

Simple People

Chapter One

Let me introduce myself. I'm a more-or-less normal guy. I have a job; I support myself; I'm a little on the shy side—some people might call me standoffish. Despite that, I get along with people okay; I have a couple friends I see from time to time, but I am pretty busy, so it doesn't happen very often.

I have sort of an odd name: Ahmed Winslow. Growing up it was a funny name: no other kids I knew had a first name like mine. One day when I was sixteen or so, I asked my dad about it. He explained that my mother was British, something I had known, not the least because of her accent. He was Jordanian; I also knew that for the same reason, even if the accent was more challenging to place. He met my mom when she was a volunteer in Jordan. They hit it off right away and, after a few months, decided that they would marry. She did not want to return to England, and he didn't want to stay in Jordan, in part because his family was not so hot about his marrying an infidel. So they settled on the United States.

Somewhere along the line, my dad decided to change his last name to my mother's. He thought it would help him blend in once they got to the States. I guess he didn't give much thought to the fact that his heavy accent, dark complexion, and thick, jet-black hair might play a bigger role in how other people saw him. On top of all that, his first name was Mohammed. Whatever. It was his call. Even my mother once said that she thought it was a little odd, but she did not protest.

When I asked my dad why they named me Ahmed, he said that he wanted his kids to have some tie to Jordan. He missed that country a lot and often talked about going back. So that was it. I have kind of a mixed-up name; so does my sister, whose name is Fatima.

I learned early on that lots of Americans are suspicious of any people who have ties to the Middle East, and that's probably a reason I come across as a little standoffish. I approach people with caution, because you never know where they stand. Not a big deal really; but it makes me a little, um, careful around people I don't know. I'm pretty sure I am not the only one who has this problem, but I've never met anyone who did.

It sometimes embarrasses me, but I would never tell my parents that. They were touchy about a lot of things. I heard somewhere that cross-cultural marriages could be challenging, but I didn't really need anyone to tell me that. My parents argued a lot. About everything. Even though my dad decided to come to the U.S., he never seemed at home here. He didn't even seem to like it very much and was forever talking about how he didn't trust Americans. I think he pretty much grew to hate the U.S.

A lot of the battles were about religion. He is Muslim and my mother is Anglican. He wanted her to convert to Islam, but she refused and never gave up her religion. Weekends were kind of chilly at our house. My dad never got over mom's refusal to convert, and he insisted that my sister and I be raised Muslim. So he dragged us to the mosque on Fridays. My mother retaliated by dragging us to mass on Sundays. My sister and I accepted this because we didn't want to add more fuel to the marital fire, so we pretended that this was normal and never talked about it. It's not that our silence mattered much; both my parents were more interested in fighting and attacking each other than paying attention to us.

But it wasn't just religion. The incessant arguing, the name-calling, the slammed doors could be triggered by any little thing: dinner choices, who did what, who didn't do something. It was a crazy house, really more a battleground than a home. Finally, in my last year of high school, my mother couldn't stand it anymore and filed for divorce.

That made matters worse for a while, and those were tough times at the Winslow house. My dad was not a violent guy, but he would get so angry that we—Fatima and I—thought he might strike out physically and hurt my mom or maybe even us. Mercifully, he never did. What he and my mom did, however, was sink into a tense, suffocating silence until one or the other of them left the house. When they did speak to each other, usually for some practical reason, it led quickly to an argument, where they looked at each other with a kind of hatred that even I had never seen before from them. It often ended with a slammed door, the sound of car tires screeching down the driveway, or a vague threat to do harm to the other person. It was sickening. And scary. But even when they weren't speaking, which was most of the time, the glares and hostile looks dominated the atmosphere in the house. Honestly, it was hard to breathe in our house, and sometimes my sister and I went outside just to get some air, but even that was overshadowed by the fear that the anger would become physical.

Fatima and I whispered about it a once in a while, but that went nowhere: she was completely on mom's side and couldn't understand my dad's side at all. I thought both of them were angry, stubborn people, and my goal was to get away from that house as soon as I could. Fatima and I were not that close; we didn't argue really; we just sort of went our separate ways. Fatima stayed close to mom, who would whine to her about her bad marriage. I just wanted to get out of there.

My parents continued to live together until the divorce was final. Then my dad moved out. A heavy silence fell in our house. There was no more constant bickering or arguing, but the tension level didn't drop much. Even though the house was quieter, no one would call it happy. Honestly, I don't even know what a "happy house" would look like. A few weeks after the divorce was final, my dad left a voicemail on my mom's phone announcing that he was going back to Jordan. I was eighteen and Fatima was sixteen. Nobody has heard from him since.

Fatima pretended that she didn't care about that, even though she was furious when she learned what he was going to do. She was so angry she called him and told him she never wanted to see him again. That shocked me some and may have been one of the reasons we never heard from him again. I don't know.

I think the three of us were exhausted from the years of fighting. While the quiet was welcome, the wounds we all bore didn't go away just because my dad left. It was a dark, uncertain time. My mother and sister clung to each other, often wrapped in each other's arms; I spent as much time as I could away from home. Mostly, I was planning my escape. My mom tried to get me to talk about the divorce, but there really wasn't anything to say: the marriage had failed spectacularly. We all knew it was a disaster long before the actual divorce. And my mom, who can be an outgoing and resourceful woman, was a nurse who loved her work and made enough money that our living standard didn't change. But she was also one of the wounded. It's not a coincidence that none of us handles relationships very well. My mom never remarried, and my sister has still never had a boyfriend. As for me, well, let's just say any relationship I would have with a woman would feel like a minefield, a dangerous thing.

