

ONE  
MAN  
GUY



Michael Barakiva

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX  
NEW YORK

Copyright © 2014 by Michael Barakiva  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United States of America  
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark  
First edition, 2014  
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

macteenbooks.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barakiva, Michael.

One man guy / Michael Barakiva. — First edition.

pages cm

Summary: "When Alek's high-achieving Armenian-American parents send him to summer school, he thinks his summer is ruined. But then he meets Ethan, who opens his world in a series of truly unexpected ways"—Provided by publisher.

ISBN 978-0-374-35645-3 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-374-35646-0 (ebook)

[1. Gays—Fiction. 2. Coming out (Sexual orientation)—Fiction.  
3. Love—Fiction. 4. Armenian Americans—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.B229538On 2014

[Fic]—dc23

2013033518

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers may be purchased for business or promotional use. For information on bulk purchases please contact Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 x5442 or by e-mail at [specialmarkets@macmillan.com](mailto:specialmarkets@macmillan.com).

*To Rafael*  
*When I started this book*  
*I didn't realize*  
*I was writing it for you*

*And*

*To my family*  
*For providing endless love, support, and,*  
*Of course,*  
*Material*

*“One belongs to New York instantly. One belongs to it  
as much in five minutes as in five years.”*

—Tom Wolfe

*“If you can make a good bargain with an Armenian, you can  
make a good bargain with the devil.”*

—Ancient Persian saying

*“I got the outfit for the party.”*

—Rufus Wainwright, “Rashida”

# 1

ALEK STARED AT THE MENU SUSPICIOUSLY. HE SMELLED marinara sauce and a trap.

“Welcome to Trattoria dell’Arte. My name is Lizzy. Can I start you off with something to drink?” The waitress was young, maybe a college student already home for the summer, with a kind, round face framed by bangs that curled up at the bottom. Alek pitied her. She had no idea what she was in for.

“What bottled water do you have?” Alek’s mother asked, while his father and brother inspected the menu like enemy drones searching for their opponents’ weak spots. Even though both of his parents were born in this country, Alek’s mom spoke with the slight accent she inherited from the Little Armenia neighborhood in Los Angeles where she grew up. Most of the time the accent just hovered in the background of her speech, elongating her vowels and giving her an untraceable European mystique. But when

she needed to, like now, she turned it on the way a spider might weave an especially enticing web to lure its prey in for the kill.

“Bottled water, coming right up!” Lizzy responded cheerfully, misunderstanding.

“No, we’d like to know the *brand* of the bottled water,” Alek’s father specified.

“Oh,” Lizzy said, as if he might be kidding.

“You see, many bottled waters actually have levels of contaminants equal to or even higher than tap.” Alek’s mom informed poor Lizzy of this information as if doing her a favor.

Alek looked at his older brother, Nik, but he continued ignoring Alek. Alek turned back to Lizzy pityingly, futilely trying to telepathically prepare her for the ordeal about to transpire.

“We have Evian,” Lizzy offered.

“Evian’s good,” his father agreed.

Lizzy relaxed. “So, Evian to start?”

“Do you keep any at room temperature?” Alek’s mother asked.

“Excuse me?” Lizzy asked nervously. Alek suspected the full horror of the situation was slowly dawning on her.

Alek’s mom seized the opportunity to educate. “Digesting chilled water actually taxes the body,” she lectured, “because the body has to bring anything it ingests up to its own temperature before it reaches the stomach. That’s why we prefer room temperature water.”

“It’s easier on the system,” Nik added, as if this was something everyone should know.

“I can ask,” Lizzy offered weakly, succumbing to the three-person tag team.

“That would be great,” Alek’s mother continued. “And if not, would you ask someone in the kitchen to warm it to room temperature?”

Lizzy laughed, as if Alek’s mother was making a joke. But Alek knew she wasn’t.

“Not more than sixty-eight degrees, please. Seventy at most,” she instructed. “I don’t want it to be *warm*, because then we’d have to put ice in it, and that would just be adding contaminants, which would defeat the whole point. I’m sure you understand.” Alek suspected Lizzy was wondering what heinous crime she had committed in a previous life to get stuck with this table. “Unless, of course, you have ice made from bottled water.”

“No,” Lizzy said slowly, as if she were talking to a dangerous criminal. “I think all of our ice is from tap.”

“So let’s see if we can find some Evian at room temperature,” Alek’s mother concluded. Lizzy scuttled off.

Alek thought it should be illegal for Armenians to go to restaurants. Or that at least they should come with a warning like cigarettes: “Waiting on Armenians Might Be Hazardous to Your Health.” The problem was that Armenians prided themselves on being such good cooks that they resented paying money for something they felt they could do better.

“I wish they had zatar here.” Nik pitched his voice just loud enough that the staff could hear him complain about the absence of the Middle Eastern spice mixture.

“We can make some when we get home,” his mother said. Alek wondered if non-Armenian families spent their time at restaurants planning backup meals when the institutions they were patronizing inevitably disappointed them.

“So, Alek, your mother and I have to talk to you about something,” his father began.

“I know,” Alek responded. “And I know it must be bad since I’ve been begging you to bring me here for months.” He dunked a piece of bread into olive oil.

“You know, they might just be doing something nice,” Nik said. Alek could hear the implied *Not like you deserve it* trailing off his brother’s words.

“Well, spit it out and let’s get it over with,” Alek said.

“You’re going to summer school!” his mother announced, as if he’d just won a prize.

“I’m what?” Alek abandoned the glistening piece of bread on his plate.

“They said you’re going to *summer school*,” Nik repeated from across the table.

“It’s not that I couldn’t hear them, dimwit. It’s just that I didn’t believe it,” Alek snapped.

“Aleksander, please lower your voice,” his father admonished him, absentmindedly running his hands over the salt-and-pepper beard he’d grown this year. “We’re in public.”

If Alek had been in a better mood, he might’ve made a joke about Armenians’ deluded belief that, like royalty, paparazzi tracked their every action. But he wasn’t. “Why’m I going to summer school? It’s not like I failed or anything.” Alek’s mind began racing, trying to figure out what miracle he could perform in the last week of school that might alter this terrible fate.

“Honey, Ms. Schmidt said she’d be willing to make an exception for you,” Alek’s mom explained. “She said that if you

retook English and math and earned high enough grades, you could stay on Honor Track next year.”

“You spoke to Ms. Schmidt behind my back? This is a total conspiracy.”

“Aleksander, you are fourteen years old. We are your parents. When we speak to your guidance counselor, it’s for your own good,” his father scolded him.

“Well, maybe I can still get my grades up—”

Alek’s mother cut him off. “Ms. Schmidt told us that even if you got the highest scores possible, it still wouldn’t keep you on Honor Track.”

“Well, who cares about that?” Alek fought back. “I’ll just take Standard next year. It’s not like that would be the end of the world.”

“You know, Alek,” his father started, “South Windsor has one of the best public school systems in New Jersey. Your great-grandparents fled Turkey during the genocide of the Armenian people almost one hundred years ago and ended up in this country with nothing. They gave up their land, their belongings, and their history to come to a country where they could be safe and where their children would grow up without persecution and receive the best education in the world.”

Alek knew that when his dad starting speaking “Old World,” things were bad.

“Their sacrifice means you have a responsibility to do the best you can,” his father concluded.

“But what about tennis camp?” Alek cried out.

His parents spotted Lizzy returning with a bottle of Evian

and stopped talking immediately. *God forbid an outsider be privy to the secrets of the Family Khederian*, Alek thought.

"I have good news—we keep some Evian at room temperature in storage," Lizzy said, naïvely opening the bottle.

"I wish you had mentioned that they were plastic bottles," Alek's mother lamented semi-apologetically before Lizzy could pour.

"What?" Lizzy asked.

"We don't drink from plastic," Alek's mother explained, as if the words coming out of her mouth made perfect sense. "First of all, polyvinyl chloride distributes pollutants that are suspected to disrupt the hormonal balance. Secondly, bisphenol A has been linked to obesity and abnormal chromosomes. And you don't even want to know what the plastic does to the water if it's been left out in the sun!" Alek truly marveled at his mother's ability to say insane things reasonably. "We'll just have some green tea," Alek's mom concluded.

"Can I tell you about the specials?" Lizzy asked, taking a step back in preparation for the anticipated assault.

"Actually, can we ask a few questions first?" Alek's dad countered.

