

Author's Note

It's a strange time to be Muslim in America. But the thing is, it has always been strange for me. My birthday is September 11th. I remember that night after the terrorist attacks, when I turned nine, my parents closed the curtains, and we sang "Happy Birthday" quietly and blew out candles. It wasn't until years later that I realized the reason we were celebrating so quietly was because my parents didn't want the neighbours to see the Muslims celebrating on 9/11.

The icing on the Muslim cake is that I'm also gay. For as long as I can remember, I have felt like a contradiction, coming from a religion and culture that isn't exactly known for being friendly towards gay people. As a result, I kept those two sides of my identity separate. When I finally came out in college, I told my friends but not my family. I created a wall between the me that existed in New York City, that had boyfriends and danced to Robyn in gay bars, and the me that went home to my Iranian family.

This book is me tearing down that wall and pulling up the curtains. *How It All Blew Up* is the kind of story I have always been afraid to write, but after a life-changing summer experience, it was the only story that I *could* write.

So many times, when I tell someone I'm gay, their first question is, "What do your parents think?" It's a question I

know for a fact they're not asking their white gay friends. It's the whole contradiction of my existence. But that's why I needed to write this story: because yes, there are parts about being a gay Muslim that just plain suck, but they exist right next to the joys of discovering your identity.

I like to call this book a "Trojan Horse" of diversity. On the surface, it complies with the narratives you expect from gay people and Muslim people. It is a dramatic coming-out story. There is even a Muslim family in an interrogation room. But beneath the surface, it's a different narrative: a Muslim family defying the stereotype and proving that they love their son. And a gay boy living his best life in Rome.

I understand that every book is personal, but let's be real: *How It All Blew Up* is my most personal book.

Much love, Arvin Ahmadi

HOW IT ALL BLEW UP

Uncorrected Proof

Interrogation Room 37

Amir Azadi

First, let me get one thing straight: I'm not a terrorist. I'm gay. I can see from the look on your face that you're skeptical, and I get it. People like me aren't supposed to exist, let alone make an admission like that in a situation like this. But I assure you, I'm real. I'm here. I'm Iranian. And I'm gay. I just needed to get that off my chest before we started, since you asked why my family and I were fighting on that plane. It had nothing to do with terrorism and everything to do with me.

Okay, I'll assume from the way you're clearing your throat that I should probably stick to the questions. Sorry, sir. I didn't mean to be disrespectful.

My name is Amir Azadi. I'm eighteen years old.

I was in Rome for about a month. Yes, like Italy. I don't know exactly how many days I was there.

I lived in multiple apartments in Rome. I can get you the addresses if you'd like. My family found me in the Italian countryside yesterday. I willingly went back with them. I can't

really say why—it happened so fast—and then we fought on the plane, which is, I guess, why I'm in here.

It was such a huge whirlwind of emotions that I didn't even notice when the flight attendants started pulling the four of us apart. They put us in separate parts of the plane. One of them was actually really kind to me. "Family can take a while," he said as he buckled me into a pull-down seat in the aircraft kitchen. He had an earring in his nose. Slick blond hair. "Trust me, kid, we've all been there." He even let me have one of those snack packs with the hummus and pita chips, which was nice, considering I was being detained.

As soon as we landed, Customs and Border Protection took our passports and escorted us from the plane to a holding room in the airport. Soraya—my little sister—kept asking what was going on, and my mom kept telling her to be quiet.

They told us to sit and wait until our names were called. We were glued to those chairs. Soraya took out her phone and one of the officers barked at her to turn it off. My mom snatched it from her hand. After what felt like forever, one of the male officers entered the room and looked sternly at my dad. "Mr. Azadi. Please come with me." My dad didn't ask any questions. He just went. Then a minute later, I got pulled into this room.

Was I in touch with any "organizations" while I was in Rome? Oh God. You must think I ran away to join ISIS, don't you? You probably think they recruited me to their Italian satellite office. Sir, I don't mean to belittle the evils of the world, but those guys would never take a fruit like me.

