

IDEOLOGY'S LEGACY (HAMID THE TIMID)
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For years they asked, "What made Hamid so timid?"

All it took was a poorly timed remark by Hamid's father about the rigorous implementation of Machostan's apostasy laws. Someone with a grudge must have reported him. A friend leaked to him that he would be charged with apostasy, which, of course, meant conviction, which in turn meant execution. That brought to an abrupt end what had been a guarded life of wealth and influence. Using his connections, Hamid's father managed to flee Machostan with his family, at the cost of his entire fortune.

During the years of limbo in a western European nation while the family waited to be granted political asylum in the United States, Hamid found a job and went to college. Resentful of the injustice in Machostan, Hamid sought to redress or at least pulicize all legitimate grievances by majoring in journalism and communications.

Asylum was finally granted a month before Hamid's graduation. The family moved to America, where Hamid secured a job as reporter from a middle market station of the IBC (International Broadcast Corporation) because, in addition to his status as a political refugee, Hamid had a deep, sonorous voice, stunning looks, and thorough knowledge of Arabic and of Machostan.

Hamid was immediately befriended by Benjamin, another of the young reporters. Hamid had never met anyone like him. Benjamin was kindly and gentle, with a timid, shell-shocked look. Benjamin was very liberal, always feeling and showing sympathy for the underdog and, as a result, his ratings at the station were very high.

When Hamid had been on the job only two weeks, the local station manager was fired. He had been overheard saying to one of the pretty young interns, "You are beautiful." She filed a complaint that he had repeatedly threatened her job if she didn't do "favors" for him, and his comment provided sufficient evidence for dismissal. He was replaced by Sam. Sam turned out to be Samantha, a middle-aged lesbian.

Hamid told Benjamin that he was astonished that someone could be fired so easily on such flimsy, unsubstantiated charges in America, the land of the free. Some time later, Benjamin spoke quietly to Hamid when no one else was in the Men's Room and told him, "Hamid, take my advice and keep your mouth shut! Never say anything that might be interpreted as politically incorrect. In Machostan, women are silenced under the veil. Here men are silenced out in the open." Hamid was so new to America that he had to ask exactly what politically incorrect meant. Benjamin gave him a primer.

It wasn't difficult for Hamid to learn to be wary and close-mouthed. That had been the way to keep alive in Machostan, and it was apparently the way to keep your job in America. And Hamid couldn't afford to lose his job. His father had reached the customary age of retirement in Machostan, after which the sons are expected to become the family breadwinners. Hamid, as the only son became single-handedly responsible not only for his parents but for his three younger, still-veiled, still-single sisters.

In the next six months, four male reporters, two cameramen, and one male anchor were fired after being charged with various forms of sexual abuse and/or politically incorrect comments that had been reported or rumored. The replacements included 6 women of color, one gay man and one transsexual.

Similar personnel changes were going on at all the other liberal networks, which, of course, meant most of the networks. The clarion call repeatedly broadcast and editorialized at the stations was for equal pay and equity for women. No matter that about 70% of reporters and anchors were women. Sam made a point of repeating her mantra, "Look at all the professions where women and LGBTQ's are underrepresented and victimized. They need us as their champions."

Hamid noted all the eyes on him and found himself growing ever more frightened and timid. He and Benjamin stopped eating lunch together in the cafeteria because they feared that being seen together would be interpreted as some sort of male conspiracy.

When Hamid had been on the job for one year Benjamin was charged with making improper advances toward a cleaning lady. She accused Benjamin of harassing her late one night (Benjamin often stayed late) and her story was backed by two anonymous sources. Benjamin swore that the only time he ever spoke with the woman was to say hello or to ask if he were in the way. It didn't matter that he denied the charges and even offered to take a lie detector test.

Sam said the station could not risk retaining any employee who might tarnish IBC's sterling reputation and so Benjamin was let go. As he cleaned out his desk, Hamid started to rise to bid him farewell and express sympathy, but Benjamin quietly signaled him by holding out a palm to sit back down and act indifferent.

Hamid had never seen a hint that Benjamin ever did or said anything out of line with anyone. What he did see was a constant in human nature. The joy some felt in repressing others may have been expressed differently and with more severe consequences in Machostan than in America, but it proceeded from the same spirit of nastiness and sadism.

Benjamin's replacement was Ariadne, a shy but ravishing young woman. Hamid was utterly speechless when introduced to her. For Hamid, it was love at first sight. From his core he knew his love was not blind; it gave him an instantaneous vision and clarity of Ariadne's inner quality as well as outer appearance. There was no question that she was the love of his life. He had never felt anywhere near as attracted and drawn to any other woman, and knew he would never be again. But he did everything he could to keep his eyes off of her. He feared it was the kiss of death for the job he needed so desperately.