"Sure," Lizzy responded wearily. Alek's parents wound up for the interrogation.

"What farm do you get your mozzarella from?"

"Which of the vegetables are locally sourced?"

"Are the tomatoes organic?"

"Are the pickles boiled before they're brined?"

"Are the peas fresh or frozen?"

"Is the rack of lamb domestic or international?"

Lizzy consulted the notes she'd frantically taken on her little pad. "Um, let me see. The mozzarella is generic, I think some of the squash and cucumbers are local, and I don't know about the tomatoes. What else did you ask? Something about pickles?"

Lizzy did her best as the tag-team barrage continued, but by the time it ended, her spirit had been broken. Nik's not-so-subtle sneers every time she failed to answer a question didn't help.

"Do you know what you'd like to eat?" she asked meekly, holding her notepad like a shield. "Or do you need a little more time?"

"I think we're still deciding," Alek's father said.

Alek swore he heard the formerly kind Lizzy muttering obscenities under her breath as she left. "At least with tea, they'll have to boil the water, so we know it's safe," his mother confided to the table. "Now, what were we saying?"

"I was asking how I can go to summer school when tennis camp starts in two weeks. Remember tennis camp? That thing you *promised* I could do because you wouldn't let me try out for the team this year?"

"We didn't let you try out because we thought that time would be better spent on improving your grades. I'm afraid tennis camp is going to have to wait as well," his father informed him.

"But what about the deposit? You know they're not going to give that back," Alek pointed out.

"We know, Alek," his mother responded. "But it's a loss we're willing to bear. Academics come first in our house."

"This sucks," Alek hissed.

"Don't use that word," his father said reflexively. Alek remembered the first time he heard one of his friends curse in front of

his parents—a real curse, not *damn* or *suck*. That would never fly in his home.

“Well, if you find the work too challenging, I’d be happy to help you with it.” Nik smirked.

Alek kicked his brother under the table.

“Alek, stop that!” his mom reprimanded him. “People will talk!” She looked around to see if anyone had witnessed the inexcusable faux pas.

“God, Mom, don’t you understand, nobody is looking at us. Nobody cares what we do. I can stand on top of this table and throw bread at him and they wouldn’t care.” To demonstrate his point, Alek picked up the piece of now-soggy bread, drenched in oil and balsamic vinegar, and aimed it across the table at Nik.

“Aleksander, that’s enough,” his father scolded him. “Now put that bread down, sit at this table like an adult, which is how you’re always asking to be treated, and enjoy the meal we’re paying for.”

*The meal Mom’s paying for*, Alek thought to himself. But he knew better than to say that out loud. Ever since his dad got laid off from his architectural firm last year and his mom had to return to work full-time, Alek’s dad had been especially sensitive to the money issue.

“Well, thanks, guys,” Alek said, the saccharin pouring off his voice. “Let’s see—you think I’m an idiot, you tell me one week before school ends that I’m going to have to spend the rest of my summer in the den of despair that is my high school, I can’t go to tennis camp even though you *promised* I could—is there anything else you want to lay on me?”

“Well,” Alek’s mom said, fidgeting with her napkin.

“Oh my God, are you kidding me? What else can there possibly be?”

His mom looked at his dad for help, but he was scrutinizing the menu as if it were the Ark of the Covenant.

“You don’t have to be in the top five percent of your class like I am to figure it out,” Nik observed. “If you’re doing summer school, you’re not going to be able to go on the family vacation.”

“Now, Andranik, we’ll handle this,” his father said, finally looking up. Nik, who’d sprouted another four inches his junior year, had the decency to shut up for once. “You see, Alek, when we committed to going to Niagara Falls with the other families from church this summer, we bought into a group deal. If we pulled out now, we’d jeopardize everyone else’s vacation.”

“Not to mention that I had to ask special permission to get those days off from camp,” Nik added.

“You’re telling me that you’re choosing the people from church over your own son for our *family* vacation?” Alek asked incredulously. “And I’m sure the fact that Nik’s girlfriend is one of those people is a total coincidence, right? I mean, I’m used to you choosing Nik over me, but choosing Nanar over your own flesh and blood? That’s a new all-time low.”

“She has nothing to do with it,” Nik interjected.

“Whatever.”

“Alek, Nanar’s family is just one of the many families we’d be letting down if we backed out now,” his mother explained.

Nik flipped through the menu, the disdain with which he turned the pages making it clear he wasn’t impressed. “Besides,

all of us from Armenian Youth are planning on researching our heritage projects in the Toronto Archives.”

“Not to mention losing all of our money,” his father concluded.

“I still don’t understand why we didn’t just take a normal family vacation by ourselves,” Alek asked petulantly.

“Well, if that’s what you want to do next year, that’s what we’ll do. Your father and I decided that because you can’t go this year, you’ll get to choose where we go next summer.”

“If I don’t have to go back to summer school, you mean,” Alek rifled back. “Because who knows? Maybe I’ll get another”—he gasped for dramatic effect—“God forbid—another C, and they’ll threaten to kick me off Honor Track again, and I’ll have to sacrifice another summer of my life to the cruelest institution in the history of mankind.”

“Be reasonable . . .” his father began, but stopped when he saw Lizzy walking back slowly, balancing a pot of hot water and four mugs with tea bags in them.

Alek’s mother smiled at the waitress when she reached the table. Lizzy took it as a good sign, but Alek knew better. “Do you have any loose tea?” his mother asked.

“Loose tea?” Lizzy asked meekly.

“It’s just that some studies show that the paper in tea bags—”

“Oh my God!” Alek exploded. “Why are you torturing this poor girl? She’s not even related to you! And nobody gets cancer from drinking tea in bags. Do you hear me? NO ONE. And no one gets cancer from drinking Evian in plastic bottles!” The way the other customers in the restaurant were looking at Alek told him he was probably using his outside voice, but he didn’t care.

“This is supposed to be my meal? My consolation prize for being betrayed by my parents to a summer of hell? Then we’re going to do it my way.” He looked at Lizzy, whose befuddlement was quickly morphing into gratitude. “The tea is great, thank you.” Alek slammed the menu shut. “I’ll have the pasta carbonara. They’ll split the grilled steak. And that jerk with his mouth gaping open like a fish in the corner will have the lasagna. And make sure the meat is well-done, okay?”

Lizzy nodded yes, furiously scribbling into her little pad.

“Now quickly, go before they have a chance to say anything!”

Lizzy didn’t need any further encouragement. She sprinted away, her apron strings flopping behind her.

The moment Lizzy was out of earshot, Alek’s mom leaned in. “I do hope they cook the meat all the way through,” she confided. “Otherwise I’ll simply have to send it back.”

# 2

"GOODBYE, YOU HELLACIOUS DEN OF SIN!" BECKY screamed at the top of her lungs. She had just popped on her right Rollerblade and was struggling with the left. A few of the kids walking by her locker laughed, but most were in too much of a rush to escape the last day of school to pay her any attention.

"Are you done?" Alek asked miserably.

"Goodbye, you heinous concrete monstrosity!" Becky continued, ignoring him. "Goodbye, you culinary atrocities that parade as lunch! And you barely conscious teachers, a very special goodbye to you!" Becky turned around lopsidedly, still wearing just one skate, and looked through the window at the yard in front of the school, where even the buses lined up looked impatient. She called out to the students outside, knowing they couldn't hear her. "And most importantly, goodbye to you, lemming peers of mine." Becky waved to them vigorously. Some

of the students, misinterpreting her, waved back, inspiring Becky to continue. "For three blessed months, my life will be free of you all." Becky had gotten her second skate on and began circling the halls joyfully. "No more meaningless homework assignments and school assemblies. No more—"

"Becky, that's enough," Alek cut her off. He ran his fingers through his thick curly Armenian hair and adjusted the hunter-green JanSport book bag he'd prayed would fall apart every day since his mom gave it to him the first day of seventh grade. "Can we get going, please?"

"Well, somebody's underwear is all knotted up today. Just because you have to go to summer school doesn't mean I should forgo my last-day-of-school ritual."

"I'm just saying, a little bit of consideration wouldn't kill you. I'm still going to have to deal with all the stupid things you're saying goodbye to."

"It's not my fault you're stupid."

"It's not my fault you're a bitch," Alek shot back. He looked down the school corridors, not believing that only six days had passed since his parents had informed him he'd be denied the well-earned summer respite that was every teenager's sacred right. "By the way, 1999 called. They want their Rollerblades back."