I'm sorry we scared all those people on that plane, I really am. I wish I hadn't exploded at my parents like that, all spit and tears

and hysteria, on an airplane. Especially being, you know. Of a certain complexion. But at the end of the day, I'd much rather be in this airport interrogation room than back in the closet.

You asked me why we were fighting, sir, and to answer that question, I'll have to start at the very beginning.

Ten Months Ago

It was the first day of school, and I was already sweating in my seat. As if it wasn't torture enough to sit through transfer orientation, the classroom was as hot as an oven. Figures I move farther south of the Mason-Dixon line and the air conditioner decides to crap out.

The senior class president was fanning himself with a manila folder in the front of the classroom. He was about to introduce us to our "buddies"—student government leaders and athletes, clearly, who would be showing us around the school.

I scanned the lineup.

Not the cute one. Anyone but the cute one.

The one all the way at the end of the row. The one with the messy blond hair and nice arms and golden skin. The one I was too scared to call "cute," even in my head, even though I just did. Right, it should have been: *anyone but the one on the far right, who will make me feel even more sweaty and uncomfortable than I already am.*

The other three senior transfers were all girls, and judging from how they were ogling this dude, they definitely wanted him as their buddy.

I just don't get all the hype around pretty people. I get why they exist—for meet-cute purposes, for magazine spreads—but they're just so stressful to be around. Who needs that kind of stress in their life? Not me.

Not him. Anyone but him.

I imagined the Sorting Hat whispering in my ear: *Not him, eh? Are you sure?* Yes, you pretentious hat, I'm sure. If you can save Harry from Slytherin, you can save me from having to spend the next hour with this annoyingly handsome jock.

Not him, not him, not him . . .

The Sorting Hat did not have my back.

His name was Jackson Preacher. He looked right through me when the president said our names together. When we met, his "hello" was like walking straight into a brick wall. While everyone else's "buddies" enthusiastically asked them questions, Jackson and I just stood there with our hands in our pockets.

He was just as stoic as he took me to my locker, walked me through the main hall and past all the classrooms.

"This is the library," Jackson mumbled when we passed the library, which was marked in big bold letters: LIBRARY. He didn't really have much to say, and I didn't really have much to ask.

What did it matter, anyway? One year at this new high school and I'd be out. That was half the reason why I didn't hate the idea of moving; my dad's new job came with a higher salary, which meant we could afford out-of-state tuition for college. In a year, I'd be somewhere far away. In a year, I could start being myself. That had always been my dream. It was the only reason I didn't fight as hard as my sister about the move.

At the end of the tour, when I assumed Jackson would

resume his God-given right as a jock to ignore me for the rest of the school year, he said, "Well, that's it. Let me know if you ever need a hand with anything around here."

I cocked my head back. "Seriously?" He didn't strike me as the hand-offering type. "Is that a real offer?"

Jackson looked off to the side. He shrugged.

"They make you say that, don't they?" I said.

He nodded. "It's part of the script."

"Gotta follow the script," I said, and out of nowhere, Jackson let out one of those snort-laughes. Then we kind of widened our eyes and looked away, because this conversation wasn't part of *our* script.

Jackson combed a hand through his wavy mop of hair. Some days his hair was dirty blond, some days it was brown. I remember that day it was blond.

I asked if he thought I would fit in at this new school. Jackson didn't really answer; he was staring at the parking lot behind me. I had my eyes glued to the school entrance behind him. Later, we would joke that that first day we met, we were actually competing in a very serious un-staring contest.

"It's fine," I said after a long silence. "I don't really fit in anywhere."

Jackson smiled—and I cheated at our contest. I snuck a glance at him. Something in him knew. He had found himself another outsider. We fit like gloves, Jackson Preacher and me. We fit like pasta and wine, football and Bud Light.

I was the pasta and wine. He was the football and Bud Light.

