
Cold War

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Cold War

LEILA CHRISTINE NADIR

MY PARENTS COMPETED FOR THEIR children's love, measuring affection through our ethnic, religious, and consumer choices. Since we grew up in the States, my mother had the home advantage. What kid wouldn't choose her all-American fun over my father's foreign moral policing? When her favorite Top 40 songs crackled through our car's radio, she turned up the volume, and she, my brother, my two sisters, and I sang-shouted in unison, our blue Volkswagen van barreling down the road. She filled the house with the aroma of chocolate chip cookies baking in the oven, pulled out her credit card for trendy outfits and ice-cream sundaes at the mall, and snuck me into the hair salon when my father forbade me to cut my long hair. "Just put it in a ponytail," she said, handing me an elastic scrunchie, when the new perm curled my hair to my ears. "He'll never notice." (He did.) Baba made rules, and Mom taught me to break them. She was the normal one, I thought, just like every American in the USA. She had twirled a baton at football games with her high school marching band; kicked her legs into the air in a mini-skirt and tasseled boots. So I did my hair the way she wanted, moussed, teased, hairsprayed, and frizzy on top, so I could be normal too, like her and everyone else.

Baba was different. And not only was he hell-bent on accentuating his difference—he called it "Afghan-Muslim Pride"—he wanted for his children to be different too, just like him. When my aunts sent new shalwar kameez from Afghanistan—for some reason, they always chose the most conspicuous hues, bright red, shiny yellow—he suggested I celebrate these gifts by wearing them to the mosque, which was fine, but he didn't stop there. Why didn't I wear them every-

where, to the grocery store, to the post office, and—the thought terrified me—why not to school to show my friends I was a proud Afghan girl? My hometown in the 1980s, in western New York State, was a town with limited global imagination. My classmates made sense of my brown coloring by guessing my family had come from Italy, the darkest, most faraway place these rural white kids could fathom. And I didn't correct them. When I resisted Baba's idea of interrupting my high school's parade of stonewashed jeans and white sneakers with an Afghan fashion show of radiant pink, he turned away, wounded, as if I had personally insulted him.

While Mom gladly would have let me and my siblings plant our butts down in front of the TV all day, or chug cans of soda to quench our thirst, Baba found these behaviors morally dubious. The icy Coca-Cola fizzing in our glasses at dinnertime, he announced one day, was actually "chemical water" and no longer allowed in his house. *Family Ties* and *The Cosby Show*, family-safe programs by most standards, were deemed proponents of a licentious American culture when the child characters grew up and began to date, and he jumped from the couch to shut the TV's power. Our time was better spent practicing Persian writing skills, he decided, and he instituted after-dinner lessons. I drafted letters to my aunts and cousins in Kabul, whom I had never met, and translated newspaper articles or paragraphs from novels, which he painstakingly corrected with red pen. More homework upon regular school homework, plus thirty minutes of Qur'an reading every morning and prayers five times each day. Baba exerted concentrated effort to impress an Afghan-Muslim identity upon his children, to counteract the American

culture we naturally absorbed every day, the culture my mother reinforced just by being there.

BECAUSE THEY WERE ENGAGED IN A perpetual power struggle, my parents refused to tell me how exactly they met. They didn't want to give each other that much credit. Their relationship had turned so bitter they couldn't concede that, once, long ago, they had actually fallen in love. Though when I was a teenager, my mother made a snarky remark I never forgot, one rich with interlocking clues.

"In college your father sexually harassed me," she quipped angrily when I pushed her on the subject. "I passed his house on my way to class. He sat outdoors smoking cigarettes and yelled at me from his porch. He said one day I'd marry him, that I was going to be his wife, and I told him to leave me alone."

My mother had followed Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court confirmation hearings closely in 1991, shaking her head at the TV in disbelief at Congress's treatment of Anita Hill. The experience pushed her a few notches further on the feminist scale. I suspect this is when she adopted the new, empowered vocabulary to describe her first encounters with my father. But her sexual harassment strategy never sat well with me, and over the years, the more I thought about her words, the more clear it became her story didn't indict him any more than it exonerated her. As an Afghan-American girl, I understood both my parents too well to fall prey to easy accusations. An Afghan man in the West for the first time, my father had been unfamiliar with standard dating protocols, and though the budding-feminist version of my Mom didn't want to admit it, she obviously had been receptive to his pursuit.