"Should I hand over your entire wardrobe while I'm at it?" she asked, one-upping him as usual. "I still don't get why you're even doing it."

"I told you, my parents are making me! Ms. Schmidt told them that if I get A's in algebra and English, I can stay on Honor Track, and then I might even be able to get on AP by junior year."

“Ms. Schmidt is a cow. How can we be expected to take advice from someone who decided to become a guidance counselor? That’s like asking a blind man to help you pick a pair of glasses.” Becky finally snapped on her last safety pad. “Are you ready? I’ve been waiting for you for, like, forever.”

Alek rolled his eyes.

“Catch me if you can, slowpoke.” Becky kicked off and skated down the main hall, where green-and-white athletic banners from past years hung like sloths. A hall monitor halfheartedly called after her, “No rollerblading in the hallways,” but Becky ignored the reprimand and flew out the main entrance onto Western Avenue. Alek didn’t bother running after her. He knew she’d come back eventually.

Alek made his way up the small hill in front of his high school, trying to figure out why his freshman year had been so miserable. He even missed middle school, he was embarrassed to admit. He might not have been the most popular kid in eighth grade, but he made honor roll without trying, played first doubles for the tennis team, never had to worry about finding a partner for class projects, and had been invited to enough birthday parties and bar/bat mitzvahs to keep himself busy on the weekends.

High school, however, was its own world with its own rules, as Alek was still figuring out. As his grades started slipping, his freshman year fast-forwarded into a blur of conferences and parent-teacher meetings, none of which made any difference. And the harder he tried, the worse he did, like medicine that just made you sicker.

And when Alek’s parents didn’t let him try out for the tennis team, they effectively cut him off from all his old middle school

friends, like Jason and Matthew. Alek's social life hit a new low in humiliation when his mother reached out to some of those kids and invited them over for a surprise birthday dinner party. Alek could tell they only showed up because their parents made them, and that they'd all have rather been at the movies or playing video games. And instead of ordering in pizza, which is what he would've wanted if they'd bothered asking him, his parents insisted on making an entire Armenian feast. What grownups didn't realize was that nothing was more embarrassing than when they tried to help.

The Khederians lived close enough that Alek could walk to and from school when the weather was good, and he and Becky made a point of doing it together. Whenever she didn't have to stay after for band practice, they met in front of her locker after eighth period. Then she'd wheel ahead, eventually circling back up with him just past the tennis courts and the large black ash tree that got hit by lightning last spring.

The sound of a sharp whistle penetrated Alek's brain. He squinted up into the afternoon June sun. "Pay attention, young man," an elderly crossing guard reprimanded him, the folds of wrinkles on her forehead arching in concern. Alek looked up, startled, and stepped back onto the curb, mumbling thanks. He caught a glimpse of Becky up ahead, weaving her way through pedestrians on the sidewalk.

Alek just wasn't one of those people who thrived under pressure, like his old doubles partner. Seth wasn't a better tennis player than Alek, but when it really mattered, Seth would deliver, serving an ace or slamming the forehand winner down the line.

But when Alek felt pressured, time sped up and out of his

control, like when he and Seth had played in the final match last year against Steinbrook. The two teams had been evenly matched, reaching a tiebreaker in the fifth set. Alek and Seth were down five to six on Alek's serve. They needed to win the point to stay in the match.

Seth had trotted over to Alek after he faulted on his first serve. "I'm counting on you, man. You can do it." Seth gave Alek an encouraging pat on the shoulder and resumed his position on the court.

Faulting again would lose them the point and the match, so Alek prepared for his simple-but-reliable second serve. As he planted his feet and prepared to throw the ball in the air, Alek had decided to give the serve everything he had. He hoped the unexpected force would surprise the opposing team. Besides, this was the last match that he would be playing as an eighth grader, and he wanted to make it count. Alek aimed at the corner of his opponents' advantage court, threw the tennis ball high in the air, arched his back, and swung his racket up and around to hit the ball with maximum strength, hoping with every part of himself that the serve would find its mark.

Instead, the ball had slammed meaninglessly into the net. Alek had double-faulted, losing the point and the match.

In the locker room afterward, Seth tried to pull Alek out of the black hole he'd sunk into. "Don't worry about it, dude. It's just tennis."

Alek had looked up, his shoulders relaxing for the first time since his faulty serve. He thought about how much he would miss his tennis partner next year, since Seth would be going to the fancy private high school two townships over. Even though they

hadn't really known each other until they started playing together and they didn't have the same friends or hang out together, their tennis partnership had blossomed into its own special type of friendship.

"Hold on to this." Seth held a tennis ball out to Alek.

"Why?"

"It's the ball from your last serve."

"So?"

"I had to get it out from the net. You hit the ball so hard that it got stuck. That's not an easy thing to do, man. If your serve had landed, you would have aced them, no question." Seth leaned forward, and the light caught the gold of the Star of David necklace he had started wearing after his bar mitzvah.

"But I didn't. I double-faulted and lost us the match."

"Come on, man. I'd much rather play with someone who gives it everything he's got than someone who takes the safe route, okay? That's what made playing with you so fun this year."

Alek had stretched out his hand to accept the ball from Seth, and their fingers brushed. Alek kept his hand there, their hands holding the ball in midair between them. Their fingers had remained linked, connecting them and embracing the suspended ball.

Alek thought he saw Seth leaning in right before they both heard the locker room door swing open.

"Aleksander, are you ready?" Alek's father shouted in.

"Yeah, Dad—one sec!" Alek had grabbed the rest of his things and scrambled out. "Hey, Seth . . ." He wanted to thank Seth for having been such a great partner and friend, for being kind to him when most partners would've ripped him apart, but he

didn't know how to do any of that without sounding stupid or corny. "Thanks for the ball," he finished, looking away.

"No prob, man."

Alek hadn't seen Seth since then. He thought about reaching out to him, but never actually did because he didn't know what to say. All Alek knew was that he missed Seth differently from everything else in the world he left behind.

# 3

ALEK TURNED ON ETRA AND SAW BECKY LEANING against a stop sign.

“What took you so long? I could’ve taken the SATs waiting for you.”

Even on her skates, Becky barely broke five feet. Nothing about her appearance, from her frizzy brown hair to her daily outfit of overalls and a sweater, betrayed her real personality. Becky had gone to the other middle school in South Windsor, so Alek hadn’t met her until they sat next to each other in Earth Science on the first day of freshman year. Becky began whispering asides to Alek about their teacher’s ear hair less than five minutes later, and by the time the bell rang Mr. Cenci had reprimanded Alek twice for disrupting the class with his laughter. Each time, Becky stared straight ahead, serious and solemn, feigning innocence at Alek’s disruptive behavior.

“So when are you leaving for Maine?” Alek asked.

“Change of plans.”

“What happened?”

“I decided to dis my grandma when I found this.” She unzipped her book bag and handed Alek a brochure.

“You want to go to skating camp? Really?” Alek flipped through the glossy images of teens performing stunts and tricks.

“It’s the last two weeks before school starts. You get to train with pros. I can’t wait!” Becky said, spinning with joy. “My folks told me I’d have to pay for it if I wanted to go, so I got a job at Dairy Queen.”

“God, I’m so happy that you’re going to be here,” Alek admitted.

“Everybody’s been saying that to me. A few minutes ago, a group of cheerleaders stopped and thanked me for deciding to stay. They said the summer just wouldn’t be the same without me.”

“It wouldn’t! You wanna hit the movies this weekend?”

“Okay, but there’s an Audrey Hepburn film that I want to see, too. Why don’t we catch whatever mindless-superhero-blockbuster ridiculousness you want on Friday night, and then we can spend a civilized afternoon watching *My Fair Lady* on Saturday? I’ll see if Mandy and Suzie can come.”

“Do you have to?” Alek asked.

“It might be my last chance to see them before band camp,” Becky protested.

“You know I don’t like hanging out with girls,” Alek said.

“Thanks a lot.”

“You know what I mean, Becky. You’re not like them. You’re different.”

“Well, don’t even think of standing me up,” Becky warned him. “Because if you do, I’ll cut you. I’ve got a reputation around these parts for being a badass. Why do you think no one picks on us? They know you’re running with me and my posse.”

