasn’t true at all.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” I said. “I promise. Ahab is a good name. And I’m proud of you for knowing it. It’s from a very famous book.”

“Moby the Whale!”

“Right.”

I could not bring myself to say *Moby-Dick* in front of my little sister.

“What about the others?”

“He’s Simon.” She pointed to the smallest fish. “And he’s Garfunkel. And that’s Bob.”

I wondered how Laleh was certain they were male fish.

I wondered how people identified male fish from female fish.

I decided I didn’t want to know.

“Those are all good names. I like them.” I leaned down to kiss Laleh on the head. She squirmed but didn’t try that hard to get away. Just like I had to pretend I didn’t like having tea parties with my little sister, Laleh had to pretend she didn’t like kisses from her big brother, but she wasn’t very good at pretending yet.

I took my empty cup of genmaicha to the kitchen and washed and dried it by hand. Then I filled a regular glass with water from the fridge and went to the cabinet where we kept everyone’s medicine. I sorted through the orange capsules until I found my own.

“Mind grabbing mine?” Dad asked from the door.

“Sure.”

Dad stepped into the kitchen and slid the door closed. It was this heavy wooden door, on a track so that it slid into a slot right behind the oven. I didn’t know anyone else who had a door like that.

When I was little, and Dad had just introduced me to *Star Trek*, I liked to call it the Turbolift Door. I played with it all the time, and Dad played too, calling out deck numbers for the computer to take us to like we were really on board the *Enterprise*.

Then I accidentally slid the door shut on my fingers, really hard, and ended up sobbing for ten minutes in pain and shock that the door had betrayed me.

I had a very sharp memory of Dad yelling at me to stop crying so he could examine my hand, and how I wouldn't let him hold it because I was afraid he was going to make it worse.

Dad and I didn't play with the door anymore after that.

I pulled down Dad's bottle and set it on the counter, then popped the lid off my own and shook out my pills.

Dad and I both took medication for depression.

Aside from *Star Trek*—and not speaking Farsi—depression was pretty much the only thing we had in common. We took different medications, but we did see the same doctor, which I thought was kind of weird. I guess I was paranoid Dr. Howell would talk about me to my dad, even though I knew he wasn't supposed to do that kind of thing. And Dr. Howell was always honest with me, so I tried not to worry so much.

I took my pills and gulped down the whole glass of water. Dad stood next to me, watching, like he was worried I was going to choke. He had this look on his face, the same disappointed look he had when I told him about how Fatty Bolger had replaced my bicycle's seat with blue truck nuts.

He was ashamed of me.

He was ashamed of us.

Übermensches aren't supposed to need medication.

Dad swallowed his pills dry; his prominent Teutonic Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he did it. And then he turned to me and said, "So, you heard that Babou went to the doctor today?"

He looked down. A Level Three Awkward Silence began to coalesce around us, like interstellar hydrogen pulled together by gravity to form a new nebula.



“Yeah. Um.” I swallowed. “For his tumor?”

I still felt weird saying the word out loud.

Tumor.

Babou had a brain tumor.

Dad glanced at the turbolift door, which was still closed, and then back to me. “His latest tests didn’t look good.”

“Oh.” I had never met Babou in person, only over a computer screen. And he never really talked to me. He spoke English well enough, and what few words I could extract from him were accented but articulate.

He just didn’t have much to say to me.

I guess I didn’t have much to say to him either.

“He’s not going to get better, Darius. I’m sorry.”

I twisted my glass between my hands.

I was sorry too. But not as sorry as I should have been. And I felt kind of terrible for it.

The thing is, my grandfather’s presence in my life had been purely photonic up to that point. I didn’t know how to be sad about him dying.

Like I said, the well inside me was blocked.

“What happens now?”

“Your mom and I talked it over,” Dad said. “We’re going to Iran.”

## SLINGSHOT MANEUVERS

It wasn't like we could drop everything and leave the next day.

Mom and Dad knew it might happen. But we still had to get plane tickets and visas and everything.

So it was a couple weeks later when I sat down at the lunch table and announced, "We're leaving tomorrow."

I immediately executed Evasive Pattern Beta, a swift dodge to the left. My lunch companion, Javaneh Esfahani, tended to spray Dr Pepper out her nostrils if I surprised her at the lunch table.

Javaneh sneezed twice—she always sneezed twice after spraying Dr Pepper out of her nose—and wiped her face with one of the cafeteria-issue brown paper towels. She tucked a lock of hair blown loose by her violent sinus eruptions back into her headscarf.

Javaneh always wore her headscarf at Chapel Hill High School, which I thought was very brave. The sociopolitical landscape of Chapel Hill High School was treacherous enough without giving people an excuse to pick on you.

Javaneh Esfahani was a lioness.

She blinked at me. "Tomorrow? That's fast. You're serious?"

"Yeah. We got our visas and everything."

"Wow."

I mopped up the carbonated explosion on the table while Javaneh sipped her Dr Pepper through a straw.

Javaneh Esfahani claimed she was physiologically incapable

of burping, so she always used a straw to drink her Dr Pepper from the can. To be honest, I wasn't sure that was really a thing—being physiologically incapable of burping—but Javaneh was the closest thing I had to a friend at Chapel Hill High School, so I didn't want to risk alienating her by prying too deeply.

