

# Bestest. Ramadan. Ever.

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Sharif



Mom has said that I could lose a few. I've never thought it was possible. My first diet was five years ago, when I was ten. I daintily ate crackers and cheese with a glass of juice for every meal, so proud of myself that I ate so little by the end of each day. Then it became too hard and I ate like a pig again. I tried to cut out carbs last year, but rice and bread were too yummy to give up. I don't want to eat a burger without a sesame-seed bun. No way. And life without pizza. Is that even possible? Might as well ask me to cut off a limb.

I don't like what I see in the mirror. My hair is frizzy from the Florida heat. My shirt is baggy to hide my potbelly, which grows after large meals. I was minding my own business at the mall one day, waiting in a long line to buy some jeans, and an older woman asked me if I was pregnant. Gasp. At fifteen? And do I really look that fat and bloated? On a bad day, on a high-carb day, maybe I do look like I'm carrying a bun or two in the oven. I'm not overweight, just at the high end of normal on the height/weight chart. Sometimes I console myself that it's called big-boned, not fat.

I'm starving, but I can't eat lunch since it's the first day of Ramadan. Ramadan is the month God revealed the Koran to Muhammad, so we purify ourselves physically and spiritually by fasting. My family is halfway religious—we do most things, not everything, Islamic. Let's just say holiness has tapered off through the generations. My grandparents follow Islam to the tee, my parents are pretty religious (they pray frequently, but not every day), and I'm sort of religious. I pray once in a while, and I've been to a mosque only twice in my life, but I still feel I should do this. I don't want to be the only one in my family

not fasting, which was the case in previous Ramadans.

I'm fifteen years old and I vow that this will be my first successful month of fasting. No cheating. No Oreo cookies eaten in my bedroom away from prying eyes. No sipping water from the water fountains at school. No snacks when my friends offer me any. I shalt not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. Day = no food. Night = all you can eat.

Last year I tried to fast, but it didn't last. On the first day, I cheated. I remember that day; it was a Saturday and my grandparents were visiting. I went to my room, had a few chocolate wafers, and came back to the living room. Grandpa was watching *Dr. 90210* with the rest of my family, and he looked up at me. "Almira, are those crumbs around your mouth?" he asked. The shame rained down hard on me. Grandpa shook his head and lectured me on the importance of religion.

My parents looked upset, but then they told me it was all right and I could try the next day, but I didn't. It's taken me a year to get the gumption to tackle Ramadan again. Can I last a whole month without eating during sunlight hours? That task is my own personal Mount Everest.

"Almira, come here this minute!" my mom yells from the living room.

I push my glasses up my nose and rush to my mom, who is less than genial when she is fasting. Fasting makes her kind of mean. My stomach growls with hunger, so I know why Mom is such a monster during Ramadan—hunger makes me nervous and testy as well. I frown and stomp toward her voice. I listen to her tell me how slovenly I am because I left my wet umbrella on top of a pair of suede shoes, her shoes to be exact. I look at the high-heeled pumps and see that they're mottled and funky looking. Yup, I did a boo-boo. She looks so mad that I want to tell her to eat a cookie to calm down, because cookies have always soothed me. But there can be no cookie breaks on account of the fasting. Peanut butter cookies and macadamia nut cookies swim in my head as Mom lectures me on how suede and water don't go together. Duh, I already know that. Now eat a cookie.

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When I hear a crash outside, I know that my grandfather is here. He always hits something in or around our driveway when he comes to visit us. I'm waiting for

the day when he'll crash through the picture window of our living room, but so far he only targets garbage cans, mailboxes, and pillars.

I rush outside past my grandfather's tanklike car. Old people are attracted to planet-sized cars because they seem so safe. Dad may get flattened in his sports car, but Grandpa will survive any driving mishap. Grandpa knocked down the garbage can, so I straighten it out. At least it's empty since the sanitation truck had visited this morning.

"*Marhaba!*" Grandpa hollers.

"Hi," I say. I don't speak a word of Arabic, even though Grandpa tries to teach me simple phrases. I'm bad at foreign languages, but I speak *un poco español*.

"*Azizi*, let me look at you," Grandpa says as he exits his car. He's short and skinny with white hair and a white bushy beard. When I was little I used to call him "Santa," but he told me to stop calling him that since Santa is an infidel. An infidel is someone who doesn't believe in God, or anyone who's not Muslim. Grandpa calls anyone he doesn't like an infidel.

My grandmother emerges from the other side of the car wearing a huge dress that swallows her and a scarf wrapped around her head. She started wearing a scarf a year ago. According to her, she's getting old, nearing death (she's only fifty-nine), and aims to go to heaven. So basically she's telling God, "Love me because I'm covering my head in one-hundred-degree weather." Prior to her religious fervor, she looked like a typical Miami mama in makeup and high heels.

"I can't believe you drive like that," Grandma says.

"Then you drive, if you don't like my driving!" Grandpa thunders.

