

Why I Learned to Cook

By: Sara Farizan

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

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Making out with Hannah Michaud was the most glorious thing to have happened in the history of the world. We had been officially dating for four months. Everything was exciting and new. We didn't wear matching T-shirts or kiss in public, but it was not lost on the student body that we were an item when she showed up to my girls' varsity volleyball games and I showed up to her photography exhibit. We were cuddly cute. It was perhaps a little nauseating, but I loved it.

Finding places to be amorous had been a little challenging. We often resorted to the backseat of my brother's red Ford Mustang that he couldn't take with him to college in NYC. My parents had met Hannah and liked her but always made sure my bedroom door was open when she visited. To be fair, they had done the same thing when my brother would bring over his now ex-girlfriend, so it was a step toward equality, I guess.

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When we came up for air in the back of the car, Hannah grinned at me.

"And at one time you were so shy," she said. She laughed as I blushed furiously. To our peers we may have come across as an odd pair. Everything Hannah did was with exuberance and joy. Not in a corny, superficial way. She oozed free spirit and didn't seem to have any preoccupations with high school cliques or SAT prep. She did whatever she wanted and I was a little envious of that.

I was . . . well, me. Tall—about five ten—athletic, I almost always wore a high ponytail. I liked structure. I liked to have a plan. I liked to have my assignments done before they were due and didn't understand why Hannah would leave everything for the last minute. I worried about everything all the time. Hannah didn't seem to get anxious about anything.

"Well, I have my moments of courage," I said as I gently wrapped a strand of her brown curly hair around my finger.

"Sometimes," Hannah said kindly. There was, however, a hint of passive-aggressiveness. I knew what she was getting at.

My Friday nights were usually taken up by dinners at my grandmother's home. I had come out as bi to my parents a year ago, but I hadn't told my grandma yet. There didn't seem to be any point, since up until now I didn't have much of a love life. That is, until there was Hannah. I hadn't yet introduced her to my grandmother, nor had I planned on doing so anytime soon.

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"You up to anything tomorrow?" I asked.

"Depends. I am very popular," she said, straight-faced. She was making fun of my describing her as such at one time. She would never let me forget it. "I am free for sure tonight, though."

"You really want to spend time with my grandma and her friend on a Friday night?"

"I would. I just want to know why you don't want me to. Are you worried she'll be upset or that she won't like me?"

I wasn't sure how my grandma would react. We were close, but the conversations between us were always about the past or the future. She didn't have any regard for the present, I guess.

"It'd be weird even if you were a guy. I mean, I don't know. I don't think she thinks of me doing stuff in a romantic capacity or whatever," I said, shifting my body away from her a little.

"It wouldn't have to be a huge coming-out thing, Yasi. You could just introduce me as your friend."

"She'd guess you were more than that," I said. My face would give me away. It was one of the things Hannah said she liked about me, my transparent feelings, particularly when she was around. It was how she had known I liked her. When Hannah walked by me or tried to make small talk, my face would flush and I'd stammer. She was the one to ask me out. I wouldn't have asked her because I never would have dreamed she could actually like me too. I was a bit of a chickenshit.

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"I suppose she would. Anyone would, really," she said. I stuck my tongue out at her. When she smiled at me, my insides felt like I was made up of the remnants of the blown-up and torched Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. The Stay Puft residue sliming up my gut wouldn't let me fully relax around her. It was kind of scary liking someone this much. "Mostly I just want to eat homemade Persian food. Her importance to you is secondary," Hannah said with a grin.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. Everything that Hannah had said that afternoon ended up being on my mind at Grandma's.

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The inside of my grandma's home sometimes felt like a shrine to her family, as photos of her siblings, late husband, kids, and grandkids overflowed her small living room. There was almost no room on any of the end tables or coffee table, because all the space was taken up by framed photographs. Most of the frames had pictures of me throughout the years. It was a little unnerving to have my whole life unfold in front of me while I drank tea.

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There were only two photographs of my grandfather. One was a black-and-white from their wedding day, he and Grandma smiling as they sat at a dinner table. Another was just of him, solo, in a suit, looking very serious. I had never met my grandfather. He passed away in Iran before Grandma immigrated here. My dad, a U.S. citizen, was concerned that his mom would be alone and got a green card on my grandma's behalf. It had apparently been a difficult and long process, but she came over here when my big brother was four and I wasn't born yet. Seventeen years later, I sometimes worried she didn't always feel at home.

