

I hover my phone over the frying pan, holding steady to get a good video. That sizzle is going to add some nice ASMR to the soundtrack.

"*This post will go viral. 3 million likes,*" I assure myself, hoping the universe can hear me.

"Zoey cooks now? Seriously, this is hilarious."

I roll my eyes at my brother as he enters the kitchen and opens the fridge. "Arun, I told you *so many times* to call me Zohal. I don't go by Zoey anymore."

"Zohal, as in your social media persona?" he laughs as he shuffles around Tupperware containers of leftovers in the fridge.

"I'm not calling you Zohal just because you're pretending to be the most Afghan girl that ever Afghan'd. Hashtag you're not."

I take a deep breath and press my lips together, tasting my strawberry lip gloss. *Just ignore him. He's a hater. Focus on good vibes - viewers can feel that.* And I haven't had a lot of views on my socials lately.

It's been almost six months since my first post went viral. I made it after I heard Ethan, the cutest boy in the entire school, call me *hot in that princess Jasmine* way to his friends by my locker. I got rid of my blonde highlights that same day, using a black box dye. I styled myself just like the Disney character. I've always been amazing at makeup, so I got the eyeliner and everything *spot on*. And although Ethan has still never talked directly to me, I'm so glad I heard him say that because my phone *blew up* with compliments about my exotic beauty, and questions about my ethnicity. I got stopped so many times at school that whole month. Some people called me Jasmine, and I'd smile back. Others congratulated me on going viral. Maple Grove is pretty small with a noticeable lack of diversity; so even at the grocery store people knew it was me, smiling and pointing with whispers. It was unreal.

Naturally, now I make videos about being Afghan, some cultural beauty tips from my mom but mostly from internet research, and when I can't think of anything I put up some mood content with aesthetics. I didn't go viral again, but I will. I'm *pretty much* an influencer at this point, if you count consistent views... but you wouldn't know it from my own family, who could not be bothered to support me.

*Good vibes, good vibes.* I place the plate piled with perfect triangles of fried sheet dough on the small dining table, beautifully set with my favorite gold table runner. Arun tries to grab a piece from the top, and I swat his hand away.

"I need to film first!"

I take some photos and some videos of my aesthetic meal, but it's missing something. I grab a rose from the vase and place it next to my plate. I think that's it. These shots are gorgeous.

Sliding the plate towards my brother, I feel good (smug even?) practicing the introduction of my invention.

"Are you ready for... Z bolaneese?!"

Arun gives me a blank look and takes a bite, not exactly in awe. I should've known better. Nobody supports a sister less these days than this guy. I force a huge smile for my moment, describing the meal as if he's asked.

"What you have in front of you is a ZOHAL original! A classic American grilled cheese sandwich meets Afghanistan's infamous bolani."

I hear the crunch on the exterior as he takes another bite and see the cheese is gooey. I'm encouraged and continue.

"I've made it so simple too! Instead of making dough from scratch, you just fold an Asian egg roll wrapper from the package, with a slice of processed cheese - a bolaneese!"

I grab one to bite into, realizing too late that I should have filmed my own reaction.

As Arun swallows his massive bite, he laughs.

"So let me get this straight. You *created* a fake quesadilla? And what part of this is bolani? There's no potato, no leek inside."

"Arun, do you even know what fusion food is? The outside represents bolani, the cheese is self explanatory, and I call it a BOLANESESE."

"That sounds like a pasta dish, airhead."

Oh. Oops. I knew the name had sounded familiar. Either way, haters are so annoying.

"Is being a critical, non-supportive sibling your only goal in life?" I snap as I grab his third triangle from his hand.

"Zoey, seriously. I'm trying to help you. You had a viral moment, and now you're faking who you are."

Madar enters the kitchen, wrapping her big puffy curls into a bun, like she always does on the way to work. She's been calling her style *hippie revival* lately, but it's just the same long flowy skirts with embroidered tops she's always worn with the addition of dangly earrings her best friend Jenny makes. Today it's sea shells that clink against each other as she moves.

"What's the commotion kiddos?"

"Nothing new, Zoey made something fake, totally on brand for her. Just another day of pretending for the internet."

The word fake really stings. A girl in my biology class who used to be so nice, commented on one of my posts that I was a *fraud*, and I didn't stop thinking about it for days. Like... how could it be fake to share the culture I'm actually from? I'm starting to conclude these are jealousy vibes. It's so unexpected that my popularity *bothers* people who should be happy for me. It's

the ones who were sweet and protective of me when I was an ugly duckling who don't like me getting attention now? Make it make sense!

"These quesadilla knock-offs ZOHAL JAAN made, taste good though. I can't tell if I need milk with them or a green tea, which is a weird dilemma."

Madar squeezes my shoulder, and helps herself to a bolaneese, taking a bite. "Oh so cute, Zoey jaan! Like bolani with gooey cheese!" She's in a rush, as usual for weekends, the busiest time at her flower shop. But I know she's going to sit down for a little bit with us, to have what she calls "a check in with my family." She doesn't pour herself milk like Arun has, switching on the kettle for her tea instead.

"So how are my children? Arun *Jaanem*, chess team update? How'd you do yesterday?"

My mom pronounces his name Aa-ron instead of Ah-roon. When our Boba was still alive, he'd said life would be just that much easier in this small town if our names were easier to pronounce. So we were given some Americanized ways to say our Afghan names. My name Zohal has been Zoey at school since kindergarten, and Arun was barely a shift at all to being pronounced Aaron. I remember him saying that the paperwork to change the spelling wasn't necessary. *You never know, we could go home to Afghanistan one day, my Zohal and my Arun.*

"Chess practice was good! I played a few sharp Sicilian defenses and ended up winning a couple of great endgames. It was cracked."