"You know I can't drive," Grandma says.

"Feh!"

Older-generation Muslim women don't seem to know how to drive, Grandma included. I'm so happy that Mom knows how to drive, as if it's something, a badge of honor. Women in Saudi Arabia aren't allowed to drive. That sucks. I'm glad that I don't live there.

"I'm just saying watch where you're going!" Grandma bellows as she walks toward our front door.

"Do I ever get into any accidents?" Grandpa says, facing her head-on as if he's

about to charge at her.

Mom winces whenever Grandpa yells, which is all the time. Mom and Grandpa have this uncomfortable in-lawship, with either silence or hints of an argument bubbling between them. I look at Mom and her shoulders are hunched over the stove. She shoots an askance look of annoyance toward us.

“Eh.” Grandma waves her hand in the air dismissively and then turns her attention to me. “Almira, you’ve lost weight.”

I give her an embarrassed smile as she rakes her eyes up and down my body. I hate being reminded that I’m hefty. I’ve fasted for four days straight and feel lighter. Indeed, I lost two pounds. It’s probably just water weight rather than fat, but it’s something.

Mom continues to cook. The smell of shish kebabs makes me salivate. I haven’t eaten in ten-and-a-half hours. That is, like, forever. The sun rose at about seven this morning. At least it’s November and the days are short.

On the news, a mug shot of some guy accused of money laundering flashes on the screen. “Infidel!” Grandpa screeches.

“Calm down!” Grandma tells him.

“Don’t tell me to calm down. This is a sick world and it breaks my heart.”

Grandpa’s a bit of a drama king. He winces, puts one hand on his chest, and flings an arm in the air as he watches television. Yes, okay, I get it; his heart bleeds for the sins of this world. With his accent—Asiatic, but less choppy than an Indian one—he is one eccentric grandpapa.

A sigh issues from Grandma’s lips and she adjusts her scarf. Mom raises an eyebrow and asks, “Will you be dining with us tomorrow, too?”

“No, Asma!” Grandpa says. “I have plans.”

“Great.”

“We’re going to go out with friends, but my son did say he wanted to break fast as a family.”

“Well, it’s hard to please everyone, but I’m sure your friends will appreciate your company,” Mom says. She talks in a stilted, non-Mom way when she’s around Grandpa. She also looks relieved that she won’t have to entertain the in-laws tomorrow. I sit with them, wriggling in an armchair, wondering when the tension in the air will dissipate.

Dad comes in. He's a dentist with his own practice. He totally looks like a cosmetic dentist. He has jet-black hair that is moussed into inertia (it won't budge) and teeth as white as chalk. All day long he bleaches teeth, slaps on veneers, and makes smiles look pretty. I refrain from smiling at him. I smiled this morning and he asked me if I'd flossed. It's hard to live with someone who inspects my teeth on a daily basis.

All of us migrate to the dining table, which faces the golf course behind our house. Dad stares at the setting sun. I stare. Grandma and Grandpa glare at the sun. Die, sun. Die.

"You've lost weight," Dad says.

I feel myself blushing.

"Keep it up," Dad says, flashing me his million-dollar smile. Has anyone spent a million dollars on a smile? I'm sure some of his patients did. Dad has shown me some before-and-after pictures, and some of his patients had truly heinous teeth. Overbites the size of canyons. Chipped teeth that looked like old china cups. Teeth as yellow as butter, which makes me momentarily turn my stomach against butter, which would taste great on a baguette right now.

"You look great," Grandma says.

I flare my nostrils in anger. *You were a fat cow and now you're less of a fat cow.* That's the way I interpret these compliments.

Grandpa pinches my arm—cowlike, I'm being manhandled as if I'm livestock—and grunts in approval. "Did you have any snacks today?" he asks.

Why do some people have to remind others of their faults and weaknesses? It seems so overly critical. It's a new Ramadan but Grandpa is trying to rehash the last ... chocolate wafer crumbs stuck on my Bonne Bell lip balm. "No, I haven't cheated," I say in an even voice.

"All right, all right."

Setting the awkwardness aside, I close my eyes and inhale the food. Mom sets a large tray of meat and vegetables in the middle of the table. The juice from the beef runs in rivulets around the cherry tomatoes. The red peppers are slightly black around the edges.

The sky is a rainbow of red, orange, and purple where the sun is a mere sliver on the horizon.

Next, Mom puts a plate of pita bread next to the shish kebabs. They're imperfectly round, white, and tan. They sure look like they can soak up the broth running out of the beef.

The sun is no longer visible, but the pretty rainbow colors of refracting light are still there.

Mom fills our glasses with icy water. I haven't had anything to drink since before sunrise.

Dad puckers his lips as if he's kissing the air. Grandpa twitches his mouth like a squirrel eating an invisible nut.

I'm going to faint if I don't get a bite of this delicious food soon.

The pretty colors are gone. The sun vanishes. The sky is dark. What happens next is not a sight I'm proud of.

