

The Start of Something Big
Sarah Babazadeh

Note: Abe's real first name was Ebrahim. That was the name I knew him by when we met. The nickname "Abe" came later.

It was the last week of June, 1963. I had quit my teaching job at the end of the school term and moved back home. It had been a rough year, professionally and socially, and I was somewhat depressed. So I returned to Syracuse University to start on my master's degree in art education. Now I was taking a drawing class in summer school.

My homework, one day, was to sketch figures in motion. That evening there would be square dancing and folk dancing in the Hendricks Chapel parking lot, so I decided to go there to complete my assignment.

I carried my sketch pad and pencils and sat down on a low cement wall. The sun had just set but it was still light enough to do some quick sketches. The dancing began. The light was slowly fading and I was hurrying to finish my work, when someone came over to me.

"Come on and dance," the person said.

I didn't look up at him. "I'm doing my homework."

"You can't draw in dark," the person insisted. "Come on. Let's dance."

He extended one hand to help me up and the other to relieve me of my sketch pad. I let him take the pad and set it down on the wall. This guy doesn't take no for an answer, I thought.

Now I looked at him. He was short, scarcely taller than I, and skinny. He was definitely not my type. He asked me my name and then introduced himself.

"I am Ebrahim Babazadeh," he said as he shook my hand.

"Where are you from?" I asked.

"Tehran, Iran."

We began dancing: horas, shadishes and square dances. I'd been square dancing since grade school, and I thought I was quite good at it. In fact, dancing was one of my passions, and I loved to dance with men who were great dancers. He wasn't a great dancer. What he lacked in ability he made up for in enthusiasm.

After the dance was over, he asked me out for a drink. We went to the Orange, the campus watering hole. He had a CC and ginger; I ordered a seven and seven. Now I could see his face

more clearly. He had black hair, and expressive eyebrows over luminous dark eyes. Any woman would have been jealous of his long black eyelashes. His nose was narrow and straight, much nicer, I thought, than mine. A perfect nose. His face, however, was scarred. It looked as though, long ago, someone had sliced a bit out of each cheek. In my clueless mind I imagined that middle eastern people probably ride on horses and fight with swords.

I looked at his hands, slender and tanned, with a bit of dirt under each nail. The cuffs of his shirt were dingy, as if they had never been pretreated before washing. Furthermore, the man slaughtered the English language. He was not the type of person I would have chosen to befriend. Yet I felt happy. My depression had evaporated. It was as if he were happy enough for both of us.

He asked me if I was Jewish and I said I wasn't. He said he thought I was Jewish from the moment he saw me. I assumed he was Moslem. Wasn't everybody from the middle east Moslem?

At ten forty-five I remembered I had told my mother I would be home by eleven. She would be up waiting for me and would worry if I were late, so I told Ebrahim I had to leave.

He offered to walk me home. We walked across campus and toward my parents' home, just a block beyond the women's gym. We arrived at the large white house with the broad, columned front porch, and I stopped at the gate to thank him and say good-night.

"I have to meet your parents," he said.

I looked at him in amazement. "No! It's eleven o'clock at night! My father will have been asleep for hours. My mother will be up waiting for me, but she doesn't want to entertain anyone at this hour."

"I have to meet them. I want they know I am honest and my intentions are good."

He held my hand, opened the gate and walked me up the steps. I feared the scene that might ensue if my father happened to be up.

I rang the doorbell and Mother answered. Weakly, I tried to explain that this guy wanted to "meet you and Daddy." She didn't have a welcoming expression on her face, but she let us in. A religious booklet was lying on the brown easy chair by the television, where she must have been reading or dozing, when we interrupted her.

Ebrahim introduced himself to her and made some polite conversation, then asked to meet my father.

"Oh, he's asleep," Mother protested. Mother had always been the guardian of my father's sleep. He should never be disturbed. Nevertheless, without further complaint, she went to his room and roused him from his slumber.

My father walked slowly into the room. He was wearing a dark burgundy robe over his pajamas. His thick gray hair, worn longer since his retirement, hung in waves over each ear. He carried his fancy wooden walking cane, as much a prop as a necessity. Having just awakened, he looked surprised and a little confused. He did not seem angry and he did not display his imperious old self. He sat down in the gold brocade wing chair by the fireplace, carefully arranged his cane beside him, and motioned for us to sit on the sofa opposite him. Mother retreated to her chair. I noticed immediately that Ebrahim was not cowed by my father, unlike boyfriends I'd had. It seemed that the formidable old Italian and the eager young Iranian were alike in totally opposite ways.

The next morning a package was delivered to the house, addressed to me. It contained two dozen beautiful red roses, from Ebrahim

On Sunday Ebrahim invited me to a program of short films at the University auditorium. We were early and the doors of the auditorium were still locked, so we sat together on a bench outside. The sun was high in the sky and the July weather was warm and pleasant. I could not help but enjoy the moment. Ebrahim suddenly spoke.

"Let's make a team!"

I was stunned and tried to make a joke of it. "What kind of team? A football team?"

"A marriage team!"

I think I simply said no, but I don't recall any expression or word of disappointment from him. He said he would have asked me on the first night, but he thought that it would have been too forward.

The last of the short films was a documentary about the Holocaust. Ebrahim was visibly shaken, his reaction visceral. I had not expected to see this optimistic and cheerful person so intimately and sorrowfully affected by the film. What possible connection could this Iranian have with the Holocaust? Stupidly, I didn't ask.

Ebrahim invited me to play tennis on the following Sunday. He told me he had to paint an apartment for a lady that morning, but he should be finished in plenty of time to pick me up at one o'clock.

Sunday arrived and I was in my room doing homework. I'd asked my father to let me know when Ebrahim arrived. One o'clock came and went. I stopped working and went downstairs.

My father was standing in the living room. It seemed odd that Ebrahim had neither shown up nor called.

"He was here," my father said. "I told him you weren't home."

Father went on to describe how Ebrahim came to the door in old clothes spattered with paint, and how that was no way for a young man to come and visit a young lady, so he sent him away.

Ebrahim did call later. His painting job had taken longer than expected. He had risked coming to pick me up in his paint clothes because, he said, he wanted above all to be on time. I was angry enough with my father that I told Ebrahim exactly what he had done.

Ebrahim introduced me to his cousin, an undergraduate at Syracuse. Oddly the cousin called him Albert, not Ebrahim. He pronounced it the French way: *al ber'*. Then we met a former classmate of Ebrahim's, who greeted him as "Charlie."

"What *is* your name anyway?" I asked, suspiciously.

He replied that he wanted to tell me his real name, Ebrahim, so that I would know he was an honest person. I accepted that, but still wondered about Albert.

Whenever we met, he greeted me with: "When are we gonna get married?" He may have said it humorously, but to him our marriage was inevitable.

One lovely autumn afternoon we were driving to Fayetteville in his old 1951 Plymouth, a sorry looking vehicle. My yellow cardigan sweater echoed the hue of the golden leaves on the trees as we passed. I said something — I don't remember what — that indicated I believed he was Moslem.

"I am not Moslem," he said. "I am Jewish."

I began to laugh. I laughed and laughed. My father had encouraged me to break up with my college sweetheart because he was Jewish. My best friend in college was Jewish. And I wanted to be Jewish. I laughed until I had tears in my eyes. At that moment my life changed forever.

We were married on a snowy day in mid-December, just six months after we first met. I converted to the Jewish faith. And we were a team for the next forty-seven years.