That first semester, Jackson and I existed in completely different worlds. As much as we crossed paths, we never really

talked. He flew in the stratosphere of athletes and popular kids; I flew under the radar. I just didn't see the point in going through the social acrobatics of making friends when I was only going to be at that school for eight months.

Still, we kept playing our un-staring contest in the halls whenever we passed each other. There was something lingering from that tour, and it was going to take a seismic shift to get it out.

That seismic shift happened right before Thanksgiving, when our football team lost the last game of the season. I was driving home after the game and stopped by 7-Eleven to pick up some salt-and-vinegar chips when I found Jackson sulking in the parking lot. I thought about just walking inside like I didn't see him. But he had dirt marks all over his face. A dried-up river of tears running down his cheeks. He was vulnerable. So I went, "Need a hand?"

He looked up and saw it was me, and he laughed. "I'm supposed to be giving you a hand," Jackson said, wiping a tear from his face.

"Screw the script," I said.

He looked at me differently after those words slid out of my mouth. I don't know what invisible hand gave me the push I needed that night to respond so smoothly, but it will forever go down as the best and worst decision I made in high school.

I comforted Jackson that night, in the grassy corner of the parking lot. I remember his hair was dark and sweaty. I don't know how long we were talking, only that I got to see Jackson in all his multitudes. I saw him, blond and brown-haired, stoic and sensitive, a guy who plays football but who maybe, just

maybe, plays for the other team, too.

When I walked him over to his car, he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed tight. "Remember that thing you were telling me when we met," he said softly, "about not really fitting in anywhere?" My eyes grew wide. I stared right at him, his green eyes, and he was staring back at me. "I feel that way, too."

And right there, the world shifted.

I wish I could just slip back into that little crack in the universe, that guilt-free space where I wanted Jackson Preacher's touch and nothing else. A week later, I was sitting in the passenger seat of his car, fumbling with my sweaty fingers. I was quiet. Jackson was quiet. The radio was humming softly, something poppy. He later told me he kept expecting me to make a move, since, in a way, I had made the first one, but I didn't have any more moves left in me. When he finally put a hand on my shaking leg and leaned in to kiss me, I pulled back. That really scared the shit out of Jackson. He looked like he wanted to die right there. But I needed that second, that frozen moment in time, to say goodbye to my old life. The way you might take one last look at your house after the moving boxes are all packed up. That's all I needed. A second. When I finally pressed my lips against his, I swear, I could feel us both exhaling. Jackson taught me how to breathe. A special method of breathing that involved drowning, because, boy, was he a slobbery kisser.

I was so happy between Thanksgiving and the middle of March, when I had Jackson and not much else. I should have known Ben and Jake would smell my happiness like a shark smells blood.

Ben and Jake had singled me out from day one at my new school. Much like those “random” security checks at the airport, they picked on me without any probable cause. I was brown, and I was there.

One morning, they deviated from their routine cafeteria traffic stop and caught up with me at my locker. Ben flashed a phone in front of my face.

“We know what you’re up to, Jihadi,” Jake said, gesturing at the picture on the phone. I took a closer look, and when I made out what it was, I tried to steal the phone from his hand. Jake grabbed my wrist.

It was a picture of Jackson and me kissing in his car.

Ben leaned in closer and went, “You wouldn’t want us to smear your faggy little secret across town, would you, Amir Bin Laden? Wouldn’t look so great for your people.”

Their words stung so hard that I didn’t even register that they had followed Jackson and me into the empty parking lot where we hooked up when both our parents were home. I didn’t even get a good look at the photo. It’s hard looking at a photo like that, at the face of the first boy you’ve ever kissed, without imagining the creepy stare of the two boys who would blackmail you with the most intimate detail of your life.

“One thousand dollars of your Wiki fortune, and we won’t show this shit to your parents,” Jake said. He nudged Ben, who nodded. Looking at them, it hit me that they were dead serious: they really did believe I was a “Wiki millionaire.”