I decided not to go to college. I didn't care much about school anyway, and it seemed to me that, if I had gone to college, I would probably have to live at home, since we lived in a college town. Ugh! That was the last thing I wanted to do. As time went on, I began to resent both my parents and even my sister. In my head, I blamed them for the way I was brought up, the way we all were with each other, and the way my parents especially seemed more interested in fighting than raising us. As soon as I could, I found a decent job and struck out on my own. Fatima went to school a little later and became a nurse, just like our mom. She's doing okay, but she still lives with our mother.

I'm doing okay too. I found a job quickly as a truck driver and threw myself into work. Being a truck driver is flexible: you can take the jobs you want and carve out your own free time. This feels right to me; I like it.

A few months after I started working, I was able to afford a place of my own. It wasn't fancy; it was a small rental house on the outskirts of town. But it was mine; it was quiet, and I still cherish the silence it affords me. It feels like a home—my home—more than any other place I've lived. I love the fact that I am the only person who lives here.

As time went on, I fell into a comfortable routine. I worked as much as I could in order to get enough money together to buy this house. The owner, who was a lot older than me, offered me a deal: the house was rented to me with an option to buy it. Part of my rent would go toward the purchase price. I figure I can put together a reasonable mortgage within a year or so. I see this as a forever kind of place.

Then there is this other thing.

I don't talk much about this, but it will help you get to know me. So here goes: I am a counterfeiter. This is embarrassing, but it's important. It started as a lark. I was reading an article not long after I got my place about how well U.S. currency is made. It is hard to reproduce without very specialized equipment, and the agency charged with protecting it is none other than

the Secret Service. But the article also mentioned how widespread counterfeiting was. It planted a seed: I began to wonder how hard it would really be. After all, it was all about printing, something I knew nothing about but thought I could learn. I started doing some Internet searches about counterfeiting money, and I was shocked to learn that you could even buy a small counterfeiting machine online for a price I could afford. At first, I scoffed at the idea. Pipe dream, I thought. It's too dangerous. But the idea wouldn't let me go.

I started doing weird things, like doodling images of Benjamin Franklin. My doodling got to be something of an obsession. I thought I was getting better at it. So I did some more research about the history and the mechanics of printing money. The more I learned, the more infatuated I got and the more I came to believe that I could do it. I read everything I could about currency: not only its history and how it's produced, but also how it is tracked and how the Secret Service works. It was exciting, even exhilarating.

At first, I tried the counterfeiting machine. It made reasonable copies of U.S. currency, but anything more than the most casual look would reveal it a fake. So I went back to the Internet—this time I found my way to the dark web—to see what the alternatives were. It was there that I found something called a hologram printer. This was fascinating. It would print any hologram and reproduce it exactly as it was made. This was eye-opening, so I ordered one on the spot. I constructed a hologram of a dollar bill, and damn if the printer didn't reproduce it exactly. Except for the paper, it looked like a dollar bill.

So I studied the paper. It's made of cotton and linen and apparently is hard to find in regular stores or reproduce from other products. But as it turns out—with a little digging—the Department of Engravement and Printing sells uncut sheets of the stuff! This struck me as an enormously bad idea for them but one that was great for me. I ordered a bunch of sheets.

That's how I learned to make exact replicas of U.S. currency.

I've been doing it for a few years now, and insofar as I can tell, I have not come close to getting caught, mostly because I am very careful, and I go to great lengths to avoid trouble. Some people might call me paranoid, but I don't think so; I'm just careful. Doing this gives me pleasure.

And money, of course. I do not do big bills; I limit myself to fives, tens, twenties, and fifties. But they add up. I started experimenting with ones, but it wasn't worth the time and brought me little pleasure. But a pile of twenties? Or fifties? That's another story.

And I was creating something valuable. Even today, when paper currency's popularity and maybe even its place in history is less than it was before online shopping and digital forms of payment, there is still a lot of space for cash. And being a truck driver is the perfect opportunity to spread the results around the country in a way that should be difficult to track.

It was and is a story that makes me happy: The son of an immigrant doing well, working hard, and building a fortune despite the odds. The American Dream, or at least some version of it. More like The Godfather than a story you'd find in the headlines of The Financial Times. But it always seemed to me to be a victimless crime.

Still, it's a hobby with a dark (ok, illegal) side. I can't really tell anybody that I do it. That's not a terrible problem, as I don't have a lot of people to tell. But even on those occasional times when I'm with other people, I have to watch what I say. I can't drink too much for fear that something might slip out. I want to be safe, and being safe means keeping a distance between myself and everybody else in the country.

There's also the challenge of turning counterfeit cash into the real thing. It's a complicated business in itself. I can't use it to pay my bills; almost all of that stuff is online. I always want to get rid of the counterfeit stuff as soon as and as quietly as possible. To let it go and let it make its own way in the world.

There is a small but persistent sense of guilt that goes along with this game. I know it's against the law. While it's hard to see who I might be hurting by breaking these laws, it's hard to extinguish guilt completely. So I bear it as best I can. I also rely on a Muslim precept to help assuage the guilt: I donate a percentage of all my production to the poor. Mohammed said that doing this guaranteed financial security. Or something to that effect. I guess that's superstitious, but . . . well, so far so good.

One of the effects of being raised in a double-barreled religious family is that morality is a big deal. For years my sister and I heard from imams on Friday and priests on Sunday about how to be and how not to be. It was a lot of don't-do-this and don't-do-that. When I left home, I never set foot in another church or mosque again; in the process, I left all those rules behind. What do they know? I can make my own rules, which will be more sensible than anything religion could come up with.

So that's all about me. Except for the next part. The part where I was cruising through life, driving and printing, when I encountered someone whose presence required more of me and who, because of that, might well have wrecked my peaceful life.--