We all simultaneously lunge for the food. My shish kebab stick gets stuck on top of Dad's and we each yank hard to disengage them. We don't speak to each other as we operate on pure animal instinct. The bread disappears quickly. I take a slice of bread and fill it with beef, peppers, and cherry tomatoes. I bite into the sandwich, barely chewing, transforming into an eating machine. I gulp the chunky meat as if I'm a wild animal chewing on raw deer in the Serengeti. We all belong on National Geographic.

I drink my water in one gulp and Grandpa reaches for the pitcher before I can. No one offers to refill my glass. We all work independently. This is how we break fast in the Abdul household. I burp loudly and don't bother apologizing.

## 2

**M**y mom is hot, which is hard because I'm not. I'm average, whereas my mom looks like some toned superbabe that men stare at with lust and women with jealousy. At home she always wears exercise clothes, like tank tops, shorts, and leotards. And when she goes out, she dresses to the nines, with strappy sandals and designer clothes. Too ridiculously hot. This situation reminds me of the music video for "Stacy's Mom," except my mom doesn't dance on stripper poles, not as far as I know. And she can't steal my boyfriend's attention because I don't have a boyfriend. And if I did have a boyfriend, I hope he wouldn't lay eyes on her because then he might fall in love with her.

Before I leave for school, Mom is doing yoga from one of her many exercise DVDs. Her skin is golden, her black hair is in a ponytail, and she wears a leotard. She doesn't have any cellulite and her stomach is concave. How annoying. I pinch my belly and the fat rolls on my hips. I look like a hippo compared to her. For years Mom asked me to exercise with her, but I kept resisting and she stopped asking. Her hotness will not be passed on to the next generation.

I eat breakfast, leftovers from last night, as I look at the dark sky through the kitchen window. The same thought comes to my head every morning that I'm fasting: why am I fasting? I look at a tapestry on the wall that has Arabic calligraphy on it, probably something saying how *Allah* is great—*Allahu Akbar*—and other stuff like that. I start to think about my afterlife and if all the righteous stuff I do will get me into heaven. Grandpa always tells me that there's an angel on my right shoulder writing down everything good I do and one on my



left shoulder taking notes of all the bad things. Sometimes I feel that I'm doing bad things by writing love letters to Robert Pattinson (which I never send out) and daydreaming of having a boyfriend in the near future.

I chew absentmindedly as I think about all of this heavy metaphysical stuff. Mom is standing on her head, and she peers at me while I eat like a maniac. Perish the thought that I'm still chewing once the sun tickles the horizon.

"Don't eat everything in the Tupperware," she advises. "I want some, too. Show some consideration."

I look at her upside-down face. Her thin legs are pointed toward the ceiling. I wonder how she does that, but she's a limber skinny minnie. Whenever I stand on my head, my skull hurts and my legs wobble.

"Yes, Mother," I say, putting the lid over the Tupperware, leaving some shish kebab for her.

"You look really good today."

I smile. I don't get many compliments from her. The fasting makes me feel leaner, and my size-eight jeans are loose on me. Yay for weight loss.

As I wait for Mom to get the car out of the garage to drive me to school, I see the dreadful sun rise. Now I can't eat the Tootsie Rolls I keep in my bookbag for light snacking. Never before have I felt such animosity toward the sun, giver of heat, keeper of life. But I'm determined to fast and prove my religiosity.

While we drive, I look at all the kids walking to school with their bookbags and trendy clothes. I'm the only Muslim in my school. It's weird, but at the same time cool. Since we live in the middle of Miami-Dade, most of my classmates are Hispanic. I blend in, with my dark hair and brown eyes, but at the same time I'm different. Dad is Syrian and Mom is Iranian. Grandpa once told me that he forgave my mother for being Iranian, as if it's a sin not to be Syrian. I was like, okay Grandpa, forgive someone for something they can't control! My mom didn't choose her nationality. But I didn't really say all of that to him, since he scares me.

I meet with my bestest friend Lisa Gomez in front of school. We've known each other since kindergarten. We're exact opposites. I'm brainy and love to read, while she's in love with celebrities and only reads magazines. She's tall and skinny, while I'm short (five foot three) and on the heavy side. We have the

same round brown eyes and curly hair, though, and sometimes our friends joke that we're sisters.

There's twenty minutes left until the bell rings, so we hang out on a bench by the school entrance watching buses and parents drop off students. Lisa has some squiggly black marks on her upper arm that she made with a Bic pen. She's totally obsessed with Angelina Jolie and literally wants to be her.

She catches me looking at her messy tribal armband, which must have gotten smeared when she dressed this morning. "I can't wait until I turn eighteen," she says. "I'll be in a tattoo parlor on that birthday."

I sigh, because I've heard all of this before. "You shouldn't get a tattoo because you might regret it," I say. "Can you imagine being an old lady with tattoos all over your wrinkled skin?"

