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Mo

By Abby Kloppenburg

Everyone at the table is silent. The clinking of glasses is deafening, the scraping of silverware like nails down a chalkboard. I keep catching my reflection in my spoon, and then his. I look around at the sea of laughing, eating, talking faces. A sea of white. I look over; he's drowning in it.

"So, Mo-hamm-ed," my dad begins, pronouncing the name with astonishing difficulty. "When did you and your parents move to America?"

"They still live in Pakistan," he responds quietly, "we live there permanently." He glances at me with a small smirk, but I don't return it. Instead my eyes fall on his outfit, a suit too formal for a country club brunch, but one that he changed into frantically after my dad informed him that jeans were forbidden. I'm struck with a sense of compassion, and sadness. Here he is, trying so hard to impress my family, and they're looking the other way.

"Hm." My dad responds. "What's that like?" I can tell he's asking in earnest, but it comes out like a bullet.

"Well, I mean, I've been to America before I came to college with your daughter, so it's not that weird for me." He moves his water glass around awkwardly. "I don't know. It's different at home, but people themselves are generally the same everywhere."

"Well, I don't know if I'd say the same," my dad says offhandedly, and turns around to call out to some golf friends. They approach our table, try to suppress prolonged glances at Mo, and continue with the same conversation about golf they have every weekend.

I glance at my boyfriend. "How weird is this for you?"

"It's fine, Abby, really," Mo says, slipping off his suit jacket with the regal shoulder pads. "I don't know why he said my name that way," he smiles, "but it's fine."

Barely reassured, I glance at my mother and sister talking casually with each other and at all the coiffed country club members politely chattering around us. Every once and awhile I think I can sense discreet glances being stolen at the one standout in the room, sitting right next to me. I long to explain to them how

alike the two of us are, how we can talk for hours, but I can already see their doubt. Now I want to block him from their sight, protect him from the cruel judgment pouring from their eyes.

“So, Mo,” my dad says, turning back to the table. “What’s your family situation like? Do you see your grandparents often?”

I can see him planning his answer carefully before he actually responds. “Yes, actually, my grandmother lived with us for a while before she moved to the States.”

“Oh, why did she move? Is it that dangerous over there?” Again my father’s sincerity comes out like a jab.

“Oh no, no, my grandfather just got a job over here,” Mo says. I can tell he’s lying to bridge the gap between him and my father, to smooth over the starkness of their differences.

“Hm. Well, in our family, Abby sees her grandparents a lot. We’re a very close family unit.” My dad emphasizes each syllable in a phrase I’ve never heard him utter in my life. I don’t know what he’s trying to prove. I push around my scrambled eggs, and the din of silence builds.

After a few moments, “So, what’s the government like in Pakistan? Is it a democracy?”

“Um, kind of,” Mo responds quickly. “But we have a Parliament, and a prime minister. Right now the prime minister has more power than the president. They, like, switch back and forth, it’s confusing. I don’t know. Everything’s really corrupt.”

“I’m sure,” my father says. “But, if it makes any difference, the U.S. has given the most money in aid. I have to admit, we’re good in that way.” I look at my staunchly Republican, thoroughly American, stockbroker father from across the table. The one who raised me, who taught me everything he knew and gave me anything he had to offer. For the first time, I feel like I’m breaking away from his guiding hand, putting on someone else’s eyes to see the world around me. I feel torn between a deep compassion for my dad, but also for Mo, who let me look at my sheltered surroundings through the eyes of someone to whom this land is a foreign place. I’m torn between two perspectives, the owner of each unable to see the other.

The waitress comes; my dad smiles at her familiarly and signs the check. Mo walks up ahead with my father to the car, and my mother comes up behind me and puts her hand on my back. “What does Mo’s mother think of your relationship?”

“I don’t know,” I lie, although I’ve heard her on Skype telling

Mo that “American relationships should stay in America.”

“I’m sure she feels even stranger about it than we do,” she says, “although we’re doing our best to get to know him.” My mother looks at me, “It’s just difficult, Abby; we’re at war in his country.”

“I know, Mom,” I say, and I do. “But it’s not like he’s a soldier. That’s just where he’s from.”

My mother shakes her head in her all-knowing way and walks up ahead. Mo looks back and smiles at me, seemingly unaffected by my mental torment.

I’m numb standing there in the parking lot, my entire family and my Pakistani boyfriend already in the car. The car seems to sink onto the tires until they’re close to bursting, so weighed down by ancient prejudices and misunderstandings. It’s when I think about trying to lighten that load that I feel a sudden sense of helplessness washing over me. I try to shake it off as I walk across the parking lot to join them, but my skin still prickles as I open the door.