Javaneh had the smooth, olive-toned look of a True Persian, arched eyebrows and all. I was kind of jealous of her—Mom had inherited Mamou's pale coloring, which meant I didn't even get a half dose of Persian melanin—but then again, Javaneh was constantly getting asked where she was from, something I mostly avoided until people learned my first name.

She grabbed a tater tot. "I've always wanted to see Iran. But my parents don't want to risk it."

"Yeah. My mom didn't either, but . . ."

"I can't believe you're really going. You're going to be there for Nowruz!" Javaneh shook her head. "But won't you miss Chaharshanbeh Suri?"

"They were the cheapest tickets," I said. "Besides. We might fly over a fire. That counts, right?"

Chaharshanbeh Suri is the Tuesday night before Nowruz. Which is weird since *Chaharshanbeh* technically means Wednesday. But I guess it sort of means the night before Wednesday. Either way, the traditional way to celebrate Chaharshanbeh Suri is with fire jumping.

(And a mountain of Persian food. There are no Persian celebrations that do not involve enough Persian food to feed the entire Willamette Valley.)

Mom and Dad always took us to the Chaharshanbeh Suri celebration at Oaks Park, where all the True Persians and Fractional Persians and Persians-by-Marriage—regardless of faith—gathered every year for a huge nighttime picnic and bonfire approved by the Fire Marshall of the City of Portland.

Stephen Kellner, with his long legs and Teutonic jumping strength, was an excellent fire jumper.

I was not a fan.

According to family legend, when I was two years old, Dad tried to hold me in his arms as he jumped over the fire, but I wailed and cried so much, he and Mom had to abandon the celebration of Chaharshanbeh Suri and take me home.

Dad didn't try it again. Not until Laleh came along. When Dad held her in his arms and jumped over the fire, she squealed and laughed and clapped and demanded to go again.

My sister was a lot braver than me.

Truth be told, I was not that sad to miss Chaharshanbeh Suri. I was much more comfortable flying over a bonfire at 32,000 feet than I was jumping over one, even if it did deprive Stephen Kellner of another excellent opportunity to be disappointed in me.

After lunch, I headed to the nurse's office. Because of Chapel Hill High School's strict Zero Tolerance Policy toward drugs, the school nurse had to dispense all medications for Chapel Hill High School students.

Mrs. Killinger handed me the little crinkly paper cup with my pill in it. It was the kind used in every mental institution in every movie and television show ever.

Except *Star Trek*, of course, because they used hyposprays to deliver medication directly through the skin in compressed air streams.

There were slightly larger crinkly paper cups for water, which I poured from the drinking fountain in the corner of Mrs. Killinger's office. I couldn't bend over a drinking fountain and take medication that way; I either choked or accidentally spit my pills all over the basin. And I couldn't dry-swallow my pills like Stephen Kellner either; the one time I tried, I got a Prozac lodged in the back of my throat and spent five minutes trying to hack it back up, while it slowly dissolved into skunky powder in my esophagus.

That was before Dr. Howell switched me off Prozac, which gave me mood swings so extreme, they were more like Mood Slingshot Maneuvers, powerful enough to fling me around the sun and accelerate me into a time warp.

I was only on Prozac for three months before Dr. Howell switched me, but it was pretty much the worst three months in the Search for the Right Medication.

Dad never really talked about his own diagnosis for depression. It was lost to the histories of a prior age of this world. All he ever said was that it happened when he was in college, and that his medication had kept him healthy for years, and that I shouldn't worry about it. It wasn't a big deal.

By the time I was diagnosed, and Dr. Howell was trying to find some combination of medications to treat me properly, Stephen Kellner had been managing his depression so long that he couldn't remember what it was like. Or maybe he'd never had

Mood Slingshot Maneuvers in the first place. Maybe his medication had recalibrated his brain right away, and he was back to being a high-functioning Übermensch in no time.

My own brain was much harder to recalibrate. Prozac was the third medication Dr. Howell tried me on, back when I was in eighth grade. And I was on it for six weeks before I experienced my first Slingshot Maneuver, when I freaked out at a kid in my Boy Scouts troop named Vance Henderson, who had made a joke about Mom's accent.

I'd been dealing with jokes like that my entire life—well, ever since I started school, anyway—so it was nothing new. But that time it set me off like a high-yield quantum torpedo.

It was the only time in my life I have ever hit anyone.

I felt very sorry for myself afterward.

And then I felt angry. I really hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping and I hated the other boys, who were all on their way to becoming Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy.

And then I felt ashamed.

I made a lot of Mood Slingshot Maneuvers that afternoon.

But I wasn't ashamed of standing up for Mom, even if it did mean hitting Vance Henderson. Even if it did mean leaving a perfect red palm-print on his face.

Dad was so disappointed.

## A NON-PASSIVE FAILURE

Chapel Hill High School had two gymnasiums, supposedly called the Main Gym and the Little Gym, but most of us called them the Boys' Gym and the Girls' Gym, because the boys were always in the larger Main Gym.

This, despite Chapel Hill High School's Zero Tolerance Policy toward sexism.

I was halfway down the stairs to gym when I heard him: Chip Cusumano.