"There's always laser surgery. Aren't you getting any tattoos?"

"No. Mom said it's against our religion."

"Oh, that's terrible," Lisa says with genuine sadness in her voice. She pulls a magazine out of her bookbag and shows me the cover story about Angelina's latest adoption.

"She's going to run her own school the way she's going," I say.

Lisa brushes her curls out of her face. "I'm sure this will be her last kid."

"Uh-huh."

"Ohmigosh, look at him."

"Who?" I say.

This awesome guy with deep-set eyes, brown hair falling around his face, and broad shoulders walks past us. It's Peter Hurley from our biology class. Lisa's been drooling over him recently and I think he's cute, too. He's quiet and keeps to himself. He isn't loud and obnoxious like the popular boys.

"He's like Brad Pitt," Lisa dreamily says.

I don't see the resemblance, but Lisa likes to humor herself by comparing everyone to a celebrity. I look like Penelope Cruz, with an added twenty pounds and glasses, and Lisa is Jennifer Lopez (during her Selena days, not when she became blond and bronzed after becoming superfamous).

"He's hot," I say.

"Yeah."

“Let’s sit next to him in lab today.”

“That’s a good idea, Almira.”

The bell rings and we get up to go inside. As we walk, I lick my finger and use it to swipe at the Bic tattoo below Lisa’s sleeve. I rub a good chunk off.

“Almira!” she screeches.

I step away from her to get to my locker, which happens to be next to Peter’s, and I get a good look at his Greek god profile—he resembles the gorgeous statues from the world civ textbook that I’ve taken a liking to, even though it’s sort of sick to lust over a hunk of carved marble.

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Mr. Gregory is my biology teacher. He used to be a Hollywood actor but somehow ended up teaching science at Coral Gables Preparatory. He’s hot, for an older guy. Lately I’m thinking that most guys are hot. It must be my hormones. I imagine all these wriggling bubbles of hormones flowing through my blood, swooshing through my body in swift rage. They’re microscopic, but they pack a punch.

While watching *Twilight*, I saw Mr. Gregory in a cafeteria scene. He was an extra in that film, and he’s young enough to pull off being a high school student, but he denied it when many of us saw the movie last week on cable. So my teacher is sort of famous and had the honor of working with Robert Pattinson, who’s immensely talented and extremely hot.

Mr. Gregory flashes a smile my way. He has brown hair combed back with gel and a fit body under his suit. But his canines are yellowish. The birth of a coffee stain, as my dad would say.

We have to do a lab exercise. Eww, dissecting a frog. Lisa gives me a meaningful look and then darts her eyes toward Peter, who is seated a few feet from me. We planned on doing lab with him, so I go in for the ambush.

“Hi, Peter,” I say, sidling up to him.

“Uh, err, hi,” he says, looking confused.

“You want to be my lab partner?”

“Yeah, okay.” He’s awkward for someone who’s good-looking, but he seems like a loner. I know he’s on the chess club, so he’s an intellectual. He also carries a sketchpad around for art class, and I hear that he’s really good at drawing. I

also know his hotness grows incrementally by five percent a month, because last year he was slightly heavier and had more pimples, and when he returned to school this August, he had clear skin and a defined waistline. Some people are like that: they're okay looking, and all of a sudden you notice they're hot. I wonder when I'm going to blossom, if I ever am destined to. Soon, I hope.

"Hi, Peter, can I join you?" Lisa says.

"Uh, yeah, okay."

Peter isn't much of a talker, but that's fine. I'm satisfied by looking at his wavy brown hair and jade green eyes. Sometimes someone doesn't have to talk, because it's enough to just admire the person. When I go to bed at night I leave the television on mute, like an animated night-light, and it's great looking at Eric Bana or Jake Gyllenhaal while I doze off. There's no need for them to speak. Look handsome for me. Thanks.

Lab groups consist of two or three people, so this is our trio. Lisa glows and squeezes my arm. Then we both watch with horror as Peter leaves our station and returns with a metal tray that has a brownish blob on it.

I hold my hand to my mouth and Lisa looks pale. Peter hands us latex gloves and when his hand touches mine, I feel nothing. This romantic moment of skin colliding is ruined by the dead frog in front of us. I think of my Kermit stuffed animal that's propped up against the lamp on my nightstand. Dead Kermie.

Peter wields a scalpel and follows the directions in our lab guide. When Mr. Gregory walks by, he admonishes Lisa and me on our lack of participation. "Ladies, you need to give a helping hand."

I gingerly pull at one of the frog's legs as Peter cuts into the abdomen. I'm touching the leg of a dead frog. Eww. I really want to vomit. The formaldehyde stench gets to me and the sight of torn froggy corpses doesn't help my nausea either. Lisa doesn't look as bothered. She's participating the easy way by playing nurse and handing Peter a pair of surgical scissors. She leans in, pretending to be interested in the frog, but really she's staring at Peter's profile. She gets so close to him that she places her cheek on his shoulder.