"Befarmaeed shaam!" Grandma said to Mrs. Khodadian, her best friend who lived in the apartment above, signaling that we were welcome to the dinner table. She had prepared far too much food, expecting more than just the two of us. My aunt and her family were at a wedding, my other uncle and his wife were away on vacation, and my parents were too tired, which I

thought was a lousy excuse. It seemed like, as the years went by, Grandma's dinner nights had become an afterthought and something that was okay to skip.

Grandma had prepared a billowing platter of long-grain basmati rice with saffron on top, two stews, salad Shirazi, and bell peppers stuffed with meat, lentils, and rice. Her hand trembled a little as she poured us doogh from a pitcher. I always told Grandma that I thought doogh, a carbonated yogurt drink with mint, was gross, but she still handed me a glass every time and told me that if I tried it again I would like it. It never took.

"How is school, Yasaman?" Khanoum Khodadian asked me in heavily accented English.

"Oh, um, it's good," I said in English. I could understand and speak Farsi, but I was always embarrassed by my accent when I spoke. It would also take me a while to adjust and I'd occasionally use Farsglish, when I would jumble the two languages together. Like, I'd forget a word in Farsi and use the English word instead.

Page 91 "She is such a good student! Did you know she has straight As?" Grandma bragged to Khanoum Khodadian in Farsi. Grandma didn't feel the need to speak English in her home with just Khanoum Khodadian and me. My grandma understood English and could communicate pleasantries, but if a conversation ever went a little too fast or there were words she missed, she would become very quiet.

Khanoum Khodadian did know I got straight As, because Grandma brought it up every time they saw one another.

"Did you watch your show?" I asked the ladies in English. I was happy to take some of the attention away from me.

"Oh yes! They voted off my favorite! I don't know why they voted her off," Grandma responded.

Grandma loved *Dancing with the Stars*. Actually, she had an affinity for all the variety talent shows, whether they involved singing, dancing, magic, pets doing tricks, but *Dancing with the Stars* was her absolute favorite. What I found most amusing about it was that she didn't know who any of the "stars" were. She'd describe the contestants as "the one with the sick mother" or "the one who used to play some sport but is now balding."

"Did you vote for the singer to stay?" Khanoum Khodadian asked her.

"It wouldn't have made a difference if I had. Besides, I don't think it's very fair when we have Olympic athletes or football players compete against older actors and singers. Of course the athletes will have an advantage," Grandma said.

Page 92 My phone buzzed. Both ladies looked at me. My phone almost never buzzed. I ignored it. I didn't want to be rude at the dinner table.

"Answer it! Maybe it's your parents deciding to join us," Grandma said, hopeful in a way that made my heart break for her.

It wasn't my parents. It was a text from Hannah.

I'm sorry if I pushed you about grandma today. I just know she means a lot to you. And you mean a lot to me. So it's like the transitive property in math.

"Who is that?" Khanoum Khodadian teased in English. My face had probably given me away again.

"Oh, um, it's a friend from school."

"I know my friends don't make me turn the color of a pomegranate," Grandma said in a playful tone.

I put my phone down and covered my mouth with my palm so they couldn't see me smile. I wanted my grandma to know who made me blush, but didn't think it was the appropriate time to break the news. But then, when would be an appropriate time?

"Grandma . . . do you think you could teach me how to cook?" I asked. Both women looked shocked. It was as if I had told them I was going to be a contestant on *Dancing with the Stars*.

"Oh, I never thought this day would come." Grandma held her hands to her chest. She had always been upset by the fact that my idea of cooking was heating up burritos in the microwave.

"You have made your grandma so happy," Khanoum Khodadian said as she fanned Grandma who was pretending to pass out.

I texted Hannah back.

How committed are you to vegetarianism?

Meat was kind of a huge staple in Persian cuisine. Figured I should learn menu items Hannah could eat.

Tell your grandma not to worry. I'm not going to convert you. :)

I laughed at that. My grandma and Khanoum Khodadian took notice and smiled at one another but didn't say anything.