I kept my head down and took the stairs faster, swinging myself around the rail as I reached the landing.

"Hey," he called from behind. "Hey! Darius!"

I ignored him and went faster.

"Wait!" Chip shouted again, his voice echoing off the concrete walls of the stairwell. I had just hit the last landing when he tugged on my backpack.

"Let go."

"Just—"

"Leave me alone, Chip." I jerked forward to loosen his grip.

Instead, my backpack experienced a non-passive failure, splitting across the seam holding the main pocket together. My books and papers spilled down the stairs, but at least my tablet stayed Velcroed in.

"Oh."

"Really, Chip?" I knelt and grabbed for my papers before someone could kick them away. "Thanks. Thanks a lot."

“Sorry.” Chip handed me a book from a few steps down. He had this goofy grin on his face as he shook the hair out of his eyes. “I was just gonna tell you your backpack was open.”

“Wasn’t my bike enough?”

“Hey. That was just a joke.”

“Me not having a bike anymore is a joke to you?”

“What are you talking about? Your tires were right in the bushes.”

I glared at him.

How was I supposed to know that?

“You never found them?”

“Leave me alone, Chip.”

The warning bell rang: One minute to make it to class.

“Come on, man. Let me help.”

“Go away.” There was no way I was going to trust Cyprian Cusumano to help me.

He shrugged and stood. “Okay. I’ll tell Coach Fortes you’ll be late.”

I got all my papers into a mostly straight pile and sandwiched them between my econ and geometry books.

My backpack was totally unsalvageable: With the seam blown out, the straps had failed as well. The only usable part was the pouch in front holding my pencils.

The tardy bell rang. I knotted the two loose straps together so I could sling the derelict hulk of my backpack over my shoulder like a satchel, gathered my stuff up, and hurried to gym.

Coach Fortes shook his head when he saw my pile of books and the remains of my backpack. “Cusumano told me,” he said.



Why do gym teachers always call guys by their last names?

“Sorry, Coach.”

Why do guys always call their gym teachers Coach and leave off their name?

“It’s fine. Go get dressed.”

We were doing our Net Sports Unit, which meant two weeks of Badminton, two weeks of Ping-Pong/Table Tennis, and the grande finale: two weeks of Volleyball.

I was terrible at Net Sports. I wasn’t that good at any form of sportsball, really, although I used to play soccer when I was a kid. I did better at the ones where I could at least run around, because I was not bad at running. I had a lot of stamina and I was pretty fast, which surprised people since I was kind of overweight.

Well. Not kind of. I was overweight, period, which is why Stephen Kellner was always handing me the salad bowl.

As if salad would counteract the weight gain from my meds.

As if lack of discipline was the root of all my problems.

As if all the worry about my weight didn’t make me feel worse than I already did.

I pulled on my gym clothes—black swishy shorts and a red Chapel Hill Chargers T-shirt—and ran out to join warm-ups. I caught the tail end of sit-ups, and then we had to run laps for five minutes.

Chip Cusumano caught up with me on our third lap. “Hey, D,” he said.

Now that he was at Chapel Hill High School, with an enforced Zero Tolerance Policy toward bullying, he couldn’t add the *-Bag*.

I ran faster, and Chip kept pace with me, but at least he wasn't smiling anymore. "I was just gonna tell you your zipper was open. I didn't mean to split your backpack."

"Whatever. At least you can't hide truck nuts in it."

"And I'm sorry about your bike. Really."

I almost believed him.

Almost.

Unlike the rest of the Net Sports Unit, which was haphazardly arranged, we had assigned teams for volleyball. Coach Fortes set us up to play tournament-style. There were no eliminations, but the team with the best record would get extra credit.

I did not understand the point and purpose of assigning extra credit to the winners when they were—statistically speaking—the most likely to be athletic types and therefore the least likely to need the extra credit.

Me being me, I was stuck on a team with Fatty Bolger, which gave him even more opportunities to joke about balls flying at my face.

Like I said. At least he was predictable.

Trent served first—he always served first—and we bump-set-spiked back and forth, while I tried to stay out of Trent's way, because he was a very intense volleyball player. He was especially intense since we were playing against Chip's team. Despite being best friends, Chip and Trent battled like Emotionally Compromised Vulcans when they were on opposing teams.

I didn't get that at all. If I'd had a best friend—Javaneh was my closest friend, but we weren't anything approaching best

friends—we would have always been on the same team. Not in the sense of a Net Sports team, but in the sense that I'd be happy for them if they won, and they'd be happy for me if I won.

Fatty elbowed me out of the way to set the ball for Craig, who was in front of us, to spike.

"Get with the program, Kellner!" Coach Fortes shouted.

I was with the program. It's just that Fatty Bolger seemed to be operating a different version of it.

So the next time the ball came at me, I planted myself right under it, locked my elbows and bumped it.

But instead of going upward, the ball shot straight forward, right into the back of Craig's head.

I was terrible at Net Sports.

Craig looked back at me as he scooped up the ball.

"Sorry."

Craig shrugged and tossed the ball under the net to Chip, who was serving next.

"Watch where you're aiming," Trent said. "Terrorist."