Is it normal to hate my best friend? Yes, because this is the first time that either one of us is dealing with Peter and she's throwing herself at him. Plus, she showed interest in him first and now I want his attention, too.

“Do you need help?” I ask.

“I’m okay,” he says.

A quiet, dignified boy. How regal. I sigh. I wonder what it’ll be like to have a boyfriend. Dad and Grandpa both say I’m not allowed to date. They tell me over and over again that if I ever want to be with somebody, they’ll find a husband for me. Grandpa once mentioned that he knew many boys my age or a little older who would be perfect for me, but his style is old-fashioned. Arranged marriages are so last century.

Peter discards the frog. Poor frog. He died for our lab and he’s crudely thrown in the garbage. At least I’m no longer gagging, on the verge of throwing up, at the sight of the carcass. We have to do the questions at the end of the lab and Lisa continues to hover over Peter. They’re head to head, laughing at something, but I can’t hear their conversation. Students are clanging their metal trays and scalpels, talking amongst each other. I feel left out. When I scoot my stool closer to Peter, I hear him talk about intestines. Lisa smiles at him as if she’s listening to a comic act.

“It’s like our intestines are the same as a frog’s,” Peter says. “Did you see how the frog’s intestines were all curled up like ours?”

“We have nothing in common with frogs,” Lisa says, giggling.

“Of course we do. We have similar anatomy.”

“No, we don’t.”

Lisa can be really stupid. The whole point of biology is to learn that we’re related to animals and have the foundation of the cell. It’s about evolution stuff and how we all came from the sea. So my best friend is a man stealer *and* a dummy.

I can smell his balsam shampoo—he even smells good. I want him to turn his head to look at me, but he’s still leaning toward Lisa.

“So, like, how did they kill that frog?” Lisa asks.

“Probably drowned him,” Peter says, shrugging his shoulders.

I emit a loud, hysterical laugh, forcing the humor out of me. *Notice me, Peter.* Peter raises his eyebrows. I can be such a dope. Why do I have to act like an idiot in front of him? Now he must think I’m a nutcase with a horrible, unsexy, high-pitched laugh. I touch my hair and it’s frizzy since it’s a muggy day. My

face is oily because I didn't have time to blot it before getting to class. How am I ever going to get a boyfriend when I'm such a mess?

"Ohhhhhhhh!" Lisa says. "I get it, like, frogs are manphibians."

"Amphibians," I correct her.

"Ohhhhhhhh!"

"So you can't drown them," I say.

"It was a joke," Peter says.

"Ohhhh," Lisa says. "So they strangle them instead?"

"Why don't we stop by the library later to find out," Peter says.

Now they have a library date? This is the first time Lisa has talked to Peter and now he's all over her, educating her about frogs and offering to show her our library's reference website. I laugh again and neither one of them turns to look at me. I have to try harder to get him to notice me, even if that means pissing Lisa off.

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Mom picks Lisa and me up from school. Sometimes I walk, but if Mom's available she drives by. It's nice to have a ride, especially on rainy or sweltering days, but things can get uncomfortable. Boys stare at her. Mom's gorgeous with her hair down and full makeup; sometimes her tanned shoulders are left bare by a tank top. And the boys look and look. It's a hard blow on my self-esteem that my mom gets more attention than me.

Lisa and I get in the back seat of her blue Mercedes. Mom has the radio tuned to the '80s pop station and she's singing to Madonna's "Dress You Up." She's crooning with her eyes closed.

Traffic after school is terrible, with the seniors driving out of the student parking lot from one side, teachers leaving from an adjacent lot, and buses coming from the other direction. We're at a standstill behind dozens of automobiles. Some football players stand to the side of the parking lot. One of them, a husky giant, catches sight of my mom and blows a kiss her way, which she doesn't notice since her eyes are still shut.

"Mother," I whisper.

"Hmmm," she says.

"Mother!"

“I love vintage Madonna.”

“Mom!”

She hears the urgency in my voice above the radio’s volume. She stops, knowing I’m embarrassed. She just gave a juicy show to the jocks and they all saw me—now they know Almira’s mom is an *American Idol* wannabe who sings off-key. At least she isn’t singing to “Like a Virgin.”

Mom shimmies her shoulders to some Aerosmith tune. “Your mom’s so cool,” Lisa says to me.

*Then you can go ahead and have her*, I feel like saying. Lisa has a normal mom. Her mom has short hair and glasses and practices podiatry. She barely says a word to me whenever I visit, so there’s no room for embarrassment with Lisa, unless it’s embarrassing to have a mom who cures feet all day. Feet are gross, unless they’re fresh from a pedicure, and I can’t imagine touching them for a living.

We drive by Peter, who happens to be walking home. He looks up when he sees our car. His eyes become glued on my mom.

“Do you see how he’s looking at me?” Lisa asks.