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I usually took Grandma shopping on Sundays. Today we were also buying ingredients for the dishes Grandma was teaching me to make.

I pushed our full supermarket cart in the checkout line behind Grandma. The store was always crowded, no matter the time of day or night. I put Grandma's everyday stuff onto the conveyor belt.

"Hello. How are you?" Grandma said in her heavy accent to the man behind the register.

"Hi there," he said politely as he unenthusiastically scanned our items. The woman behind me with a toddler in the cart kept pushing her cart toward me, giving me little space to move. She loudly sighed behind us.

"Ninety-seven dollars and forty-five cents," the cashier said as Grandma pulled her debit card from her wallet. She looked about to swipe the card, but the cashier stopped her. "We do the chip now," he said.

"What?" Grandma said, not understanding what he meant.

"We. Do. The. Chip. Now," the cashier said, loud and slow. The woman behind me huffed. I squeezed my way past the cart and took the card from Grandma.

"Sorry," I said to the lady behind us as Grandma entered her pin information. The woman had her arms crossed over her chest, but her child with chocolate all over his face smiled at me. Grandma looked angry, but she thanked the man when he gave her the receipt.

She didn't say anything to me until we had loaded everything into the trunk and were seated in the car.

"Why did you apologize to that woman?" she asked me.

"I . . . well, she seemed like she was in a hurry."

"You never apologize for taking up space, Yasaman. You have just as much right to take as much time in that line as you want to," Grandma said.

"Oh, no, that wasn't . . ."

"You don't apologize for who you are. I'm an old lady now and perhaps that doesn't mean much in the world we live in, but I exist and I shouldn't have to be sorry for that. As a woman, you have to know that. Don't ever apologize for who you are," she said.

I nodded and held her hand. It was wrinkled but soft and smaller than mine. I kissed the back of it.

"You're right," I said.

"I'm always right. Tell your mother that," she said. "Now let's go! We have to get to the market before the good vegetables are gone."

. . .

I had spent the past two months on weekends preparing the dishes Grandma taught me to make. My parents were starting to get sick of kuku sabzi, a vegetable herb frittata, though they were pleased to see that my attempts at making it were improving. I had also enjoyed going with Grandma to the ethnic food markets. We went to an Armenian-owned store for fresh and cheap produce and to a Persian bakery for dried barberries and chickpea cookies.

When Grandma would ask where the limoo torshi was at the Armenian grocery store, no one would bat an eye, but rather would lead her to the sour dried limes. They had shelves full of items from different countries, all to remind the shoppers of their favorite dishes from places they or their relatives had connection to.

I was doing my best to follow the recipe in Grandma's kitchen.

"Are you sure I can't help you with anything?" Grandma asked. I had spent all day peeling onions and garlic, boiling and stirring rice, and washing vegetables, and I was exhausted. Each dish I made took at least two hours, not including half an hour of prep time. No wonder my parents were fans of ordering takeout.

What I had loved the most about preparing adas polo (lentil rice), kuku sabzi, and fesenjan (a pomegranate stew) was spending time with Grandma and hearing about how her mother had prepared those meals. And the parties she went to as a kid with her parents and the celebrations she hosted when she raised her own children.

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" I shouted as I tried to beat Grandma to the door. I opened it to find Hannah, wearing a dress and holding a bouquet of flowers.

"I know I'm early," she said. She was never early. She was almost always ten minutes late for everything, which I had factored in for the evening, but she didn't need the extra time. She was wearing a dress I had never seen before. I didn't think she wore anything but jeans and a sweater. Her curly hair was pulled back into a bun. She had taken out her nose ring. Her hand picked at the plastic around the bouquet. Hannah smiled, but there was a look on her face I had never seen before. She was nervous. I didn't think that was a feeling she knew anything about.

"Your timing is perfect," I said as I let her in.

"Do I look okay?" she asked me. I felt the Stay Puft residue bubble up inside me.

"You're perfect too. But you didn't need to, uh . . . You could have come like you usually dress."

"Oh, I'd dress like this if I were visiting my grandma. But she's no longer with us."

"I'm so sorry for your loss," I replied, concerned.