It was hard to imagine someone less intimidating than Becky. Luckily, South Windsor wasn’t the kind of high school where anyone got beaten up. The kids here were interested in getting good grades, getting better SAT scores, and getting into the best colleges. Honor Society students at South Windsor High were treated the way jocks would be at a different school.

“If I’m lucky, this book about the making of *My Fair Lady* will have arrived by then. That’s the reason I want to see it again! In fact, I’ll probably want to watch it again *after* I read the book, too, so I can really appreciate the nuances.”

Alek and Becky continued until they reached Orchard Street.

“I can go down the rest of the way by myself.” Becky smiled, initiating their ritual.

“Why don’t I walk you to your door?” Alek recited on cue.

The first time Alek and Becky had walked home from school together, he had insisted on taking her all the way to the front door, because “that’s what my mother told me a gentleman would do.” Becky was so flabbergasted by Alek’s bizarre chivalric formality that she let him accompany her. Ever since then, when they arrived at this intersection, they reenacted the exchange.

Alek dropped Becky off, retraced his steps back to Mercer, and continued walking home. A few minutes later, he reached the train station, the halfway point between his house and Becky’s.

He heard a train approaching, so he ran to the station to watch it pull in. Alex had fallen in love with a hand-carved wooden

miniature locomotive he had received for his second birthday and loved trains ever since. Their strength and speed exhilarated him, especially the express trains that skipped South Windsor, shooting through the station at maximum velocity as if it wouldn't even occur to them to stop at the insignificant suburb. The train pulling in now was a southbound local, originating in New York and traveling into New Jersey. The other side of the station, which Alek had never visited, was for the northbound trains en route to the city.

Over the last few years, Alek had gone into New York with his parents a handful of times. Usually, his family would drive in on a Saturday morning, catch a Broadway matinee or a museum exhibit, and then drive back. Alek begged to stay longer, but Manhattan restaurants made his parents feel claustrophobic, and they flat out rejected Alek's suggestion that they "just walk around for a while." Alek could sense other parts of the city calling to him, neighborhoods hiding behind skyscrapers like exotic animals in a jungle. But these family outings were the only way he could get into the city, and he took what he could get.

The train pulled in and the doors slid open. A few people trickled out, unlike the throngs that got off at the end of the workday. Alek envied them for getting to go to New York, but also pitied them for having to come back to suburbia. It made him think of Tantalus, the character in Ancient Greek mythology he learned about in sixth grade, doomed to thirst and starve in the underworld, with water and food always just out of his reach. Alek didn't know which was worse, being so close to the thing you wanted and not being able to grasp it, like Tantalus, or being exiled from it entirely.

The doors closed and the train started to pull away. Alek watched it shoot into the distance, an arrow happily speeding toward its target.

Alek had lived his entire life in the neighborhood on this side of the station. The proud houses stood behind their manicured lawns in perfect lines, and since the housing association insisted they all be painted in the same palette of heinous pastels, the blocks looked like rows of oversize dinner mints in a giant's candy box.

The other side of the station, the New York-bound side, bordered a less welcoming part of town. Because it was South Windsor, it wasn't really dangerous, at least not compared with the parts of New York Alek's parents had described living in before they got married. But the northbound side didn't have the cookie-cutter, squeaky-clean feeling of Alek's.

The two sides of the station had only been connected by a small underground tunnel until an overpass had been built a few years ago. Passing the station every day on his walks to and from school this past year, Alek had fantasized about going to the other side, jumping on a train, and shooting into the city. But Alek's parents had made it abundantly clear that under no circumstances was he allowed to go in without them.

"I know you love New York," Alek's mom told him last month in the car on the way back from their Armenian church. "But the city is very dangerous, especially for someone young. Maybe when you're a senior in high school, and we've had time to explore it together, we'll let you go in. During the day. To a few neighborhoods we would agree on beforehand. With some friends. And a chaperone. And maybe a police escort."

Alek hoped to get some support from his father. “Didn’t you move to New York for college when you were just a few years older than I am now?” he asked. But his father wouldn’t budge.

“Listen to your mother. The city’s not safe.”

Alek stood in the opening to the tunnel, peering down. Even in the middle of the day, the tunnel was dim, lit only by sporadically flickering orange fluorescents that made it feel like the setting for a horror movie. Since the overpass had been built, the tunnel had gone mostly unused, forgotten like an old pair of jeans. Although he knew his dad expected him to come home right after school, Alek lingered. The corrugated steel forming the tunnel’s opening invited and threatened him at the same time. He took a step in. And then another.

Alek held up his hand and marveled at how the orange light made his flesh look alien. He walked forward, matching his footsteps to the *drip-drip-drip* of a leaky pipe. He focused on the small landscape of sunlight at the end, beckoning him. The air was cooler in the tunnel. Alek inhaled and continued walking.

He emerged in an abandoned parking lot on the northbound side of the station. A bunch of older kids whom he recognized from school were skateboarding on an obstacle course of ramps and traffic pins they had erected. These kids were Nik’s age, but Alek knew they weren’t part of Nik’s Honor Society clique. They were called the Dropouts, or D.O.s for short, because of their impressively challenged graduation rate. Each clique at South Windsor High had its part to play, and you could always count on the Dropouts to sneak cigarettes, cut class, or start fights. Alek didn’t know most of them by name, but he recognized the one named Ethan as the initiator of the infamous food fight in March.

Principal Saunder had implemented a dress code that prohibited baggy pants and had just rejected the student petition to have them reinstated. So, the rumors went, Ethan took it upon himself to initiate a cafeteria-wide food fight in protest. Alek didn't share the same lunch period with Ethan, so he hadn't witnessed the fight itself, but he remembered what all the students looked like when they were being marched out of the cafeteria—their clothes drenched in ketchup and milk, bread and potato chip crumbs and God knows what else, and happier than he'd ever seen a group of kids at South Windsor High. Although Alek was glad he hadn't been caught up in that mess, he also wished that it had happened during his lunch period so he could've witnessed the pandemonium.

But even before that food fight, Alek thought Ethan epitomized cool. Today he was wearing army-green cargo pants with buckles and chains looped through them and a black T-shirt that read DARE TO RESIST DRUGS AND VIOLENCE in blocky red letters. Alek looked down at his own boring khaki shorts and dark blue short-sleeved button-down shirt. Even if his parents had let him shop for his own clothes, he wouldn't know where to find anything other than the same boring Gap fare they had always chosen for him.

Alek watched Ethan navigate his skateboard through the obstacle course with ease, laughing and talking to his friends at the same time. Ethan was a few inches taller than Alek, with wavy sandy hair that fell in his face in a way that made Alek think of surfers. Alek's own hair was dark, thick, and unmanageable, like weeds in a garden. He had tried to grow it out last year, but it only got bigger instead of looking cool. All the kids at

church referred to it as an Armenian 'Fro, and his parents told him that one day he'd be lucky to have such thick hair, but Alek envied the way Ethan's hair flopped up and down as he jumped over pins, kicked off stairs, and slid down banisters.

A big D.O., his meaty forearms crossed in front of his chest, spotted Alek and called out, "Hey, kid, you got a problem?"

Alek felt his face grow red. He didn't want to look scared, but all he could do was stutter back. "No, um, I, just was, um . . ."

The guy lumbered up to Alek, wiping his runny nose on his arm. He was wearing a short-sleeved plaid shirt that stretched tight across his ample bulk, and his brown hair was clipped on the sides, so short that Alek could see the flesh of his skull. The top of his hair spiked up in a fauxhawk, making him appear even bigger. Alek couldn't remember his name, but knew that he was supposed to have graduated last year. He approached Alek with the confident swagger of home turf. "Spit it out, dude. I said, you got a problem?"

Before Alek could reply, the guy drew his meaty arms back and gave Alek a sharp shove. The force caught him off guard, and Alek fell to the ground. He cried out, more in surprise than pain. The commotion caught the other guys' attention. They skated over, hoping for some afternoon entertainment. Alek stared up from the ground, faces appearing in his field of vision like enemy spaceships.

Jack. Alek suddenly remembered his attacker's name. Jack.

Jack's face hovered menacingly over Alek. "What's your problem? Why don't you stand up and take it like a man?" Alek tried to move away, but the much bigger kid squatted down, using his

knees to pin Alek to the ground. Jack barked the questions again, like an army sergeant.