*Um, no, he’s like totally checking out my mom!* A burst of rage explodes inside of me. I want Peter to notice me like that! I look at Mom, whose eyes are on the road. She doesn’t even notice Peter’s attention. That’s completely ungrateful of her. If he ever looks at me like that, I’ll feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven.

Peter crosses the street, his head turning as he walks so that he can continue to look at Mom. He’s going to morph into the girl in *The Exorcist*, but he can’t swivel his head in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree angle, so he turns away. I don’t feel relieved, because now I know I’m the only female in the world he won’t pay any attention to. He admires Lisa, the other girls at school, and now my mom. Everyone but me will be graced by his attention. I close my eyes and silently pray that he was looking at me instead. I’m right behind Mom in the back seat. But it really did seem like he was focusing on her. Why would he look at me like that?

Lisa’s house is at the beginning of our block and Mom drops her off. Then we make it to our house. It isn’t until I’m inside the kitchen that I realize how empty my stomach is. During lunch I had studied in the library, away from the

temptations in the cafeteria. I watch Mom prepare chicken for sundown. But I'm really not that hungry to begin with. I'm too flustered about Peter, and trying to hatch a plan to get him to notice me.



# 3

Sifting through my folder tonight, I see that Parent Night is coming soon. Traditionally, students go to Parent Night all dressed up and afterwards they find a hangout. Last year it was so fun. I got a manicure, had my hair straightened, and wore a little red dress. While my parents did the boring task of talking to my teachers, I gossiped and texted. When the conferences were over, my friends and I went to a Chinese buffet, which cut into my curfew, but Dad kindly didn't rip into me when I came home at midnight.

I give the flyer to my parents, hoping that they'll go again this year even though they embarrass me. I'm at the age when everything they say or do irks me. Dad clipped his nails in the bathroom this morning and I could hear the snip-snip of shorn fingernails through the door. How uncouth. And a week ago, the living room curtains were wide open and some boy from school stood on the sidewalk watching my mom do contortions to an exercise video. They don't see that their behavior is uncool.

Sometimes I feel that I don't fit in. Years ago, during a sleepover at a friend's house, some girl I barely knew asked questions about my ethnicity. I was wearing pink nail polish and she asked me, "Your parents allow you to wear nail polish?" As if Muslim girls can't wear something harmless like nail polish. Those ignorant comments only come once in a while, because my real friends know that I do fit in. People who know very little about me think my mom will come to school wearing a veil or sari, and they're wowed by how hot she is (the only time her hotness makes me look good). Or they think Dad will have a long terrorist beard and bland clothes, but he always comes to school in a suit,

looking all suave and charming. I don't mind if my classmates see my parents, but it's best that they don't. Like most people my age, I pretend that my home life and my school life are on different planes of existence.

"Dad, are you going to Parent Night?" I ask during our nightly snack. It's late, and we eat as much as possible during the night hours.

He neatly rips the meat off a chicken bone with his precise teeth. As a dentist, he sees his teeth as fine instruments, like meat cleavers to a butcher or cuticle scissors for a manicurist. "Yes," he says.

Mom walks in, wearing her usual tank top and shorts—which she wears all day long, unlike normal moms who wear sweatsuits, housedresses, and robes. She perks up her ears when she hears my question. "Of course we're going, Almira," she says.

"Woo hoo! Can you just drop me off, though? I get good grades. You don't need to stick with me or talk to all my teachers. I just want to go to dinner with my friends after the meetings."

"We want to see all your teachers."

"Their pictures are on the school website!"

"Stop whining, Almira," Dad says.

I pout, feeling put out, as if my emotions don't matter. I guess I'll just suffer through things the way I normally do.

"My father called today," Dad says.

"Yeah," I mumble through a mouthful of chicken.

"He's going to give you driving lessons starting this weekend."

My jaw would be dropping, but I'm still chewing. A few months ago I had an argument with my parents about how I'd be sixteen soon and that I wanted my driver's license. They had taken me seriously, so Dad gave me some lessons. Driving is terrifying. And now with Grandpa as a teacher! In his tanklike car. Will I live to experience my sixteenth birthday?

"Isn't it best that you continue to teach her?" Mom says.

*Thank you, Mom, I think. You overexercise and sing in a crummy voice, but thank you for defending me.*

"My father insists," Dad says. "Almira has had a learner's permit for nearly a year, and I don't have time to finish teaching her."

“Dad, with six lessons already, I know how to drive,” I say. “But I’m out of practice.”

“I don’t have time to give you more lessons,” Dad says.

“He’s a really bad driver,” Mom says.

“He’s just old, that’s all. His faculties are with him.”

“What faculties are those?” Mom asks.

Dad presses his lips together, and I don’t want to be around during one of their fights. I hope to never have in-laws. I want a drop-dead-gorgeous husband who’s extremely wealthy and has parents who live across the world in some exotic country. I’d only have to see my in-laws during holidays, and maybe not even then because they’d live in the middle of a jungle and I could always use the excuse that I didn’t get immunized for my trip or that the water makes me sick. But then they could visit me. I’ll worry about that when I get older, but in the present I know that Mom and Grandpa don’t like each other.