At first, Ariadne was friendly and even inviting to Hamid in her quiet, shy manner. But Hamid's awkward silences, his sideways glances that never met her eyes, and his brusque retreats at even her tentative approaches soon truncated any more of Ariadne's veiled attempts at contact. When they travelled together on assignment, if she sat in the front of the van he sat in the back and vice versa. On camera he was professional, and even acted engaging to her when they appeared together, but the moment they were off camera he moved away from her and turned silent, even if they had scored a coup. Secretly, their forced partnership only deepened their mutual love and respect as it drove them ever further from confessing their feelings.

The other young reporters saw clearly that Hamid's unexplainably odd and insistently evasive behavior was the result of a crush he had on Ariadne, and they told her, but she didn't believe it.

The girls didn't stop at that. They felt honor bound to arrange a match. They even got Sam to join the game. Sam was surprisingly eager; the chance of matchmaking aroused her feminine instincts. She announced a lunch meeting of the young reporters, which meant mandatory attendance.

Everyone worked it so that Hamid had to sit next to Ariadne. Hamid was so nervous that when he drank, he picked up his glass with two hands like a three-year-old. This made him even more terribly self-conscious and embarrassed at his incapacity.

Sam was uncharacteristically bubbly. She announced a grand new strategy for the reporters and asked Hamid several times for his opinion. He was so monosyllabic that Sam could not resist a little jab. "So, now that you're no longer a member of the master sex that you were in Machostan, words and courage fail you. Not so easy is it when your unearned privileges have been stripped away?"

It was very possibly the worst thing she could have said. Hamid turned red as a beet. In Machostan, where every man was ready and almost eager to be insulted so he could prove his valor by wreaking vengeance, the absolute, ultimate humiliation that could ever be heaped on a man was to be publically insulted by a woman. Everyone at the table, especially Ariadne, would surely view him as more cowardly and insignificant than ever.

As he seethed over the gratuitous insult, all the women except Ariadne innocently got up to go to the powder room. Sitting so close to Ariadne was unbearable. His heart pounded and his head spun so that he could not think at all. Suddenly he felt convinced he was being set up to be betrayed as some sort of sexual offender. Sam was using Ariadne as an excuse to fire him. Hamid knew he had to get out of there and fast. He jumped up mumbling something like, "Excuse me please," and raced off to the Men's room.

Ariadne had indeed been in on the plot, but the idea had been to force Hamid to confess his love. Ariadne, so used to being pursued obnoxiously by men because of her stunning looks, felt herself the object of scorn and, all hope for love lost, wept inconsolably. Hamid made sure not to return to the table until after everyone else had and by the time he did Ariadne had fled.

Hamid was so distraught that he sought consolation and advice from Benjamin. But Benjamin, who was still unemployed, was strangely remote, complaining with a robotic drone that he would never have been fired if he either claimed he were gay or if he had had a sex change operation. Hamid left feeling that Benjamin was in even worse shape than he was.

Later that month, on the very day Benjamin committed suicide, Ariadne was hired as a reporter in a smaller market and left abruptly. Hamid was utterly crushed. He had failed to save a friend and had forever lost the love of his life.

Hamid remained at the station four years longer. The moment he got his citizenship papers he found an anonymous civil service job in the back offices of the CIA, where he performed competently but silently for thirty years before taking early retirement. He had married stoically and after a few years granted his unhappy wife divorce on the grounds of emotional neglect, thereafter living a solitary, empty personal life.

One day, Hamid received an invitation to the station's golden anniversary celebration. An ember glowed from within the ashes smothering his soul and he was surprised to find that almost by rote he had accepted. As the day of the anniversary party approached he found himself yearning to go. Would Ariadne be there? Could he ever reclaim love?

There were many new faces at the party. Most, of course were much younger. He surveyed the field. He could not find Ariadne. He figured he would take a few hors d'oeuvres, stick around a short while, and then quietly leave. Just as he reached for a chicken tender a hand touched his forearm. "Don't you remember me? I was sure that you were looking straight at me a few minutes ago."

"I'm sorry but..." Then Hamid recognized Ariadne. "Ariadne!" he almost cried out.

They talked, never mentioning the time together but only the intervening years. Ariadne had quit reporting after only two years, had gone to Medical School, and married a classmate. Like Hamid, she was childless, but unlike him was still married. As of old both felt awkward together. Their conversation began to drag after two minutes. Ariadne knew it was time to say good bye. She turned away but before she took a second step turned back and said, "You know, Hamid, I was crazy in love with you, but you made it clear to me that I meant nothing at all to you. I mourned for years but have learned to live with disappointment."