MY FATHER SPENT EVERY MOMENT HE could in the fresh air. As a teenager, I was driven mad by his demands that I drag myself from my horizontal position on the couch and stack wood, shovel snow, weed gardens, rake leaves, and help with all the other outdoor projects he seemed to invent for no good reason. In the summertime, when friends visited, he pulled half our living room furniture onto our front yard. Chairs, a coffee table, and a Persian carpet for “real” Afghans, like him, who preferred to sip their tea while sitting on the ground. His makeshift entertainment area included a stack of faux-wood drawers, the portable storage system for his Afghan music collection. On certain inspired evenings, when Baba popped one of his cassette tapes into his silver boom box and pushed *Play*, our guests would nod their heads to the beat, eyes closed, smiling nostalgically. Long-lost neighbors from Kabul, uncles who finally made it to the States, sometimes a refugee or two still living in our basement, mostly men but also a few bold women—they rose to their feet, raised their arms, flicked their wrists, and danced in that light-stepping Afghan way I’ve never gotten the hang of. While Ahmid Zahir, the most famous pop star of 1970s Afghanistan, crooned, our guests hummed along, forgetting their exile for a moment on our lawn, remembering the optimistic days before the Soviet invasion and the Mujahideen war.

So, yes, I can see a younger version of my father, outdoors on his porch, most likely sitting on his steps, foregoing the comfort of a chair. And he was a smoker back then, as my mother reported. Family members tell me a crinkled red Marlboro pack was always stuffed in his jacket pocket. I wonder, had he chosen the brand of the independent American cowboy because the promise of rugged independence seduced him, or because Marlboros were simply a convenient brand back in Kabul, available at all the shops. I can see him on his college apartment steps, blowing cigarette smoke into the wind, with his legs crossed, the way he sat on our stoop when I was growing up, with an elbow propped on his knee, a posture that made him appear smaller than he already was.

My father was strong-built for a relatively small man. His height was 5’6”, just an inch taller than my mother, but he made up for his size with agility and sturdy bones. He exhibited a sort of non-American athleticism, which he maintained with random bouts of body-conditioning. Push-ups, sit-ups, some periodic stretching to touch his toes. He began new exercise programs whenever he looked down and discovered “stomach is too big.” Jumping-jacks were the preferred regimen, wherever and whenever possible, sometimes while Mom fried eggs for breakfast or during commercial breaks of the evening news. A set of 100 could even be thrown in while he waited for his carpool ride to work. In his dress slacks, with his briefcase at the top of the stairs, he clapped his hands atop his head and his legs sprang back and forth, shaking the walls. My little sisters bounced breathlessly alongside him, practicing their Persian counting skills, *Deh, bist, si . . . sed, Baba!* For me, this was another instance of my father seeming hopelessly out-of-date, out-of-place, and improper. I wished he would put on a pair of athletic shorts or go to a gym. But his system worked. He always lost the excess weight and remained in relatively good shape his entire life.

HE HAD BEGUN WORKING AT THE AGE of eight, when his father was wheeled on a gurney into a Kabul emergency room and never came back out, leaving behind four hungry children and a wife who couldn’t work. Until his teens, my father sold newspapers, dug ditches, laid bricks, soldered circuit boards; he did any job he could find, all while falling further and further behind in his schoolwork. In 1955, his life changed when the Afghan Institute of Technology, run by American teachers under contract with the University of Wyoming, opened in Kabul. A.I.T. paid boys to quit their jobs and devote themselves to academics, its goal being to train the next generation of skilled, technical works for a modernizing Afghanistan. This gift of education convinced him that the U.S. truly was the Land of the Free. American college classrooms, he believed, were electrically charged with pas-

sionate student debates, and professors who explained the ideological pitfalls of various political positions. A collective commitment to the right to free speech. He wanted to be a part.