The smell of onions and mustard slammed into Alek's nostrils. *This is what about-to-get-beat-up feels like*, Alek realized. He just hoped that whatever happened, he would emerge without any visible marks so that his parents wouldn't have a reason to ask any questions. Getting beat up was humiliating. Having to explain it to your parents was worse.

When Alek still didn't reply, Jack lowered his face so it was right up against Alek's. "I said, stand up, son," he screamed.

"Leave him alone, Jack." Alek turned his head to see who had come to his rescue. Ethan rolled over calmly and kicked his skateboard up, revealing a collage of colorful stickers on the bottom. The bright green wheels continued spinning as he held his board in one hand and put the other on Jack's shoulder.

Jack locked eyes with Ethan. "I'm just having some fun, man."

"That's what you call fun? Picking on some kid half your size?" Ethan joked. But when Jack didn't get up, Ethan continued, "But I guess the way you've been eating, finding someone your own size to pick on is pretty much impossible."

"You don't have to take that, Jack!" someone called out from behind Alek.

"Yeah, show him who's who!"

Jack's face slowly turned red as the rest of the guys continued taunting them. "Let's see if you're still talking big when you have my fist in your face, Ethan."

"Your fist and my face are pretty much the same size now, big boy," Ethan cracked. With a grunt, Jack jumped off Alek and

rushed Ethan, knocking him to the ground. Alek remained on the ground, forgotten, as the faces staring down at him fled to witness the much more exciting spectacle. Alek heard chants of “Get him, Ethan!” and “Show him who’s who, Jack,” as well as the occasional smack of fists hitting flesh.

Alek thought about sputtering out a thank-you to Ethan, but he decided against calling any more attention to himself. He scrambled to his feet, turned around, and ran through the tunnel and all the way back home.

# 4

THE MERCILESS BLARING OF HIS ALARM CLOCK WAS A psychic assault on Alek's brain. He cheated his eyes open a sliver. The red numbers glared 7:17. Alek did the math in his head, desperate for a computation that allowed him one more snooze without being late. But when the numbers refused to cooperate, he had to hurl himself out of bed and onto the floor, letting the impact smash him into consciousness. He lay like that for a moment, wondering what Faustian bargain he could make to get out of having to go to the first day of summer school. But there was no flicker of hope, no appearance of a demonic power. Apparently, no one was interested in his soul.

The five days that had elapsed since the end of the school year proper didn't even seem like a minivacation, especially since the rain made Alek spend most of the weekend cooped up with his family.

“Hurry up if you want breakfast,” Alek heard his father scream up from downstairs.

Alek had perfected the art of getting ready in twelve minutes flat. He stumbled into the bathroom, turned the shower on, and, while it was warming up, gathered his notebooks and textbooks. He put them in the beat-up green JanSport, glaring at the impossibly long-lived bag with hatred. Then he lay out his clothes. Usually he tried to look nice for the first day of school. But since this was just a program for delinquents and leftovers, denim shorts and a plain mustard T-shirt would do.

He jumped in the shower, scrubbed himself down, hopped out, and towed himself and his hair dry. Then he threw his clothes on and went downstairs, the 7:29 on the clock proof of his perfected system.

Nik and his mom were already seated at the kitchen table, dressed and ready to start the day. Nik was wearing his new chunky blue eyeglasses, which Alek knew his brother thought made him look cool, but Alek thought were so pathetically wannabe hipster that it was embarrassing.

Alek’s brother had always been lanky, but since he started needing to shave, his body had reached almost comedic proportions. Alek didn’t think the way he was dressing helped either. For his first day of orientation as a camp counselor, Nik was wearing shorts that he’d rolled up above the knee and a white-and-blue horizontally striped shirt under a dark blue jacket. And to make it worse, he was wearing a red belt to match his red shoes, as if accessorizing well would make up for his total lack of personality.

“Hi, honey,” Alek’s mom greeted him. She was dressed for

work impeccably as always, with a skirt that came just below her knees and a wraparound light green jacket over a cream blouse. She put her chirping BlackBerry down and looked up at Alek. “Did you sleep well?”

Alek grunted noncommittally and sat down at the table. He wondered if he’d get in trouble for being late, since normally he’d be responsible for helping to lay out the breakfast that greeted him: a pot of hot tea, a pile of freshly baked scones, apricot and blueberry jam, a basket of pita bread, a platter of freshly cut fruit, a plate of thinly sliced cold cuts and cheeses, and, of course, a bowl of zatar. His Dad usually added extra marjoram to the ground herbal mixture, so that by the time it achieved the pasty consistency perfect for pita dipping, it had even more punch. As always, nothing had been touched until everyone was present. The moment Alek sat down, his brother began digging in.

“What do you want in your omelet?” his father asked. He was standing at the stove, wearing a floral kitchen apron over his pajamas, his graying hair in loose curls around his head.

“Whatever,” Alek responded.

His father answered enthusiastically, “Well, I’ve already put in some tomatoes, spinach, and—how about some cheese?”

“I said *whatever*,” Alek repeated.

“Okay then,” his father continued with gusto. “Some chanakh.”

Alek smiled. His dad knew chanakh’s biting saltiness made it Alek’s favorite. He tossed a healthy pat of butter into the already-warmed skillet, and beat the cheese into the egg-and-vegetable mixture as the butter melted. At the moment after the butter finished bubbling but before it started to burn, he poured in the egg mixture.

Alek dipped the pita in the zatar, gobbled it up, then spread some jam on a scone.

“What’s the matter, Alek? You’re barely eating,” his mother said.

“Do you know what my friends have for breakfast? Like, a bowl of cereal, and that’s it!”

“You know *these Americans*,” his mother responded. “They don’t know the first thing about food. Remember when”—she barely contained her laughter—“remember when you slept over Jason’s house in sixth grade?”

“When you still had friends,” Nik whispered, earning an under-the-table kick from Alek.

Alek hoped his father would be too busy making the omelets to hear, but he picked up as if on cue.

“Yes, yes, and Jason’s parents said you could make pancakes from scratch with them the next morning!” his father joined in.

“What happened? I don’t remember,” Nik said, although Alek knew he was just giving their parents the excuse they needed to retell the story.

“Well,” Alek’s mom continued, “Alek woke up the next day, and down they all went to their kitchen. He was so excited, he could barely contain himself. Until, of course, he saw them take out the Bisquick box of pancake mix.” Now she turned from Nik to Alek. “Do you remember what you said?”

“No,” Alek deadpanned, wishing the ordeal would end.

“Well, I do, because Jason’s mom called us that morning and told us all about it. You said, ‘That’s not from scratch,’ and then you proceeded to go to their cabinets and get the flour and baking powder and sugar and salt and mix the batter yourself. And then

when you were done, you said, ‘Now, *that’s* from scratch.’” His family guffawed at the punch line, although Alek didn’t see its irrefutable hilarity. “And when you got home, I had to explain to you that to *these Americans*, using a mix *is* making it from scratch.”

Alek’s parents threw around that phrase—*these Americans*—whenever they wanted to pass judgment without making it sound like they were passing judgment.

“*These Americans* have a television set in every room.”

“*These Americans* think dinnertime is five p.m.”

“*These Americans* are obsessed with sports.”

And on and on they went.

Whenever Alek tried to call his parents out on it, they insisted the phrase was merely descriptive. But the certain lilt they gave it made it clear that whenever *these Americans* did something, Mr. and Mrs. Khederian did not approve. Alek wondered what would happen if he pointed out that since his parents were born in this country, they were just as American as *these Americans*.

“Well, you know what, Mom? *These Americans* don’t think that every time you sit down for a meal, you have to eat so much that you feel like you’re going to explode.”

“So you’re saying you don’t want your omelet?” his father asked, taking the skillet off the stove top. The smell of the tomatoes, spinach, and chanakh called out to Alek.

“I didn’t say that,” Alek conceded.

His father walked over, slid the omelet out of the skillet onto Alek’s plate, and sprinkled some sugar on top in the traditional Armenian fashion.

“What do you say?” his mother asked pointedly.

"Thanks," Alek muttered.

"*What* do you say?" his mother repeated.

"Thank you," Alek said properly.

"That's better," his mother said. "And wish your father good luck on his job interview."

"You have an interview today?" Alek asked disbelievingly, looking at his father's pajamas-and-apron outfit.

"It's not until the afternoon," his father replied defensively.

"Wish him luck," Alek's mother repeated.