This was not the first time I had been called a terrorist. It didn't happen often—no teacher let it slide if they heard it—but school was school, and I was a kid with Middle Eastern heritage, even though I was born and raised in Portland.

It didn't bother me that much.

Not really.

I mean, *D-Bag* was a lot worse.

*Terrorist* was so ridiculous that I could shrug it off.

Mom always said those kinds of jokes didn't bother her, because Persians couldn't be terrorists. No Persian can get up early enough in the morning to bomb anything.

I knew she said it because it really did bother her. But it was easier if we could make fun of ourselves about it. That way, when boring Hobbits like Fatty Bolger said things, it didn't matter. We had already made the joke ourselves.

I guess it actually did bother me.

Just a little bit.

## INTERMIX RATIO

“Hey, son. What happened to your backpack?”

I stuck my homework in the Audi’s backseat and got in front. “Structural integrity field collapse.”

Dad laughed at my *Star Trek* reference, and also because he was finally getting his wish: He had been after me to get a new backpack all semester. “Better at school than in the airport.”

“Chip Cusumano wouldn’t have been at the airport to rip it open.” I explained how it all happened, and Dad started shaking his head about halfway through the story.

“All you have to do is stand up to him.”

“I did. He didn’t listen.”

“He’s only doing it because he can tell he’s getting to you.”

I wondered if that’s why Dad treated me the way he did. Because he could tell he was getting to me.

Ever since my bicycle had been removed from active service, I had been taking the bus to school in the morning, and Dad had picked me up in the afternoon to drop me off at Tea Haven. His work schedule was a lot more flexible than Mom’s.

I think Dad and I got along as well as we did—which wasn’t that well, but still—because I didn’t see him that often, with school and then work in the evenings. And when I did see him, it was usually for dinner, when Mom or Laleh were around to provide a buffer, or for *Star Trek*, which was sacrosanct.

The extra time in the car was throwing off our carefully calibrated intermix ratio.

I really did like riding in Dad's Audi, though.

I just couldn't tell him that.

Dad shrugged and waited for an opening to pull away from the curb. "It'll be fine," he said. "We'll get you a new one when we get back. And I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding with Chip."

Stephen Kellner clearly didn't understand my social standing at Chapel Hill High School. He'd never had to deal with the Fatty Bolgers and Cyprian Cusumanos of the world.

Stephen Kellner was a Paragon of Teutonic Masculinity.

"I made us appointments to get haircuts." He turned right out of the parking lot, toward the Shoppes at Fairview Court.

I didn't have to work that night—Mr. Apatan had given me the last week off, to get ready for our trip—but that's where Dad usually got his hair cut.

"Um," I said. "I'm fine."

"You need a haircut." Dad waved his hand up and down in my direction. "This is out of control."

"I like it like this. It's not even that long."

"It's nearly as long as your sister's. What kind of example are you setting for her?"

"No it's not." I mean, maybe it was technically, because my head was larger than Laleh's, but proportionally my hair was still shorter.

"You could at least get it trimmed."

"It's my hair, Dad," I said. "Why is it such a big deal to you, anyway?"

"Because it's ridiculous. Did you ever think that you wouldn't get picked on so much if you weren't so . . ."

Dad worked his jaw back and forth.

“So what, Dad?”

But he didn’t answer.

What could he possibly say?

I waited in the car while Dad stomped out and got his hair cut.

I couldn’t stand to be in the same place as him. I don’t think he could stand to be in the same place as me either.

When we got home, he stormed upstairs to his office without another word. I dropped my decommissioned backpack on the kitchen table and filled the kettle from the pitcher of filtered water I kept on the counter. I always used filtered water—it tasted way better than tap water—though Stephen Kellner liked to complain about the redundancy of keeping a pitcher of filtered water when the refrigerator already had a water filter built in.

Stephen Kellner complained about everything I liked.

In Russia, people use a samovar—a smaller version of Smaug the Voluminous—to heat a bunch of water, and then mix it with über-strong tea from a smaller pot. Persians have adopted that method too, except most Persians use a large kettle and a smaller pot you can stack on top, like a double boiler.

So, when the water boiled, I filled our teapot—a stainless steel one that came in a gift set with the kettle—with three scoops of our Persian tea blend and one sachet of Rose City Earl Grey tea. Mom called it her secret ingredient: It had enough bergamot in it to scent a teapot twice as large as ours, so whenever she had Persian guests they always complimented her on how fragrant her tea was.

I pulled down the cardamom jar, pulled out five pods, and stuck them beneath the jar.

*Whack, whack, whack!*

Maybe I was a little more enthusiastic about smashing hel than usual, after my fight with Dad.

Maybe I was.

I dropped the crushed pods into the pot, filled it with water, and waited for it to finish damming.

Mom picked up Laleh on her way home from work. She went upstairs to pack, while I had tea with Laleh, which was our tradition when I didn't have to work after school.

Laleh always took her tea with three cubes of sugar and one cube of ice, and she always clanged the teaspoon against the sides of her glass teacup as she stirred. Somehow, no matter how hard or how vigorously Laleh stirred, she never slopped tea over the sides of her glass or spilled on herself. I didn't know how she did it.

I still spilled tea on myself at least once a week.

Laleh took a tentative sip, holding her tea with both hands.