"Oh, no, sorry! I meant she's no longer with us in Massachusetts! She moved to Florida two years ago," she said. Both of us laughed. I led her to the dining room, where Grandma was already seated.

"Grandma, this is Hannah," I said. I didn't say *my girlfriend*, but I didn't say *my friend* either. I hoped that would be a start.

"It's very nice to meet you," Hannah said.

"Hannah! You are so beautiful!" Grandma exclaimed.

"Thank you! So are you," Hannah said. "These are for you," she said, handing her the flowers.

"Oh, thank you," Grandma said as she kissed Hannah on both cheeks, which I had prepped Hannah for. The *thank* sounded like *tank* because the *th* sound was difficult for her to say.

"I can put those in a vase," I said, extending my hands for the flowers. Grandma passed them to me before she sat down again. Hannah sat across from her, and I really wish I had put on some music or something so it wouldn't feel like I was leaving Hannah alone when I brought food in and out of the kitchen.

"Yasaman tells me you are a big fan of *Dancing with the Stars*," Hannah began. It was the first time I had heard her say my full name. Everyone at school called me Yasi or Big Y, like the New England supermarket chain. Only the assholes called me that, actually.

"Oh! It is the finals! So exciting," Grandma said. I walked into the kitchen to put flowers in a vase. I could hear Grandma trying to remember the names of the two finalists and Hannah saying she could look up the contestants on her phone. I scooped rice from the pot to a platter. I was grateful that I had plated the other dishes so as not to leave my guest alone for too long. I carried in plate upon plate of food to the dining room.

"There's more?" Hannah exclaimed.

"Hannah, I want to thank you," Grandma said.

"Oh, um, how come?" Hannah said. I could hear her usually confident voice waver.

"Because I think you are the reason my granddaughter learned how to cook!" They both laughed at that. I took a deep breath before I joined them with a dish of kuku sabzi.

"Everything is vegetarian friendly," I said, sitting at the head of the table between Grandma and Hannah. The adas polo, basmati rice with lentils and dates, smelled of butter, ground cinnamon, and sweetness.

"Okay. But next time, Yasaman will make you lamb," Grandma said. Hannah looked at me. "I'm joking. You know, like in a Greek wedding movie when the husband doesn't eat meat."

Hannah laughed, but I blushed profusely. I couldn't tell if Grandma quite understood how spot on her joke was.

"Befarmaeed sham. Dig in," I said. Hannah looked at me like I was James Bond ordering a martini shaken, not stirred. I guess she'd never heard me speak in Farsi before.

"Hannah, you must come over always," Grandma said as I loaded rice on her plate until she told me to stop.

"I'd like that," Hannah said, placing mint leaves, radishes, and feta cheese on her plate. This was going so much better than I think either of us had anticipated.

"You can tell me who is sending Yasi the texts that make her face red," Grandma said as she bit into the kuku sabzi.

"Oh, I . . . I don't know who that could be," Hannah said, not so relaxed anymore. She distracted herself by asking me what was in the fesenjan. I explained it was a walnut pomegranate stew that usually included chicken.

"Now you are red!" Grandma said excitedly to Hannah.

"I am?" Hannah asked in a panic.

"It's all right," I said to Hannah. I touched her shoulder to let her know it was okay.

My grandma noticed. Her eyes widened. I smiled at my grandma and nodded a little to let her know that yes, this was who made me blush over text messages. Grandma blinked but didn't immediately say anything, which made me worry.

"When I first cooked for your grandfather, I wasn't a very good chef," Grandma explained to me in Farsi. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Hannah tense up. "But he always lied and said everything I made was delicious when we both knew it wasn't. He said it was delicious because I put so much love into it. Your dinner is good because it was made from love, but you don't need to lie. And neither does she."

I hadn't planned on crying at dinner, but plans changed as my eyes welled up.

"Hannah," my grandma said in English. I turned to Hannah. She looked petrified. "Yasaman has done a good job, but if you really want delicious food, you are welcome next week."

I wiped my eyes with my palms before I smiled at Hannah. She laughed in relief.

I really hoped Hannah liked Persian food. She was going to be having a lot of it at Grandma's for the foreseeable future.