"*Hachoghootyoon*," Alek mumbled in Armenian, earning him a grateful look from both his parents that wishing luck in English would never have elicited.

"You psyched about your first day of summer school?" Nik asked his brother in between bouts of shoving food into his bean-pole body.

"Yeah, I think it's going to be thrilling," Alek answered sarcastically between his own omelet bites.

"Well, my offer stands. If you find the work too challenging, I'd be happy to help you with it. You know, I did tutor for the Honor Society last year." Nik smiled.

"Nik, if I wanted to puke, I could just stick a finger down my throat."

"Aleksander, don't talk like that at the breakfast table," his mom said.

"But he—"

"I just offered to help him," Nik protested innocently. "By the way, Mom, did you see the article on Peter Balakian in the *New York Times* today?" Every time Nik wanted to distract his

parents, he brought up something Armenian, and every time, they fell for it.

“Yes, I did, Nik. It was about his new book.” His mom beamed at Nik with pride.

“I can’t wait to read it. That’s the first thing I’m going to buy with my camp money,” Nik said.

“Why don’t you just borrow my copy?” their father asked.

“I’d like to have my own so that I can take it with me when I go away to college.”

Alek thought he really was going to puke now.

“Mom, do you mind if we leave a little early? I want to make sure I make a good impression on the first day,” Nik said.

“Of course not,” their mom said. “Now, honey.” She turned to look at Alek. “When do you want to go shopping for your summer clothes?” she asked, her thumbs dancing over the BlackBerry keyboard.

“You could just drop me off and let me do it myself,” he said.

“Maybe next year, honey,” his mother responded, eyes still locked on her BlackBerry screen.

“Saturday, then,” Alek said, his shoulders slumping in defeat.

“But you were going to take me and Nanar into New York so we could start working on our heritage project,” Nik practically whined.

“Are you sure you don’t have time to go during the week?” their mother asked Alek.

“I just don’t want to commit to anything before I know exactly what my workload for summer school is going to be,” Alek shot back sharply. “Cramming an entire year into a few weeks means

an enormous amount of homework, as I'm sure you and Ms. Schmidt discussed. Of course, I understand if taking Nik and his Armenian girlfriend into the city is more important than spending time with me. Nik does get better grades, after all. It must be nice to have one child you can be proud of."

His mom looked up from her BlackBerry, frustration and hurt simmering in her eyes. Alek knew he'd gone too far, but instead of saying anything, she just exhaled sadly.

"I guess it'll have to wait, because I'm helping Nik and Nanar on Saturday, and on Sunday we have church."

"If we went to a normal church, like *these Americans*, we wouldn't have to commute three hours every Sunday," Alek responded.

"We're Armenians, Aleksander," his father interjected. "And so we go to an Armenian church. Period. Now is there anything else you'd like to say to ruin everyone's morning?"

"No, that's all. May I be excused from the table? I'd like to be on time for my first day of summer school so I can make a good impression." Without waiting for a reply, Alek grabbed his hated green JanSport and walked out the door.

Passing the turnoff to Orchard Street on the way to school, Alek remembered how he and Becky had cracked each other up after watching *My Fair Lady* that past weekend.

"Goo' mornin', gov'nah," Becky had said, imitating Eliza's Cockney accent before she transformed into an upper-class lady.

Alek mimicked the professor's proper British accent. "By right

she should be taken out and hung, for the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue!’”

“‘The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,’” Becky quoted.

“‘By George, she’s got it! By George, she’s got it!’” Alek exclaimed with glee as the professor did when Eliza was finally able to speak properly.

Alek loved hanging out with Becky because it was easy. They had spent almost every weekend of their freshman year like this. After watching a movie, they’d argue about what they did or didn’t like or just horse around. Sometimes, they could just sit in a comfortable silence sipping Diet Dr Pepper.

After descending the little hill in front of his school, Alek saw the front entrance was closed for the renovation of the main lobby, so he walked around to the rear. *We don’t even get to use the real entrance*, Alek thought. He wondered if he’d know anyone else.

An impressive assembly of South Windsor High’s leftovers filed off the buses like disoriented ants. Some looked barely awake. Others were wearing clothes that must’ve been hand-me-downs of hand-me-downs. Some kids weren’t even carrying book bags. Alek fantasized screaming, “Children of dysfunctional families, unite!” and leading this motley crew in a coup of the school.

The other students weren’t the only surreal element of summer school. The whole place felt underpopulated, as if it had been ravaged by a devastating plague. Most of the building was closed off, and the classrooms were being painted, so a chemical stench lingered in the hallways. None of the posters for student activities were up, and even small sounds echoed off the walls. It

was like walking through a ghost town. Alek half expected to see tumbleweeds blowing down the corridors.

He suffered through English with Ms. Imbrie, then dragged himself down to the cafeteria. Because there were so few students in summer session, the kitchen was closed and everyone was expected to bring their own lunches. He plopped down at the table where he and Becky usually sat, hoping against reason that she would materialize out of thin air and entertain him the way she did during the regular school year. He even missed her jabs at the Armenian food his parents inevitably packed for him, such as today's dolma, with baklava for dessert and a yogurt drink to wash it all down. Although he was sure that Nik would've shown it off proudly, Alek would've killed for a PB&J, some Lay's potato chips, and a flavorless waxy red apple.

Alek could see the entire cafeteria from the table he'd chosen in the corner. To his dismay, he saw the entire pack of Dropouts enter and claim their usual table in the middle of the room. *Of course they're all here*, he thought. He turned, sitting with his back to the rest of the room, staring into a corner. The only way to make it through the hell of summer school, Alek decided, was to turn himself off to everything, not saying or doing anything, until the entire experience was over. It would be his Zombie Summer.

When the truncated summer school lunch period ended, the students in the cafeteria made their way to their afternoon session. Alek walked to his Algebra classroom in the annex and sat all the way in the back, just like he had done earlier that day, wishing he could camouflage into the wall. A poster of Charlie Brown staring at a stack of books with the words THE MORE I

KNOW THE MORE I KNOW HOW MUCH I STILL DON'T KNOW hung next to the chalkboard. Alek took his algebra book out, opened his notebook, and slumped back in the chair. The bell rang, and the teacher stood up from his desk and closed the door behind him.

Alek had only heard of Mr. Weedin and his reputation for unflinching, by-the-book strictness. A tall, thin man who looked like a bald eagle and wore spectacles on the very bottom of his nose, Mr. Weedin had a haughty way of looking down at everyone. And his British accent only made it worse.

"Welcome to Algebra I and II. Because there were so few algebra summer school students, the school administrators, in their infinite wisdom, have decided to combine the classes. I will spend the first half of the period teaching Algebra I, while the Algebra II students can review their homework from the night before. Then the Algebra I students can get a head start on their homework while I teach the Algebra II lesson for the day. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to—"

The classroom door swung open, interrupting Mr. Weedin's well-rehearsed lecture.

"How's it going, teach?"

Alek looked up and saw Ethan strut into the classroom. Immediately, Alek sat up straight in his chair.

"Ethan Novick, am I correct?" Mr. Weedin asked, consulting his class roster.

"You got it. Sorry I'm late. I got permission to go off campus for lunch today and I busted a wheel on my board getting back."

"Mr. Novick, your modes of transportation are of no interest to me. If you don't pass this class, you will have to repeat your

junior year, and I'm sure you don't want that any more than the teachers here do." Mr. Weedin addressed the entire class. "Because each summer school class is the equivalent of a week of work, anyone who cuts without a proper excuse will fail the term. Period. And three tardies count as one absence." He refocused on Ethan. "So, Mr. Novick, for your sake as well as my own, please be more responsible in the future, because if you're late two more times, you will fail."

"No prob, teach," Ethan replied. He made his way to the back of the classroom. Ethan's lower lip was swollen, Alek noticed, and he wondered if it was a memento from his tussle with Jack on the last day of school. Ethan threw his book bag on the empty seat next to Alek and sat down. Alek looked away quickly. He wanted to thank Ethan for intervening and saving him, but he didn't even know if Ethan remembered him.

"Algebra I students, let's begin with integers. Please turn to the first chapter in your book. Class, please note the seats in which you're sitting—they will be your assigned seats for the rest of the summer," Mr. Weedin said from the front of the classroom.

Alek thought that he'd be able to just tune out and let summer school wash over him. But with Ethan sitting so close, it was hard to concentrate on anything. Alek opened his algebra textbook to the first chapter. He figured out that if he angled his body just so, and tilted his book just the right way, he could make it look like he was reading about integers while enjoying a perfect view of Ethan.