I go to my room. Through my door I can hear Mom and Dad hissing at each other, refusing to raise their voices so that they won’t emotionally scar me. I call Lisa’s home phone to bounce my worries off her (her cell is always low on minutes). Her line is busy, which means that she’s online. She has dial-up, which is prehistoric. That’s like using VHS when there’s DVD and TiVo.

My DSL box blinks at me when I get on the Internet to use Instant Messenger. Lisa is on her computer, as I predicted. I start typing.

*AlmiraRules:* hey

*GorgeLisa:* hi

*AlmiraRules:* my parents are definitely going to parent night, so i hope we’ll see each other there

*GorgeLisa:* my parents are coming too. It’s until 8. so late

*AlmiraRules:* No! that means I have to fast longer, past the sun setting!!!!

*GorgeLisa:* at least u get to eat. a real fast means no food at all.

*AlmiraRules:* it’s not easy

*GorgeLisa:* i know. do you think peter will be at parent night

*AlmiraRules:* i hope so, I want to see him there

*GorgeLisa:* what do you mean?

*AlmiraRules:* i mean i know you like him, so of course i want him to be there for you

*GorgeLisa:* thanks, because he's important to me

*AlmiraRules:* ok, anyway grandpa is going to give me driving lessons since I haven't had a lesson in a while, then my learner's permit can become a license when i turn 16

*GorgeLisa:* no, don't let him, he's practically blind

*AlmiraRules:* say nice things about me at my funeral

*GorgeLisa:* i'm sure you'll live. his car will flatten anything that you hit.

*AlmiraRules:* yeah, right

*GorgeLisa:* ur parents are really going to let you drive with him?

*AlmiraRules:* yeah, they care about my welfare and whether or not I have a pulse. just watch my accident on the evening news. your best friend will be famous.

*GorgeLisa:* don't be so pessimistic. anyway, isn't Peter a q-t? i hope he likes me

*AlmiraRules:* yeah

*GorgeLisa:* I need help with my social studies homework

*AlmiraRules:* the newspaper research assignment

*GorgeLisa:* where is the boston chronicle published?

*AlmiraRules:* where do u think?

*GorgeLisa:* don't know

*AlmiraRules:* BOSTON

*GorgeLisa:* thanks, you're the bestest

*AlmiraRules:* night

*GorgeLisa:* bye

Lisa and I are in the same honors classes, but sometimes she acts like she can't think properly. She also likes Peter, just when I start to think that I like him, too. I eat a slice of cake before going to bed. I'll wake up extremely early to have breakfast with my parents, to fill up before the daylight hours of starvation.

I'll feel hungry in other ways, too. Like how can I get Peter to notice me? How can I get my parents to lay off me? How can I get Grandpa to drop the idea of

giving me driving lessons? I want so much, but don't know how to get things going my way. I stare at my computer. I have a Jake Gyllenhaal desktop, and it transitions to a Robert Pattinson screensaver. I kiss my fingers and then place them on my screen. Maybe I'll take a picture of Peter with my cell phone so that I can have a new desktop image to adore. Grandpa doesn't know squat about technology, so he never checks my computer. He doesn't want me to know anything about boys, yet I have a whole PC file of hunks that he doesn't know how to get his hands on. And I want to add Peter to the collection.

...

My family is really strict about banning boys from my life. A boy, who was nothing more than a friend, once walked home with Lisa and me. Dad happened to drive by while we were walking, and when I got home he gave me the third degree. Who was that boy? Why was he with me? How long have I known him? Was he interested in me? Did he inappropriately touch me? Who were his parents? Did he ask me out? And Grandpa is always ripping posters off my wall. He tore off Brandon Flowers because he thought he was a classmate I had fallen in love with. I can only wish that Brandon went to my school.

They act like boys are poison. I suppose that some of them are toxic. For example, Kevin Federline ruined Britney Spears. She'll never return to her former glory after knowing him. So some boys can destroy girls, I'm well aware of that, but others are okay. Sometimes I feel weird thinking about boys, because it seems wrong for a Muslim girl to be lusting after them. But isn't that what typical teenage girls do? Am I allowed to be typical?

Roberto Aguilar once asked me out, in the first month of ninth grade, but I declined. He was funny and sweet, but he had small, crooked corn-teeth that bothered me (also, what would Dad think?) and a cast on his foot from a football accident. His dry, hairy, grotesque toes peeked out from the end of his cast. I regret turning him down, because now he wears clear braces and no longer has the cast. His feet also improved, because I saw him in flip-flops at the mall the other day and his toes looked normal. He's totally hot, and I blew the beginnings of a relationship by being shallow. I wonder what a relationship with him would be like. Am I supposed to sneak around with him, or tell my parents that he's a friend? I don't think my parents will even accept me having a male friend.