The thing is, I’m actually very legit in the Wikipedia world, to the point where I actually *do* receive offers to make and edit pages for money. It started in tenth grade, when a friend’s

mom wanted to hire a Wikipedia editor to make a page for her lingerie start-up. My friend commented on the Facebook post, “Amir!!” and the rest was history. I didn’t take the offer, or any of the offers that followed. Paid articles are strictly forbidden in the Wikipedia terms of use. But when Ben and Jake once caught me editing the *Real Housewives of New Jersey* page in homeroom, I didn’t think it would hurt to *pretend* I got paid. It’s a lot cooler to say “I do this for money” than “I do this because I find the power of crowdsourcing and the democratization of information really sexy.”

I didn’t have the kind of money they wanted. I begged Ben and Jake to believe me, but they refused. Especially Jake. He was weirdly insistent about the whole thing. It was like he was desperately clinging to this fantasy notion that I was *actually* a Wikipedia millionaire.

It was less of an explosion, and more of a steady crumbling inside of me, when I realized what had just happened.

All the meticulous planning I had put into how I would come out to my parents, the years I spent closeted but knowing I had to come out the *right way*: poof. It was dust in the wind. Ben and Jake were very clear: if I didn’t get them the money in one month, I was fucked.

There was one more condition: “Don’t go telling your gay lover about our deal,” Ben added. “If anyone finds out about this, this shit’s going straight to your parents.”

Ben and Jake bulldozed right through the fortress I’d spent years building around my secret.

When you’re gay, you grow up doing a lot of mental math. Your brain is basically a big rainbow scoreboard, logging every

little thing your parents say—their offhand remarks, the way they react to two men holding hands at the mall or the latest Nike commercial with a queer couple in it. You assign each event a point value. Plus or minus. When the time comes, you tally up all the points—and believe me, you don't forget a single one—and based on the final score, you decide what your coming out is going to look like.

+1: Mom watches Ellen DeGeneres and doesn't bat an eyelash whenever Ellen talks about her wife, Portia.

-1: Mom teaches at the local Islamic school.

-5: When one of her students asks about gay marriage, Mom explains that marriage is between a man and a woman.

-20: The trailer for a gay rom-com comes on while we're at the movie theater, and Dad calls it propaganda.

-2: Mom scrunches up her face at that same trailer.

-1,000,000: We're Muslim.

To be honest: I didn't see a world where my coming out wasn't going to be messy. Pluses and minuses aside, I had bought into the same idea as everyone else, that Muslims and gay people are about as incompatible as Amish people and Apple products. I wish I could say I was better than that, that I ignored the stereotype. But when your safety hinges on a stereotype being true or not, you don't get to be brave. I wasn't going to bet my happiness on the fact that my mom watched a talk show hosted by a lesbian.

But none of that mattered anymore. My happiness hinged on a pair of greedy bastards and their blackmail scheme. I had five weeks and two options: either give in and pay them off, or come out to my parents.

Week one: I was freaking out inside my head. I holed myself up in my room. I stopped texting Jackson. He confronted me in the parking lot one afternoon: “Amir. What’s wrong?” I remember staring at the outline of his wide shoulders, the edges of his blond hair, which he refused to cut. I couldn’t look at his eyes—it was our un-staring contest all over again—because all I could see in those eyes was that stupid picture of us kissing, flashing before me like a neon sign.

“If something happened, you can tell me,” Jackson said, shifting his eyes. It was clear he was nervous to be seen talking to me. Even with all the time we spent together in his car, we still barely talked at school.

“It’s nothing, Jackson.”

“Is it your parents?” He turned his face away toward the football field, puffing his chest. “If there’s something going on, I want to—”

“No, you don’t,” I snapped. “You don’t want to help. I just need space.”

Week two: things only got worse. I started hearing back from the colleges I applied to. The rejection letters trickled into my inbox, one after another: NYU, Columbia, Northwestern, Georgetown, Boston College, George Washington. It was like one long, drawn-out funeral, especially around my parents. They got really silent and mostly reacted with sighs and tight-lipped nods. Pretty soon I realized I hadn’t just ruined my future; I had ruined their American Dream.

