

Darius the Great Is Not Okay

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Darius doesn't think he'll ever be enough, in America or in Iran. Hilarious and heartbreaking, this unforgettable debut introduces a brilliant new voice in contemporary YA.

Winner of the William C. Morris Debut Award

"Heartfelt, tender, and so utterly real. I'd live in this book forever if I could."

-Becky Albertalli, award-winning author of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*

Darius Kellner speaks better Klingon than Farsi, and he knows more about Hobbit social cues than Persian ones. He's a Fractional Persian-half, his mom's side-and his first-ever trip to Iran is about to change his life.

Darius has never really fit in at home, and he's sure things are going to be the same in Iran. His clinical depression doesn't exactly help matters, and trying to explain his medication to his grandparents only makes things harder. Then Darius meets Sohrab, the boy next door, and everything changes. Soon, they're spending their days together, playing soccer, eating faludeh, and talking for hours on a secret rooftop overlooking the city's skyline. Sohrab calls him Darioush-the original Persian version of his name-and Darius has never felt more like himself than he does now that he's Darioush to Sohrab.

Adib Khorram's brilliant debut is for anyone who's ever felt not good enough-then met a friend who makes them feel so much better than okay.

Adib Khorram is an author, a graphic designer, and a tea enthusiast. If he's not writing (or at his day job), you can probably find him trying to get his 100 yard Freestyle (SCY) under a minute, or learning to do a Lutz Jump. He lives in Kansas City, Missouri.

My grandmother loomed large on the monitor, her head tiny and her torso enormous.

I only ever saw my grandparents from an up-the-nose perspective.

She was talking to Laleh in rapid-fire Farsi, something about school, I thought, because Laleh kept switching from Farsi to English for words like cafeteria and Heads-Down, Thumbs-Up.

Mamou's picture kept freezing and unfreezing, occasionally turning into chunky blocks as the bandwidth fluctuated.

It was like a garbled transmission from a starship in distress. "Maman," Mom said, "Darius and Stephen want to say hello." Maman is another Farsi word that means both a person and a relationship-in this case, mother. But it could also mean grandmother, even though technically that would be mamanbozorg.

I was pretty sure maman was borrowed from French, but Mom would neither confirm nor deny.

Dad and I knelt on the floor to squeeze our faces into the camera shot, while Laleh sat on Mom's lap in her rolling office chair.

"Eh! Hi, maman! Hi, Stephen! How are you?"

"Hi, Mamou," Dad said.

"Hi," I said.

"I miss you, maman. How is your school? How is work?"

"Um." I never knew how to talk to Mamou, even though I was happy to see her.

It was like I had this well inside me, but every time I saw Mamou, it got blocked up. I didn't know how to let my feelings out.

"School is okay. Work is good. Um."

"How is Babou?" Dad asked.

"You know, he is okay," Mamou said. She glanced at Mom and said, "Jamsheed took him to the doctor today."

As she said it, my uncle Jamsheed appeared over her shoulder. His bald head looked even tinier. "Eh! Hi, Darioush! Hi, Laleh! Chetori toh?"

"Khoobam, merci," Laleh said, and before I knew it, she had launched into her third retelling of her latest game of Heads-Down, Thumbs-Up.

Dad smiled and waved and stood up. My knees were getting sore, so I did the same, and edged toward the door.

Mom nodded along with Laleh and laughed at all the right spots while I followed Dad back down to the living room.

It wasn't like I didn't want to talk to Mamou.

I always wanted to talk to her.

But it was hard. It didn't feel like she was half a world away, it felt like she was half a universe away-like she was coming to me from some alternate reality.

It was like Laleh belonged to that reality, but I was just a guest.

I suppose Dad was a guest too. At least we had that in common.

Dad and I sat all the way through the ending credits-that was part of the tradition too-and then Dad went upstairs to check on Mom.

Laleh had wandered back down during the last few minutes of the show, but she stood by the Haft-Seen, watching the goldfish swim in their bowl.

Dad makes us turn our end table into a Haft-Seen on March 1 every year. And every year, Mom tells him that's too early. And every year, Dad says it's to get us in the Nowruz spirit, even though Nowruz-the Persian New Year-isn't until the first day of spring.

Most Haft-Seens have vinegar and sumac and sprouts and apples and pudding and dried olives and garlic on them-all things that start with the sound of S in Farsi. Some people add other things that don't begin with S to theirs too: symbols of renewal and prosperity, like mirrors and bowls of coins. And some families-like ours-have goldfish too. Mom said it had something to do with the zodiac and Pisces, but then she admitted that if it weren't for Laleh, who loved taking care of the goldfish, she wouldn't include them at all.

Sometimes I thought Dad liked Nowruz more than the rest of us combined.

Maybe it let him feel a little bit Persian. Maybe it did.

So our Haft-Seen was loaded with everything tradition allowed, plus a framed photo of Dad in the corner. Laleh insisted we had to add it, because Stephen begins with the sound of S.

It was hard to argue with my sister's logic. "Darius?"

"Yeah?"

"This goldfish only has one eyeball!"

I knelt next to Laleh as she pointed at the fish in question. "Look!"

It was true. The largest fish, a leviathan nearly the size of Laleh's hand, only had its right eye. The left side of its head- face-(do fish have faces?)-was all smooth, unbroken orange scales.