# 5

"IT'S HERE! IT'S HERE!" BECKY SQUEALED WITH JOY AS SHE attacked the nondescript cardboard package that had arrived at her house earlier that day.

The first week of summer school had finally ended, and Alek was treating himself to an evening at Becky's with movies.

"What is?"

"*The Dinner Party Movie Cookbook!* It's a collection of recipes of food made in famous movies—*Gosford Park*, *Big Night*, *Babette's Feast*, and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner!* I didn't think it was going to show up until next week." The packaging lay tattered around Becky, who was thumbing through the book affectionately.

"Do you think you spend too much time obsessing over movies?"

"Well, what else am I going to do? Live my life? I'd rather watch attractive, well-dressed people do it for me." Becky ran

down the stairs to the basement, where the entertainment system was set up. Alek followed. Becky's parents had only gotten partway through finishing the basement, so half of it still looked like an industrial work space.

"Where are your folks?" Alek asked her.

"Conference. Somewhere in Switzerland, I think?"

"And they left you alone?"

"Sure. I told them that if I'm old enough to babysit, I'm old enough to not need a babysitter. Besides, what'm I going to do? Throw a kegger and invite the woodwind section?"

"Good point."

Most of Becky's other friends, like Mandy and Suzie, were fellow marching band geeks. But when they all decided to go to band camp that summer, Becky had refused to even entertain the notion, because she said it was clichéd. Alek really admired Becky, who, unlike most girls her age, was happy to do her own thing, even if that meant sitting at home watching movies or spending the day skating by herself.

Becky and Alek plopped down on the sectional in the middle of the room, facing the flat screen. "What are we going to watch tonight?" Alek asked.

"*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. It has Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn. And, of course, Sidney Poitier."

"So what's this movie about?"

Becky gasped in shock. "Are you being serious?"

"Not all of us are obsessed with old movies, you know."

"I worry about what you would do without me," Becky said. She leaned forward and began to explain the plot as if Alek's life depended on it. "Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn play

these really liberal upper-class parents, and their daughter arrives from a vacation with this dashing black doctor played by the super-dreamy Sidney Poitier, and she's like, 'We just met, but we're going to get married.' Now, her parents have raised her to be open-minded and everything, but when they're faced with her actually marrying a man of color, they freak. The movie's about the difference between your beliefs and reality. And, mostly, the importance of a good dinner party."

"So you've seen it before?"

"Of course I have. What do I look like, a loser?"

"Of course not. You know you're the coolest girl at South Windsor High."

Becky flipped her hair back mock-provocatively. "I know, like, all the guys on the football team totally want to ask me out," she upward inflected. "But I'm, like, too busy dating the soccer team to make time for them. Do you think I'm a slut?"

"Um, I don't, but you should read what they write about you in the guys' bathroom. They say you're easy."

"Oh my God! Shut up! No way! This is so humiliating! Every guy I slept with promised he wasn't going to say anything! I mean, this is totally gonna destroy my reputation. And then Daddy isn't going to buy me that two-door BMW convertible with tan leather interior!" Becky squeezed her eyes together and pretended to cry. She dropped the act and turned to Alek. "Can we watch the movie now?"

Two hours later, the end credits rolled on the TV, and Becky plopped her head down on Alek's lap. She had started crying toward the end of the movie, and her trails of tears had transformed into gushers in the last scene, when Spencer Tracy's character gave

his speech about the hurdles that an interracial couple would face, but that being in love demanded that they marry anyway.

"It's so beautiful. I just can't get over how beautiful it is," Becky wailed.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's just a movie," Alek said soothingly, running his fingers through her brown hair, noticing it was less frizzy than usual. Becky was the first close friend Alek had who was a girl, and he was surprised at how physically comfortable they had grown with each other in the last year. Becky adjusted her head on Alek's lap, and he continued stroking her hair.

Slowly, Becky stopped crying. She went to the bathroom, blew her nose a few times, washed her face, and returned, her nose and eyes still puffy.

"So how's summer school going? You haven't told me anything."

Alek felt his face flush red. Becky knew how upset he'd been about having to go to summer school, but what she didn't know was now he found himself looking forward to it. Especially Algebra.

"Summer school is stupid and the people there are stupid," Alek covered.

"Alek, why didn't you just take Standard next year? That way, you wouldn't need to spend your summer stuck in that den of despair."

"That's not how it works in my house. There are a bunch of things that come with being Armenian. Like, you only go to the Armenian Orthodox Church, even if it means driving one and a half hours *each way*. And chess and classical music, you have to

like both of those things, and you never, ever eat in a Turkish restaurant or buy clothes made in Turkey.”

“What’s up with the anti-Turkish stuff?” Becky asked. “That sounds pretty racist.”

“Do you think it would’ve been racist for the American Indians to be pissed at European settlers for ravaging their people and stealing their lands?” Alek asked heatedly. “Or for the Jews to have issues with the Nazis who committed the Holocaust?”

“No, but—” Becky retreated.

“Well, that’s exactly what the Turks did to the Armenians before and during World War I. And it’s not like the Turkish government even admits it. It’d be one thing if they were, like, setting displaced Armenians up in casinos or building memorials or giving our land back. But they pretend that it never happened. ‘Casualties of war’ is what they claim. But casualties of war are supposed to be from the other side, not the government of the country you live in forcing your people in death marches across the desert.”

“Okay, Alek, jeez. I was just asking a question.”

Alek slowly released the fists he hadn’t realized he’d been clenching. “You know how your parents read you stories when you were a kid?”

“Sure,” Becky said.

“Well, this was a bedtime favorite in the Khederian house.” He closed his eyes and recited:

*“Should it happen we do not endure  
this uneven fight and drained*

*of strength and agonized  
we fall on death's ground, not to rise  
and the great crime ends  
with the last Armenian eyes  
closing without seeing a victorious day,  
let us swear that when we find  
God in his paradise offering comfort  
to make amends for our pain,  
let us swear that we will refuse  
saying No, send us to hell again.  
We choose hell. You made us know it well.  
Keep your paradise for the Turk."*

"What is that?" Becky asked.

"'We Shall Say to God.' It was written by Vahan Tekeyan, this really famous Armenian poet. It's the last lines that really hit me. 'We choose hell. You made us know it well. / Keep your paradise for the Turk.' That's what my parents were reading to me when you were getting Snow White or the Little freakin' Mermaid."

"Well, dude, that's messed up," Becky said.

"Tell me about it. But they couldn't help it. And neither can I. We are all the thing we were raised to be." Until now, Alek thought this Armenian stuff was important to his parents, or to Nik, but not to himself. "How'd we even end up talking about this?"

"You were defending Armenians' blatantly racist policies," Becky reminded him.

"That's right. Well, after the Turkish thing, the next most important thing is doing well at school."

“It all sounds too intense for me. I mean, I got C’s in Standard History and Phys Ed last year, and my parents just told me to try harder next time. And that time I cut class to go skating in the park, they were just like, ‘Tell us next time so we can write you a note.’”

“That is absolutely and utterly incomprehensible to me. If I cut class, my parents would freak out.”

“At least they didn’t make you get a summer job.”

Alek put his feet up. “Oh, that’s right—how’re things at DQ?”

“Thought it would be fun. Was totally wrong. My manager, Laurie, is this rhinoceros of a woman. She gets angry when any of the employees’ friends visit, but I want to be like, ‘At least they’re attracting some customers to this pathetic business—what do you care if they hang out and want to talk for a few minutes?’ And the rest of the customers—don’t even get me started. You know that saying ‘When hell freezes over?’ That’s Dairy Queen.”

“Why don’t you quit?”

“I told you—I have to make enough to go to skating camp. And I’ve decided I need a new pair of blades, too—my Activas just aren’t going to cut it anymore. Besides, do you know how hard it is for a fourteen-year-old to get any kind of gainful employment? Especially after summer’s started and every place has already hired people?”

“Becky, let me ask you a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Has there ever been something that you’ve wanted to do but were scared to?”

“I don’t know,” Becky said, looking confused. “What are you talking about?”

Alek had spent the last week trying to thank Ethan for intervening at the parking lot, but he hadn't figured out how to do it.

"Well, I keep on trying to get my courage up to do something, but every time I bail out at the last minute."