Another guy I sort of fell in love with was Buff12, who IM'ed me one day (by accident, he said; my ID was similar to his friend's) and we emailed each other for a month. Then he became honest and said that instead of being an eighteen-year-old soccer player from Brazil with a buff body, he was really an unemployed thirty-year-old actor who was out of shape. Pedo alert. I put him on my ignore list and didn't think of him again.

I want a boyfriend. I'm ready for one, even if my family isn't. I'm determined to have one. I close my eyes and think about all the boys at school until my mind settles on Peter. Mmmmmmmmmmm.

My stomach roars like a lion, which halts my romantic thoughts. It now feels like my belly is separate from the rest of me, like I have a dog inside of me that needs to be walked, fed, and bathed. Down, boy. I eat breakfast to silence the beast.

I walk to school, because I don't feel like listening to my mom sing again. Lisa walks alongside me. She's wearing a pink sweater-dress that clings to her skinny body. Her arms are slender, with knobby elbows. I look at my own arms, which are on the plump side. Mom assures me that bracelets look good on me because of the fat on my arms, as if I'm supposed to take that as a compliment. *No, you're not a ravishing beauty, but you can always be a hand model.* Wow.

At least I'm losing weight. I pat my stomach, which is less poochy than normal. My pants are even sagging on me. I adjust my glasses. I have contact lenses, which I really want to wear everyday, but they make my eyes red and itchy. I don't have too many pimples, so my skin is good. I wonder if I could ever be considered hot, but the idea seems laughable to me.

We stand by the front entrance and try to spot Peter. I'm sweeping my eyes over the crowd, as is Lisa. Maybe that explains the way she's dressed. She even wears makeup, which she usually doesn't have on, and she applied it wrong. Two thick stripes of pink blush look out of place on her round cheeks.

While we're on the lookout for Peter, a silver monolith comes into view. It's gigantic. The sun shines on the massive vehicle as it moves toward us. Dewdrops glint off of it like diamonds. It's a Hummer. I've seen many of them, but it's still odd to see such huge vehicles on the street. Why does anyone need such a huge car? Dad says that it's to show off. I'd be afraid to drive one of

them. I'm still afraid to drive any sort of car.

The Hummer stops in front of us. My eyes try to penetrate the tinted windows, but all I see is a reflection of me and my classmates. The door opens and I see one tan leg, followed by another. A beautiful face follows, and then a tiny waist emerges as the girl unfolds herself out of the vehicle. Boys whistle. I see Peter stop in his tracks to stare. Lisa tenses up next to me, her muscles taut. I wonder who this person is, with her silky brown hair, flawless skin, and a modelesque physique.

The girl smirks, looking coyly at her admirers.

"Who is that?" Lisa asks.

"I don't know," I say. "She must be new."

The girl has long, thick, Catherine-Zeta-Jones-type hair and bottomless brown eyes. We watch her go inside the building, and we see her again in first-period English. Our teacher, Ms. Odige, introduces her. "This is Shakira Malik. Shakira, tell everyone a little about yourself."

Shakira stands up, her beige dress flowing around her toned legs. "I'm Shakira, and I just moved down here from Orlando," she says. Her voice is sexy and husky, a grown woman's voice.

Malik? I wonder if she's Middle Eastern. I hope she is, because then I won't be the only Muslim in the school. It isn't like I'm lonely or anything, but to know someone else who shares my culture seems comfortable to me, the same way many of my classmates speak Spanish to each other all the time. I want to be around someone who shares that with me. I look at her short dress and become skeptical on her possible Muslimness. Muslim girls aren't supposed to dress like that (even though many Muslims wouldn't like the way I dress). Maybe Malik is Eastern European. But then she has that first name, Shakira, which is definitely Arabic. It's the coolest name, the same as one of my favorite pop singers.

Shakira barely pays attention to anything going on in class. While the teacher talks, she continues to give coy looks to boys. Mike winks at her and she grins at him over her shoulder. Luis can't pry his eyes off of her. Shakira's eyes skim his athletic body in a predatory way.

There are grumblings from girls about her. Girls can be petty and vicious when

it comes to competing with each other on looks and attention. Surprisingly, the pretty, popular girls don't seem to take to her, even though Shakira seems to be their type. "What a man-eater," Lisa whispers in my ear.

I can't agree more, but I want to know more about her. Where are her parents from, and is she fasting like I am? I see her hand in an assignment to Ms. Odige, and she has large, bubbly handwriting. She also puts hearts above her i's. Even her penmanship is awesome. I look at my sloppy handwriting. Sometimes I can't read what I've written down. Some people are just perfect, and I'm not one of them. There is this whole secret club of perfect, cool people. I'm in high school, so I can tell. There are the higher ups, the riffraff, and the people in the middle. I'm considered a middleton, which isn't horrible, but of course I wonder what it feels like to be on top.



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