I'm pretty sure our mom didn't understand a word he said but congratulated him profusely and moved on to me. "Zoey Jaan. Sorry, sorry ... Zohal. How're things with you, my Angel?"

Typical. She asked Arun a specific question because she's paying attention to his life. And with me it's just asking how *things* are. I love my mom. She's taken such good care of us and became a single mom when we were so little. Everyone in town loves her. The beautiful Lana. Her name is already perfect. She has stunning green eyes, high cheekbones and light skin that is met with "Are you Italian?" or with the assumption Arun gets; this is a beautiful person, a beautiful American person. Nevermind how different life is for me and my brown skin.

"What *things* are you asking about Madar?" I can't help being a bit bratty, I'm annoyed at both of them now.

"Well Zohal, I'm asking about your social media, that you won't let me follow. By the looks of the gorgeous appetizer today, it seems you're going to do recipes now? Moving on from Afghan beauty secrets?"

"I still do beauty tips, but the turmeric and yogurt mask you mentioned was so watery I only got pity likes."

"Did you use full fat yogurt? And ooof, I may have forgotten to mention my mother would add a drop or two of rose water. Sorry Zoey, I've been so busy at the flower shop it's made me scatterbrained. You know how it is when spring is coming. Speaking of which, tell you what. Let's make a *haftseen* table spread together and you can film it. We haven't celebrated Naw Roz in years."

She looks a little sad for a second when she says *in years*, which stops me from whining about how it's her fault we don't do anything traditional. Her offer to celebrate Naw Roz is exciting, and I want to hold her to it.

"What's that stuff you used to make with the soaked fruit called again? Isn't that for Naw Roz too?"

"Haft mewa, yes I'll make it. We'll make it together. I'll have tulips for the table, could ask Jenny to set me up with her new candle collection..."

My mom drifts off into thought. I got that from her, while my brother got laser-sharp focus from our father, making him a chess genius, and me an all-over-the-place... occasional genius?

Arun says he has to go; his boys are waiting for him to play basketball. My six foot three brother bends down to kiss our five foot two mom goodbye, and she gushes over him, stroking his cheeks and ruffling his hair. "Look at these golden curls! Makes me love my own! I washed your T-shirts, honey; take an extra with you and good luck with your game!"

"He's not going off to war, he's playing basketball with his stinky friends."

Arun shakes his head and looks at me as if I'm way too beneath him to understand the depths of guys throwing a ball into a hoop.

"I've been playing since I was a kid. *It's not new to my personality*," he whispers the last line with a smirk.

While Arun is treated like delicate glass, my brave jump to internet personality was met with "box dye?! That's so bad for your hair! And honey, it's way darker than your natural color." My mom keeps diverting back to my journalism aspirations, and really everything she says just feels so dismissive. I haven't thought about journalism in ages, but it's because I'm busy! Everything has been a blur, and it's exciting, but it can be stressful to post enough, and it's kind of weirdly lonely. Sigh. Especially when your mom and brother don't show up for you.

Once Arun has left, a question pops out of my mouth.

"Madar, since when do you *offer* to help me with my content? I totally overpaid for my *koochi* dress online because you wouldn't look through the website with me."

"First of all, it's not that I wouldn't help you, it's that you always want to do things the instant you think of the idea. Being impulsive is a great trait in many ways, my Angel, but so is patience. Your dress is gorgeous though! I haven't seen one like that in a long, long time. Amazing what's available now that we can just order anything online, isn't it? I didn't see anything Afghan for years when we first moved here. It was just denim everything."

Lost her focus again.

"So *Madar*, now you're actually offering to help me with content because..."

"Well I love you, I want you to be happy. It'll be so fun for us to rediscover Naw Roz together after so many years of overwork at the shop. We can share pics of it with our customers too... you could tag us! Jenny said that's what I should be asking you kids to help me with. Anyway, full transparency, I was thinking about making some haft mewa for our New Year anyway. Beth came in for Sunday's church bouquet and asked me to join a welcoming committee. The church sponsored a new Afghan family moving to town. I bet they'd love to be welcomed with some haft mewa. Oooofff, what I would've given for a welcome like that. Bless that Beth, but when we first arrived, she made us meatloaf of all things..."

Hold on, what did my mother just say? A new Afghan family? Thoughts are going off in my mind like fireworks. I'll get back on that language app I dropped a few months ago... or actually push my mom to teach me how to welcome them and converse in Farsi, or Dari, as they might call it. Ugh, why did our mom ever switch to English with us? I could've been fluent instead of the *kind-of-understand* level I am now. Or wait, maybe the new family speaks Pashto like my dad's mom in Afghanistan does? Should I learn that instead? It's a game of catch-up in my head. All the things I can do to be there for this family! All I can learn from them! I could see if they're down for even being in a video series... Zohal welcomes her first experience with a *khala* and *kaka*, an adopted aunt and uncle who adore me and call me their piece of Afghanistan, their *Shahzada* princess. They'll know me as Zohal Jaan, no slips calling me Zoey. Just as I'm conjuring an image of my new aunt and uncle being cuddly like Santa and Mrs. Claus, I realize my mother has gotten up and put her coat on.

"It's a woman, about my age apparently, and get this, Zoey. She has a daughter your age! She'd probably love to teach you things for your videos. You could put her in your social media with you and maybe even stop being so annoyed with your poor Madar Jaan. She'll be exactly... what do you guys call it? Your brand! Not the only Afghan girl at your school anymore, how exciting! Have a good day, Zoey!"

I am too stunned to speak. I'm sorry, what did she just say? *Not the only Afghan girl anymore?*