"Too hot?"

She smacked her lips. "Nope."

I didn't understand how Laleh could drink lukewarm tea.

"Taste good?"

"Yeah." She took another slurp.

It was nice, sharing tea with Laleh. I didn't get to see her that much on work nights, but like I said, Mr. Apatan had given me the week off. Despite his frustrating literal-mindedness, Mr. Apatan was a pretty cool boss.



“It’s your first time going home?” he had asked.

“Uh.” I thought it was interesting, how he had called it *home*.

I wondered why he called it that. What made him call Iran home, when he knew I was born and raised in Portland.

“It’s my first time to Iran.”

“It’s so important, you know? To see where you came from.” Mr. Apatan was born in Manila, and he still went to visit once a year. “You have a lot of family there?”

“Yeah. My mom has two brothers. And her parents.”

“Good.” Mr. Apatan had peered at me over the top of his glasses. “Have a good trip, Darius.”

“Thanks.”

Mom ordered pizza for dinner, to avoid having a big mess to clean up before we left. It was a thin crust, half pepperoni, half pineapple.

Laleh loved pineapple on her pizza.

Normally, I was thrilled to get pizza—it was pretty much the best dietary indiscretion ever—but I could feel Dad watching me at every bite, flaring his nostrils.

First I had refused to cut my hair, and now I was eating pizza.

And there weren’t even any vegetables on it.

Laleh told us how her teacher had googled pictures of Iran to show the class where Laleh was going, which I thought was pretty cool.

“How about your day, Darius?” Mom asked.

“It was okay.”

“How were your classes?”

“Um. Econ was okay. Gym was okay.” I didn’t want to get

into being called a terrorist. "You heard about my backpack."

"What happened to your backpack?" Laleh asked.

"Uh. It broke."

"How?"

"Chip Cusumano broke it when he pulled on it too hard."

"That was rude!"

Dad huffed. Mom glared at him.

"Yeah," I agreed.

"Maybe if you . . ." Dad began, but Mom cut him off.

"We'll get you a new one when we get home. But your dad has a bag you can borrow. Right?"

Dad looked at Mom. It was like they were exchanging telepathic messages.

"Right. Sure."

I wasn't sure I wanted to borrow anything of Stephen Kellner's.

But I didn't have much choice.

We didn't watch *The Next Generation* that night. There wasn't time, with all the packing.

Besides, *Star Trek* was when we acted like we were a real father and son.

Neither of us felt like acting that night.

I was folding up my boxers when Mom hollered that Mamou and Babou were on Skype.

"Mamou, Babou," Mom said. "Darioush is here."

Mom did that sometimes: call me Darioush instead of Darius.

Darioush is the original Persian version of the name Darius.

I had made it my Priority One Goal in life never to let Trent

Bolger, or any of his Soulless Minions of Orthodoxy, learn the Persian pronunciation of my name, which was Darr-yoosh.

It was an even more imperative goal, now that I was D-Bag.

The opportunities for rhyming were too gruesome to consider.

I squeezed myself into frame, looming over Mom's shoulder. Mamou and Babou were squeezed next to each other in two seats. Babou sat back a bit, looking at the monitor over the rim of his glasses.

"Hi, maman!" Mamou said. Her smile looked ready to burst through the screen. "I'm so happy to see you soon."

"Me too. Um. Do you need anything from Portland?"

"No, thank you. Just you come."

"Okay. Hi, Babou."

"Hello, baba," my grandfather said. His voice was gravelly, and his accent was heavier than Mamou's. "Soon you will be here."

"Yeah. Um. Yeah."

Babou blinked at me. He didn't smile, not really, but he didn't frown either.

This is how most of my conversations with Babou went.

We didn't know how to talk to each other.

I studied my grandfather in the monitor. He didn't look any different. He had the same severe eyebrows, the mustache that quivered when he spoke, the distinguished Picard Crescent (though his was a bit fluffier, since his hair was curly like mine).

But according to Mom and Dad, he was dying.

I didn't know how to talk about that. About how sad I was. About how bad I felt.

And I didn't know how to tell him I was excited to finally meet him either.

I mean, you can't just tell your own grandfather "Nice to meet you."

I had his blood in me. His and Mamou's. They weren't strangers.

But I was about to meet them for the first time.

My chest started to clench up.

"Um." I swallowed. "I better go finish packing."

Babou cleared his throat. And then he said, "See you soon, Darioush."

## OLYMPUS MONS

Here's the thing:

No one should have to wake up at three o'clock in the morning.

My phone was set to play the *Enterprise's* RED ALERT sound as an alarm, but even with the klaxon going off, I wanted to pull the pillow over my head and go back to sleep.

But waking up at three in the morning wasn't even the worst part. That was waiting for me when I looked in the mirror.

My forehead had become host to an alien parasite: the biggest pimple I'd ever had in my entire life.

It was glowing red and ominous between my eyebrows like the Eye of Sauron, lidless and wreathed in flame. It was so massive, it emitted its own gravitational field.

I was certain that, if I popped it, the implosion would suck me, my family, and our whole house into a singularity we'd never escape.

But I did pop it. I couldn't travel with an alien organism inhabiting my face.