"You're right," I said. "I didn't notice that."

"I'm going to name him Ahab."

Since Laleh was in charge of feeding the fish, she had also taken upon herself the solemn duty of naming them.

"Captain Ahab had one leg, not one eye," I pointed out. "But it's a good literary reference."

Laleh looked up at me, her eyes big and round. I was kind of jealous of Laleh's eyes. They were huge and blue, just like Dad's. Everyone always said how beautiful Laleh's eyes were.

No one ever told me I had beautiful brown eyes, except Mom, which didn't count because (a) I had inherited them from her, and (b) she was my mom, so she had to say that kind of thing. Just like she had to call me handsome when that wasn't true at all.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No," I said. "I promise. Ahab is a good name. And I'm proud of you for knowing it. It's from a very famous book."

"Moby the Whale!"

"Right."

I could not bring myself to say Moby-Dick in front of my little sister.

"What about the others?"

"He's Simon." She pointed to the smallest fish. "And he's Garfunkel. And that's Bob."

I wondered how Laleh was certain they were male fish.

I wondered how people identified male fish from female fish. I decided I didn't want to know.

"Those are all good names. I like them." I leaned down to kiss Laleh on the head. She squirmed but didn't try that hard to get away. Just like I had to pretend I didn't like having tea parties with my little sister, Laleh had to pretend she didn't like kisses from her big brother, but she wasn't very good at pretending yet.

I took my empty cup of genmaicha to the kitchen and washed and dried it by hand. Then I filled a regular glass with water from the fridge and went to the cabinet where we kept everyone's medicine. I sorted through the orange capsules until I found my own.

"Mind grabbing mine?" Dad asked from the door. "Sure."

Dad stepped into the kitchen and slid the door closed. It was this heavy wooden door, on a track so that it slid into a slot right behind the oven. I didn't know anyone else who had a door like that.

When I was little, and Dad had just introduced me to Star Trek, I liked to call it the Turbolift Door. I played with it all the time, and Dad played too, calling out deck numbers for the computer to take us to like we were really on board the Enterprise.

Then I accidentally slid the door shut on my fingers, really hard, and ended up sobbing for ten minutes in pain and shock that the door had betrayed me.

I had a very sharp memory of Dad yelling at me to stop crying so he could examine my hand, and how I wouldn't let him hold it because I was afraid he was going to make it worse.

Dad and I didn't play with the door anymore after that.

I pulled down Dad's bottle and set it on the counter, then popped the lid off my own and shook out my pills.

Dad and I both took medication for depression.

Aside from Star Trek-and not speaking Farsi-depression was pretty much the only thing we had in common. We took different medications, but we did see the same doctor, which I thought was kind of weird. I guess I was paranoid Dr. Howell would talk about me to my dad, even though I knew he wasn't supposed to do that kind of thing. And Dr. Howell was always honest with me, so I tried not to worry so much.

I took my pills and gulped down the whole glass of water. Dad stood next to me, watching, like he was worried I was going to choke. He had this look on his face, the same disappointed look he had when I told him about how Fatty Bolger had replaced my bicycle's seat with blue truck nuts.

He was ashamed of me. He was ashamed of us.

☒ bermensches aren't supposed to need medication.

Dad swallowed his pills dry; his prominent Teutonic Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he did it. And then he turned to me and said, "So, you heard that Babou went to the doctor today?"

He looked down. A Level Three Awkward Silence began to coalesce around us, like interstellar hydrogen pulled together by gravity to form a new nebula.

"Yeah. Um." I swallowed. "For his tumor?" I still felt weird saying the word out loud. Tumor.

Babou had a brain tumor.

Dad glanced at the turbolift door, which was still closed, and then back to me. "His latest tests didn't look good."

"Oh." I had never met Babou in person, only over a computer screen. And he never really talked to me. He spoke English well enough, and what few words I could extract from him were accented but articulate.

He just didn't have much to say to me.

I guess I didn't have much to say to him either. "He's not going to get better, Darius. I'm sorry." I twisted my glass between my hands.

I was sorry too. But not as sorry as I should have been. And I felt kind of terrible for it.

The thing is, my grandfather's presence in my life had been purely photonic up to that point. I didn't know how to be sad about him dying.

Like I said, the well inside me was blocked. "What happens now?"

"Your mom and I talked it over," Dad said. "We're going to Iran."

Other Books

Rana Joon and the One and Only Now. This lyrical coming-of-age novel for fans of *Darius the Great Is Not Okay* and *On the Come Up*, set in southern California in 1996, follows a teen who wants to honor her deceased friend's legacy by entering a rap contest. Perfect Iranian girls are straight A students, always polite, and grow up to marry respectable Iranian boys. But it's the San Fernando Valley in 1996, and Rana Joon is far from perfect—she smokes weed and loves Tupac, and she has a secret: she likes girls. As if that weren't enough, her best friend, Louie—the one who knew her secret and encouraged her to live in the moment—died almost a year ago, and she's still having trouble processing her grief. To honor him, Rana enters the rap battle he dreamed of competing in, even though she's terrified of public speaking. But the clock is ticking. With the battle getting closer every day, she can't decide whether to use one of Louie's pieces or her own poetry, her family is coming apart, and she might even be falling in love. To get herself to the stage and fulfill her promise before her senior year ends, Rana will have to learn to speak her truth and live in the one and only now.

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