I was angry, too. College was supposed to be my light at the end of the tunnel—when I would be able to come out to my parents safely, with some distance between us. I was counting

on one of those schools to be my escape. With the exception of my two safety schools, they all turned me away.

I retreated into my shell. Turned quiet at home. Quiet at school.

By week three, the blackmail was back to being constantly on my mind. I had less than fourteen days left, and I still had the same two options: come up with the money, or come out. Since I was in no position to disappoint my parents even more, I decided to give into Ben and Jake's demands. But after I did the dirty deed on Wikipedia and sent them the money, I got a separate text from Jake: he wanted another three thousand dollars, this time by graduation day. That fucker.

I thought about coming out to my parents. I kept pulling up that mental scoreboard, but I just couldn't find a way to make the numbers work. Every time I opened my mouth and tried, I failed. Every time I thought about pushing it just an inch—testing the waters with a *what if I liked boys?*—type comment—I chickened out. It's hard enough tiptoeing around your entire life with a secret like that. It's draining, constantly feeling that you might not be safe around your own family. My parents were already looking at me differently after I got rejected from all those colleges; if I told them I was gay, I would cease to be their son. I'd become a stranger they had wasted their time raising.

A week before graduation, my family was sitting down for dinner when the phone rang. My mom answered, then handed me the phone. "Amir, it's for you."

"*Ameeeeer.*" It was Jake. My heart started racing when I heard his wormy voice through the speaker. "I like your mom's accent,"

he sneered. “So exotic.”

I ran up the stairs to my room. Shut the door. My mouth was so dry, I could barely speak. “Why are you calling me?”

“Somehow I don’t think your mom would approve of your other life, *Ameer*.” The way Jake said my name, mimicking my mother’s accent, it was like he had discovered a new weapon that he could torture me with.

Jake then got to the point, demanding to know when I was going to get him the money. I wanted to be brave and tell him to leave me the hell alone . . . but then I thought about my family downstairs, the peaceful dinner we were having. I collapsed onto my bed, shoving my face into my pillow. All I could think, over and over, was: *I can’t do this*.

After that night, I accepted that there was no universe in which I was capable of coming out. I tried to get the money. I really did. I busted my nerdy ass, reaching back out to every single start-up or D-list celebrity who’d ever slid into my inbox thirsty for a Wikipedia page, but at the end of it all, I was still a thousand bucks short. A couple nights before graduation, I came *this* close to texting Jake to ask if two thousand—two thousand dollars!—would work. But just before I pressed SEND, it came to me. A new idea, a third option I had never considered before.

Disappear. Just for a little while.

I knew the idea was ridiculous. So ridiculous, in fact, that the fantasy of skipping graduation and going somewhere else was actually comforting for about five seconds. It was the calmest I had felt in months.

Then I kept thinking. And the more I thought about it,

just completely removing myself from this entire mess until things calmed down, the less ridiculous it seemed. You don't just stand aside when a bomb is about to detonate. You run.

The morning of graduation, I was hyperventilating in my car in the driveway, a packed duffel bag on the passenger seat next to me. *This is it*, I kept thinking. I couldn't believe I was following through on this insane idea. But in a few hours, Jake was going to spill my secret to my parents in the middle of graduation. He'd already told me as much the day before at school.

I, however, would be on a plane thousands of feet in the air. I would be safe. I would have space. And when I landed, I would have the most important answer of my life: I would know if my family still loved me or not. If they did, then I would come home. And if they didn't—well, I would be far away, just as I'd always planned.

When I finally started driving, I felt the clash of my two identities stronger than ever. Iranian. Gay. There had always been a wall separating those two sides of me, so they would never touch. On one side, there was Jackson. On the other, my family. Soon, that wall would come crashing down.

I let out a deep sigh. And then I watched through the rearview mirror as my house shrank smaller and smaller, until it disappeared.