I swear it smelled like natural gas and pu-erh tea when it ruptured, which was weird and gross.

I never drank pu-erh. It was the one category of tea I could never learn to love. It smelled like compost and tasted like week-old sushi, no matter how many kinds I tried or how many steepings I did.

The pimple bled for a long time. I scrubbed at its remains in

the shower with my oil-control acne-fighting face wash, and my forehead was still stinging as I got dressed.

Without my backpack, I had to use one of Dad's messenger bags from work as my carry-on, or "personal item."

Like I said, I didn't understand the point and purpose of messenger bags. The one Dad lent me had his company logo on it: a stylized *K* and a stylized *N*, made out of scale rules and T-squares and drafting pencils, even though Kellner & Newton had been entirely digital since before I was born.

I'd packed my suitcase the night before, but I had left the Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag for the morning. That was a mistake.

Stephen Kellner of Kellner & Newton was not very pleasant at 3:30 in the morning. Especially since he was clearly still mad at me.

"Darius." He poked his head in my room. "We've got to go in thirty minutes. Why are you still packing?"

"It's just my carry-on. I'll be ready."

"Don't forget your passport. Or your meds."

I had already checked five different times that my passport was in the front pocket of the Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag. And I'd checked my meds three times.

I said, "I got it, Dad."

It was hard to fit books into the messenger bag. My backpack, of blessed memory, could fit four schoolbooks in it, but the Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag was clearly designed for product placement and not storage capacity. I was only able to squeeze one book in, sandwiched between the packets of homework I planned to do on the plane.

I chose *The Lord of the Rings*, since I hadn't read it in over a year, and it was long enough to last me a good portion of the trip.

I also had to fit in a pyramid tin from Rose City Teas: some loose leaf FTGFOP1 First Flush Darjeeling I bought as a gift for Mamou. It had this sort of fruity, floral scent, but the taste was smooth.

FTGFOP means Finest Tippy Golden Flowering Orange Pekoe, which is the highest grade of tea leaf, and the "1" means the very best of the FTGFOP leaves.

Mr. Apatan got mad if I ever mentioned tea grading at Tea Haven. He said it was "elitist."

I really hoped Mamou would like the tea. Persians are notoriously picky about their tea—like I said, I had to keep the ingredients in genmaicha a secret from my own mother—but I couldn't think of anything else that would make a nice enough gift.

It was hard to shop for someone I barely knew, even if it was my own grandmother.

"Darius!" Dad bellowed from downstairs.

"Coming!"

My sister did not function well at 4:30 in the morning, which is when we pulled into the parking garage at Portland International Airport.

I was grateful—grudgingly—for the Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag, because I was able to sling it in front of me and carry my sister piggyback through the airport until we reached security, while Mom and Dad pulled our luggage. It was windy,

and Laleh's fine hair kept blowing into my mouth. It smelled like strawberries, because of her shampoo, but it did not taste like strawberries at all.

"You got her?" Dad asked.

"Yeah. I'm good."

"Okay." Dad glanced at Laleh's sleeping face for a moment and then back at me. "Thanks, Darius."

"Sure."

The woman in front of us at the TSA Security Checkpoint was wearing knee-high combat boots. Who wears knee-high combat boots on an airplane? They were black leather, with steel toes and acid-green laces that ran from ankle to bony kneecap, where they ended in neon bunny ears.

Combat Boot Lady wore a too-large Seattle Seahawks jersey and a pair of sweat shorts, which I felt somehow explained everything.

The combat boots were too large for the gray plastic tubs, so Combat Boot Lady tossed them onto the conveyor belt behind her bin of less than 3.4 ounces of fluids (in a clear plastic bag) and stepped through the backscatter X-ray chamber.

The TSA agent at the scanner yawned and stretched so hard, I thought the buttons would pop off his uniform and fly everywhere. I could smell his coffee breath from the other side of the line.

He scratched his nose and nodded at Combat Boot Lady.

"Laleh." I jiggled her legs up and down where they rested in my elbows. "Time to wake up."

"I'm tired," Laleh said, but she let me put her down. She was still in her pajamas, except for her little white tennis shoes.



My sister had the cleanest white tennis shoes of any eight-year-old ever. I didn't know how she kept them so pristine.

"We can sleep on the plane. But you have to go through the scanner first."

I tossed my Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag on the conveyor belt, double-checked all my pockets, and waited for Laleh to get the all-clear so I could take my turn in the scanner.

I stood with my arms above my head and had to resist saying "Energize!"

I felt like I was on a transporter pad, except no one ever had to hold their hands above their head for three seconds on the *Enterprise*.

I was "randomly selected" for an enhanced screening after that, even though my messenger bag had nothing liquid, gel, or aerosol in it.

"Where are you headed?" asked the officer—a burly guy with dark, angular eyebrows and a round face—as he ran the little brown paper over my hands.

"Um. Yazd. I mean, we're flying into Tehran. But my grandfather lives in Yazd." The officer stared at me, still holding my palm with one of his blue-gloved hands, which made me nervous. "He has a brain tumor."

"Sorry to hear that." The machine beeped. "Good to go."

He threw away the paper swab and looked me over again.

"I didn't realize your people did the dot thing too."

"Um. The dot thing?"