He arrived in New York State with a full scholarship from the US Agency for International Development, and no need for a job except for washing dishes at a local diner a few nights each week. Yet instead of feeling on top of the world, as he had expected, he was preoccupied by his classmates’ uncomfortable glances whenever he talked to them about international politics. The USSR’s expansion into Third World countries concerned them; nuclear war, the war in Vietnam, and of course, communism had to be stopped. But when he pointed out the key role Afghanistan could play, he noticed them blink (“Afghanistan?”) as if the world had fallen out of focus. He explained how the American government used to send millions of dollars to bring progress to his country, to build airports, highways, and electrical grids, but the aid had dwindled since the mid-1960s; he wasn’t sure why. The thoughtful responses he expected never came. Instead, his listeners said: *I had no idea. I didn’t know. Very interesting.*

Not until he crossed the Atlantic Ocean did he realize he came from such an unconsidered place, somewhere so far away in the imagination, so alien, that it was a cliché for the most ridiculous of ideas. “Yeah, maybe in Afghanistan!” He heard this more than he wanted to admit—Americans’ casual dismissal of his homeland. If only he could make Afghanistan appear as a real place, with real people, not some funny idea. If he studied the books his professors assigned, the optional articles too, and typed his papers at the library until two in the morning, he could return home with an advanced American degree, become an emissary, an ambassador, represent Afghanistan on the international stage—

But he got distracted. There was another American freedom that he had not expected, a freedom more fascinating than free speech, equal opportunity, or public education: the freedom of young people to do what they want. From what he could see of his college

peers, they didn't begin working as children. They weren't married off in their teens. There seemed to be no parents, no elders supervising their behavior. That's when, I presume, my father broke through the invisible wall of culture, a wall he had never realized was there, and tried to talk to the pretty blonde with the pixie haircut who walked by his house every day on her way to class.

HE MUST HAVE NOTICED HIS FUTURE wife's platinum hair first, hanging across her forehead, in her eyes, grazing her thin nose. Almost every Afghan man I know who attended a US university in the 1970s and who married an American woman just happened to fall for a blonde. These bicultural couples were my parents' best friends when I was growing up; every weekend, if their families weren't at our house, we were at theirs. I whispered my secrets to their daughters and played Nintendo with their sons. In the kitchen, our mothers pressed naan onto cookie sheets and rolled their eyes about the conservative behaviors of our Afghan fathers, who were outside, oblivious, shuffling a deck of cards on my father's Persian carpet on the lawn. I observed these marriages, and being a product of one, I wondered how such bickering couples had negotiated their differences when they met. The women had been interacting with the opposite sex their entire lives—as grade-school playmates, sometimes as friends, and later as lovers in that space of freedom carved out for premarital male-female intimacy in American culture. The men had attended boys-only high schools, like my father at AIT, in a society where the concept of dating did not exist.

My father's first marriage was arranged when he was eighteen. His bride was sixteen.

Perhaps, then, it makes sense that before figuring out how to invite my mother to the movies he informed her she would be his wife.

On his porch, with a Marlboro between his lips, he shouted to her as she approached with her bag and her books.

"Ay, you! I'm going to marry you!" □

Summer 2013

MARTÍN ESPADA

Heal the Cracks in the Bell of the World

*For the community of Newtown, Connecticut,
where twenty students and six educators lost
their lives to a gunman at Sandy Hook
Elementary School, December 14, 2012*

Now the bells speak with their tongues of bronze.
Now the bells open their mouths of bronze to say:
Listen to the bells a world away. Listen to the bell in the ruins of a city where children gathered copper shells like beach glass, and the copper boiled in the foundry, and the bell born in the foundry says: *I was born of bullets, but now I sing of a world where bullets melt into bells.* Listen to the bell in a city where cannons from the armies of the Great War sank into molten metal bubbling like a vat of chocolate, and the many mouths that once spoke the tongue of smoke form the one mouth of a bell that says: *I was born of cannons, but now I sing of a world where cannons melt into bells.*

Listen to the bells in a town with a flagpole on Main Street, a rooster weathervane keeping watch atop the Meeting House, the congregation gathering to sing in times of great silence. Here the bells rock their heads of bronze as if to say: *melt the bullets into bells, melt the bullets into bells.* Here the bells raise their heavy heads as if to say: *melt the cannons into bells, melt the cannons into bells.* Here the bells sing of a world where weapons crumble deep in the earth, and no one remembers where they were buried. Now the bells pass the word at midnight in the ancient language of bronze, from bell to bell, like ships smuggling news of liberation from island to island, the song rippling through the clouds.

Now the bells chime like the muscle beating in every chest, heal the cracks in the bell of every face listening to the bells. The chimes heal the cracks in the bell of the moon. The chimes heal the cracks in the bell of the world.

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