Becky tilted her head and looked at Alek for a few moments. "If you want to do something, then you have to trust your instincts and do it," she said decisively, squinting at him like he was out of focus. She scootched her way next to Alek on the sofa. "Because you never know how something's going to end up."

Alek waited for her to say or do something else, but when that didn't happen, he cleared his throat loudly. But she still just sat there and closed her eyes.

"Becky, it's getting late and I need to start on some homework. I'll see you soon, okay?"

Becky opened her eyes quickly, like she had just woken up. "Soon, okay. No problem. We'll find some time when I'm not serving up Double Fudge Cookie Dough Blizzards."

Alek never woke up early on Saturday mornings. But the next day, he made an exception, because he wanted to show off his first test to his parents. Mr. Weedon had walked up and down the aisles of the classroom the day before, returning the exams to the students. Each time he gave back a test, he'd follow it with a pointed remark, spoken just loud enough so that the entire class could infer how you'd done. For example, when he handed Emily Fink her test back, he said disappointedly, "Emily, I would recommend studying next time. It does wonders." To

Ethan, Mr. Weedon said, “Mediocre at best, Mr. Novick.” But when he got to Alek, his face almost eased up. “Well done, Mr. Khederian. Well done, indeed.”

Alek held the test with a big fat red circled ninety-three on top, waiting for his parents to wake up. He had wanted to show it to them when he got back from Becky’s the night before, but they were already asleep. Two hours of Saturday morning cartoons later, he heard them stirring above. He scampered up the stairs to their bedroom and put his ear to the door to make sure they were actually awake. He hoped that they’d be so impressed with his test that he’d be invited to go into New York with Nik and Nanar, and maybe they’d even drop him off somewhere while they researched their heritage projects.

“Boghos, I just feel like I’m at my wit’s end with him.”

“It’s not like he failed, Kadarine.”

“I’m not talking about summer school. I’m talking about all of it. Where is that sweet little boy we brought up? The last year, his behavior’s been, well, relentless.”

“This has been a hard time for all of us, Kada. With you having to go back to work full-time, and me, well—”

“Honey, I know you’ll find another job soon.”

“All I mean is that this has been a tough time for everyone, and we’ll all come through it. Alek’s no exception. Besides, he’s a teenager. This is how they behave.”

“Nik didn’t—”

“Nik hasn’t yet. But who knows what he’ll be like next year, or when he goes to college?”

“Don’t look at me like that, Boghos. We did a good job bringing our sons up. Why did I take years out of my life to raise and

spend time with my children if they're going to behave like *these American* kids who were brought up by nannies and babysitters and day care centers?"

Alek couldn't listen anymore. He tiptoed away from the door and to his room, quietly closing his door behind him. He dropped the test into the trash can underneath his desk. He played his mother's words over and over in his head, and each time they stung more.

Alek stayed in his room for the next few hours. His mother had chosen a moss green for the walls and a complementary light oak bedroom set for the furniture. Alek wished the walls were painted in a bolder color, like orange, but he figured that if his mom wasn't letting him buy his own clothes yet, there was no point in even asking if he could repaint his room. He was lying on his bed, flipping through next week's assignment in the algebra textbook, when he heard his father knock on the door.

"What is it, Dad?" he called back.

His dad opened the door and leaned in the doorway. "I wish you would call me *hairik*."

"And I wish you would call me Your Excellency." Alek had stopped using the Armenian words for *father* and *mother* years ago, and he had no intention of going back.

"Your brother and mother have left, and I'm going to make some sarma. You wanna watch?"

"Why don't you teach me how to make it myself?"

"Soon, Alek. Soon, but not yet."

Like every Khederian since the beginning of time, Nik had

waited until he was sixteen to be entrusted with the ancient Armenian art of rolling grapevine leaves. So even though it was Alek's favorite dish, until he turned sixteen and his parents decided he was ready, he'd have to settle for watching his father prepare it.

"Sure," Alek responded.

His father turned, and Alek followed him out of his room and down the stairs into the kitchen.

"How'd the job interview go?" Alek asked carefully.

"Well, I thought it went well, but since I haven't heard by now . . ." his father trailed off.

Since his dad had gotten fired from the architectural firm last year, Alek had probably spent more time with him than he had during the rest of his life. It's not that his father was entirely absent from those earlier memories. Just that his presence had been peripheral, more like a half-cropped figure in the background of a photograph.

Alek followed his father into the kitchen, the pride of every Armenian household. The shiny stainless steel refrigerator and matching dishwasher had been installed just weeks before Alek's father had been fired, and Alek knew that as soon as they could afford it, his mother was planning on upgrading the cabinets to cherrywood and the counter to granite.

Alek's father began assembling the sarma ingredients while Alek sat at the kitchen table.

"Alek, do you want to talk to me about anything?"

Alek's stomach sank, like he'd been lured into a trap that had just sprung open around him. "What do you mean?"

"I just want you to feel like you can tell me anything."

“I do.”

“And if there’s anything wrong, like with girls or even drugs or sex—”

“Oh my God, Dad, there’s nothing wrong, okay?” Alek felt his face turn beet red. “I thought you were going to show me how you make sarma, not have a heart-to-heart, because even my algebra homework would be more enjoyable than that.”

“Fine, fine, fine,” his father said, equally relieved to change the subject. He joined Alek at the table and began making the Armenian delicacy. “Let me show you how to take these out without ripping them.” He carefully finessed a wad of leaves from the glass jar, unfolded it, then removed one leaf at a time. Each one was dark and thin, with veins running down its length, like a human hand. “You want to make sure you use the California leaves, because they’re sturdier than the Greek ones. Even still, the trick is to handle them very carefully. Like if you say the wrong thing, they might go running back to their room,” his father joked.

Alek smiled in spite of himself. Other fathers might throw a softball around with their sons, or take them to hit at the tennis courts. But his quality time with his father involved being gently mocked while learning how to make Armenian dishes.

“Now, I use the scissors to cut off the little stub of stem at the bottom.”

Alek’s dad showed him how to make the stuffing for the leaves, a mixture of rice, lamb, spices, tomatoes, red peppers, chopped parsley, and olive oil. Then he spooned the stuffing onto the flat leaf and demonstrated how to fold and roll the leaf, creating a perfect little bundle of yumminess.

“Now I lay it gently in the pot.”

“How come you always use the same pot whenever you make sarma?”

“This was the pot my mother always used to make sarma, and when I got married, she gave it to us. See how wide it is? Because of how the sarma cooks, you need a pot that’s wide, not deep.”

After a few minutes of working in silence, Alek’s dad tried a new tactic. “I know your mother hasn’t been around a lot lately, but try to be understanding with her.”

“I am, Dad. She’s the one who . . . As far as I’m concerned, she’s the one who’s messing everything up.”

“Now, Alek, the way you’re talking now—is that the kind of man you want to be?”

Alek knew there was only one right answer to this question. “No, Dad.”

“Just remember—this is the first time she’s worked full-time since before Nik was born. And most of the people at the UN have left since she was there, so she’s working with new colleagues, and she’s worried that no one is going to take her seriously. So whenever someone at the office has to stay late or pick up weekend hours, she volunteers so that they can see she’s committed.”

Alek didn’t say anything. He just continued watching his father unwrap, snip, stuff, and roll.

“But more than her work, family is the most important thing for her. Like it is for me. And now it’s time for us to support her the way she’s supported us, okay?”

Alek didn’t know why his dad’s talking to him this way made him want to die. “Okay, Dad,” he mumbled.

“And maybe we can all go to the city sometime soon. There’s a Rodin exhibit at the Met. Does that sound good to you?”

Alek mumbled again, “Yes, Dad.”

His father continued rolling in grateful silence. Finally, when all of the grapevine leaves were stuffed, rolled, and packed into the big pot, they filled it up halfway with hot water and brought it to a boil.

“Now we let it cook until it’s done. Sometimes we add some tomato paste for extra flavor halfway through.”

“That’s how I like it.”

“I know. So fifteen minutes before it’s done cooking, you can add it today.” Alek nodded his head, gratefully acknowledging even this small step in the journey of learning how to make sarma by himself.

“Dad, how long do you let it cook?”

“Just enough time.”

“And how much tomato paste should I put in?”

“Not too much.”

Alek rolled his eyes. He wondered if there were any Armenian cookbooks in the world, or if all of the recipes had to be learned this way.