"You know." He tapped his index finger against his forehead, right between his robust eyebrows.

I placed a fingertip in the same spot on my own forehead and

felt the scabbed-over ruins of Olympus Mons, which is what I had decided to name the remains of my pimple.

Olympus Mons is the highest peak on Mars. It's a volcano nearly sixteen miles high, and it takes up more square mileage than the entire state of Oregon. Technically, Olympus Mons would have been a better name for the pimple in its un-popped state, since the scab looked more like a crater than a volcano, but it was the best I could do at three in the morning.

"Um." My ears burned. "It was a pimple."

The officer laughed so hard, his face turned red.

It was deeply embarrassing.

## TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT

That morning, we flew from Portland to New York. Our connection to Dubai wasn't until the evening.

I slept all the way to JFK, with my head against the window and my knees pressed up against the seat in front of me. Since New York was three hours ahead of Portland, it was past lunch by the time we landed. We ate a cursory meal in the food court (I had a salad to appease Dad, who was unhappy I had finished off the cold pizza for breakfast), and then Laleh used the rest of our interminable layover to visit every single store and stall in JFK's Terminal 4.

Our flight to Dubai was fourteen hours, and we crossed another eight time zones. I was wide-awake. Laleh had acquired a bag of Sour Patch Kids while she browsed Terminal 4, and the combination of sugar and temporal distortion proved an incendiary one.

She turned around and stuck her face between her and Dad's seats, peppering Mom with questions about Iran, about Yazd, about Mamou and Babou. Where were we going to sleep? What were we going to do? What were we going to eat? When would we arrive? Who was going to get us at the airport?

A knot started forming, right in the middle of my solar plexus.

All those questions were making me nervous, because Laleh wasn't asking the really important questions.

What if they didn't let us in?

What if there was trouble at Customs?

What if it was weird?

What if no one liked us?

Laleh finally tired out at about midnight Portland time, though I had no idea what the local time was, or even what time zone we were in. She turned around and leaned against Dad's shoulder and fell asleep.

Mom played with my hair, twisting the curls around her fingers, as I steeped a sachet of Rose City's Sencha (a Japanese green tea) in the little paper cup of hot water I got from our flight attendant.

I pulled the sachet out and dropped it in the empty cup of water I'd used to take my medicine.

"Hey, Darius. Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure."

Mom pursed her lips and dropped her hand.

"Mom?"

"Sorry. I don't really know how to explain it. It's . . . I just want you to be prepared. People in Iran don't think about mental health the way we do back home."

"Um."

"So if anyone says anything to you, don't take it personally. Okay, sweetie?"

I blinked. "Okay."

Mom's hand returned to my head. I sipped my tea.

"Hey. Mom?"

"Hm?"

"Are you nervous?"

“A little.”

“Because of me and Dad?”

“No. Of course not.”

“How come, then?”

Mom smiled, but her eyes were sad. “I should have gone back a lot sooner.”

“Oh.” The knot in my solar plexus tightened. Mom pushed a loose strand of hair behind my ear as I stared out the window.

I had never flown over an ocean before. It was night out, and looking down at all that black water below, capped white where the moon glinted off the swells, left me feeling like we were the last humans left alive on planet Earth.

“Mom?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a little nervous too.”

It was night again when we landed at Dubai International Airport. We had flown all the way into one day and back out again.

I couldn’t remember the last time I had taken my medication. Or brushed my teeth. And my face felt oily enough to generate two or three more Olympus Mons-sized pimples.

My body said it was yesterday, but the clocks said it was tomorrow.

This is why I hate time travel.

“Our flight’s in three hours,” Mom said as I stood and stretched, bending over Laleh’s seat to try and extend my back.

“We should grab some dinner.”

“Is it dinner?” My body didn’t think so. All I could think about was a hot cup of tea. I had been cultivating a headache

for the last few hours—the kind of headache that felt like it was going to pop my eyes right out of my skull—and caffeine usually helped.

Laleh was hangry, the first sign of an impending Laleh-pocalypse. She dragged her feet down the jet-bridge, holding my hand and staring at the floor desultorily, until we stepped into the terminal and she caught the scent of Subway.

Subway was my sister's favorite restaurant.

The glow cast by the white and yellow letters instantly rejuvenated her. She wrenched her hand out of mine and sprinted straight for it. I chased her, my Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag banging against my legs.

I detested messenger bags.

"Can we have Subway?" Laleh asked.

"We have to ask Mom and Dad."

"Mom? Dad? Can we?" Her voice was getting whinier by the second, the pitch rising higher and higher like a teakettle on the cusp of whistling.

"Sure, sweetie." Mom studied the menu. Even in the United Arab Emirates, Subway was Subway. The menu was pretty much the same as it was in Portland, except for a seafood sub and a chicken tikka masala sub.

Dad shifted his own Kellner & Newton Messenger Bag on his shoulder. His was dark leather with the logo embossed on it—much nicer than my canvas-and-polyester one. "What do you want?"

"Um." My stomach gurgled.

I had eaten two meals on the plane—a sort-of dinner and

a sort-of breakfast—and though neither of them left me that satisfied, I did not want Subway.

I couldn't stand the smell of Subway—not since my old job spinning signs for the pizza place. It had been across the parking lot from a Subway, and ever since, I couldn't smell baking Subway bread without feeling trapped and claustrophobic from the porcupine costume I was forced to wear.

What kind of pizza place has a porcupine for a mascot?

"Um," I said again. "I don't really feel like Subway."

"You can't keep eating Laleh's Sour Patch Kids."

Stephen Kellner was extremely attentive to my dietary indiscretions.

I studied the menu. "Um. The chicken tikka masala sub?"

Dad sighed. "There's nothing with vegetables that sounds good?"

"Stephen," Mom said. She looked at Dad, and they seemed to be exchanging some sort of subspace communiqués. Laleh rocked back and forth on her heels and glanced at the counter. She was dangerously close to full-on Laleh-geddon.

"Never mind. I'm not that hungry anyway."

"Darius," Mom said, but I shook my head.

"It's fine. I have to use the bathroom."

I stayed in the bathroom as long as I could.

I still had some of Laleh's Sour Patch Kids left.

But when I couldn't hide any longer, I found Mom, Dad, and Laleh seated around a brushed-steel table with little blue hour-glass-shaped stools. Laleh had demolished her meatball sub,

leaving gallons of sauce spread around her mouth: a conquering Klingon warrior drenched in the blood of her enemies. She was licking her fingers clean, ignoring Mom and Dad's conversation.

"You can't keep trying to control him," Mom said. "You have to let him make his own decisions."

"You know how he gets treated," Dad said. "You really want that for him?"

"No. But how is making him ashamed of everything going to fix it?"

"I don't want him to be ashamed," Dad said. "But he's got enough going on with his depression, he doesn't need to be bullied all the time too. He wouldn't be such a target if he fit in more. If he could just, you know, act a little more normal."

Mom glared at Dad as soon as she saw me. "Here," she said, pulling out a seat for me. "You sure you don't want something? We can go somewhere else."

"I'm okay. Thanks."

"You feeling all right?" Mom pressed the back of her hand against my forehead. It was greasy from being on the stuffy plane for so long.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Sorry."

Dad wouldn't look at me. He kept studying his hands, wiping at them with his white Subway-brand napkin, though I doubted they were dirty, since he'd eaten a salad.

Stephen Kellner always ordered salad at Subway.

"I'll be right back. Anybody need anything?"

Mom shook her head. Dad grabbed his empty water cup and took it back for a refill.

Once he was out of earshot, Mom said, "Darius . . ."



"It's fine," I said.

"Don't be mad." She squeezed my hand. "He just . . ."

Laleh chose that moment to let out a huge, resonant burp.

Unlike Javaneh Esfahani, Laleh was perfectly capable of burping.

I laughed, but Mom was appalled.

"Laleh!"

"Sorry," she said, but at least she was smiling again.

Thankfully, the meatball sub had averted the impending Laleh-clysm.

She was still giggling when Dad sat back down. He dipped his napkin in his ice water and handed it to Laleh for her to clean off her mouth, but it was a lost cause.

"Here," Mom said, standing. "Let's go to the bathroom, Laleh. Come on."

A Level Six Awkward Silence descended upon us, despite the bustle of the terminal all around.

Awkward Silences were powerful like that.

"Hey." Dad cleared his throat. "About earlier."

I glanced up at Dad, but he was staring at his hands.

Stephen Kellner had angular, powerful hands. Exactly what you'd expect from an Übermensch.

"Let's try to get along. Okay? I want you to enjoy this trip."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine."

I mean, it wasn't fine.

I wasn't even sure which part he thought he was apologizing for.

I still had a knot in my solar plexus.

Like I said, Dad and I only got along if we didn't see each other that much, and the trip to Iran had already compromised our intermix ratio.

But then Dad looked at me and said, "Love you, Darius."

And I said, "Love you, Dad."

And that meant we weren't going to talk about it anymore.

I couldn't sleep at all on the flight to Tehran. We were scheduled to arrive at Tehran Imam Khomeini International Airport at 2:35 a.m. local time, which constituted a thirty-minute journey into the future.

I didn't understand. What was the point and purpose of a half-hour temporal displacement?

As the flight attendants wandered the aisles collecting all the tiny plastic bottles of alcohol, the women on the flight started pulling headscarves out of their carry-ons and covering their hair.

Laleh was young enough that she didn't technically have to wear one, but Mom thought it would be a good idea anyway. She handed Dad a light pink scarf over the back of the seat, and Dad wrapped it around Laleh's head. Mom's own headscarf was dark blue, with peacock feather designs embroidered on it.

My heart did its own sort of feathery flutter when the captain said to prepare for arrival, and the plane began to descend.

The smog blanketing Tehran was transformed into dense orange clouds by the lights of the city below, and then we were flying through it and I couldn't see anything else. We were soaring through a golden, glowing void.

“I don’t want to fly anymore,” Laleh announced. She scratched at her headscarf but refused to let Dad adjust it for her. “My head itches.”

“Soon, Laleh,” Mom said over the seat. She whispered something to Laleh—something in Farsi, I couldn’t catch what—and then leaned back and took my hand.

She wrapped our fingers together and smiled at me.

We were nearly there.

I couldn’t quite believe it.