My marriage started out with a big, fat lie:
I told my parents that François's family was happy about our engagement.

I had to. In the Iranian culture, fathers will consent to a marriage only if the future groom and his family worship the bride. There is no getting around this detail. If there is any problem with the groom's family, forget it. Engagement off. Moving on to the next suitor.

When I first started dating François, his mother declared that I “would never be allowed to set foot in her house.” This was before she met me.

Before meeting me, François had a longtime French girlfriend. From all accounts, she was an intelligent and capable person. But she was Jewish. Her religion was a problem until François started dating me. Compared to a Muslim, the Jewish girlfriend didn't seem so bad after all. I once asked François if there was anybody he could have dated that would have bothered his mother more. “Well,” he said, “a black Communist bisexual would have really irked her.”
My parents had a completely different reaction to François. They first heard of him during the summer after my junior year in college, six months after we had met. For five and half of those months, François and I had known we were going to get married, but had not said anything to our parents. I had simply informed my parents that I was dating somebody and I wanted them to meet him.

Dating, like the rodeo circuit or trout farming, is a completely foreign concept to my parents. They, like all their sisters and brothers, never dated, their marriages having been arranged by family members. My mother learned what she knows about dating from Days of Our Lives, especially Hope and Bo’s tumultuous relationship. The only dates my father knew about contained pits.

The first time they met François, my parents insisted on taking him to the nicest Persian restaurant in Los Angeles. My father ordered the appetizer sampler, which François ate with gusto while questioning my mother about the ingredients:

“Is this spice sumac?”
“Are these the thin-skinned Persian cucumbers?”
“Is the feta made with sheep’s milk?”

Once the appetizers were finished, François selected the most copious dish on the menu, the sultani, a combination of lamb, beef, and chicken kebob on an enormous mound of rice. His order arrived, looking as though someone had just grilled an entire petting zoo. François ate and ate and ate. My father asked me, in Persian, whether he always ate like this. My mother said, in Persian, that she hoped he wasn’t going to get sick. Meanwhile, François kept eating.

By the time he was done, there was not a grain of rice left on his large oval plate. My mother told him how lucky he was that
he could eat enough food for three people and not be fat. François was of normal weight—although he did outweigh me, which fulfilled one of my two requirements for dating a guy. The other requirement was a total lack of interest in watching sports on television. François fulfilled that one, too.

Unbelievably, he ordered dessert, exclaiming that he couldn’t possibly imagine skipping the rose water and pistachio ice cream. By then, I was just hoping that if he did throw up, it wouldn’t happen in my father’s car.

Once we arrived at my house, I asked François why he had eaten so much. “I know that Middle Easterners love to feed people and I wanted to make a good impression on your parents,” he said. “But I need to go lie down now.”

My parents did like François, not because of his appetite for Persian food, but because he was kind. And because I was in love with him.

My mother had always hoped that I would marry an Iranian doctor, someone whom she could speak to without an interpreter, a man whose parents would consider me the best thing that had ever happened to their son. She had held steadfastly to her dream, thinking that as soon as I reached my late teens, I would become the Iranian daughter whom she could relate to, the daughter who would dutifully let her parents help her select a mate.

Ever since we came to America, I had regarded my mother as a mere source of entertainment. This was a woman whose English required translation into English, a woman who listed the Gourdins in her phone book under “N” for “Neighbor” but who listed her hairdresser, Patricia, under “A” so her number would be on the first page. She had attended one PTA meeting during my entire educational career and had not understood a single
Whenever I was required to bring a snack for some club meeting, my mother always wanted to make feta cheese and basil rolled in flat bread, or sholeh zard, a neon-yellow dessert made with saffron. “Forget it,” I always told her, wishing she could just figure out how to make oatmeal raisin cookies. My mother was, in American adolescent vernacular, out of it.

Perhaps the people we think we know best are the ones who surprise us most. Once my mother realized that I wanted to marry François, she said, “He will be like a third son to me,” and wiped the tears off her face. At that very moment, my mother threw aside everything she and her generation knew about marriage and entered a new world where daughters select their own husbands. She became a pioneer.

My father was just happy that I was getting married. Having only one daughter, he was particularly pleased that François asked his permission to marry me. François later told me that while delivering his Please-takingood-care-of-my-daughter speech, my father kept trying on my engagement ring on his own finger. “I just made sure he knew I wasn’t proposing to him,” François reported.

As soon as our wedding plans became official, we started making the guest list. Despite initial misgivings, François’s parents decided to attend.

François’s Sister No. 2 also agreed to come to the wedding. His maternal grandmother, whom he adored and considered to be his biggest influence, decided not to attend. François’s oldest sister declined to come, stating that there was no way she would be in the same room as her mother or Sister No. 2. Brother-in-law No. 1, whom François had known since the age of seven, declined to come, stating that, having been virtually disinherited by his in-laws, he could not possibly attend. Brother-in-law No. 2 declined to come, probably because there just isn’t enough
Mylanta in the world. François’s only maternal aunt was not invited because she and my mother-in-law had fought over some land in Greece twenty years ago and were not on speaking terms. None of his four maternal cousins was invited, and I never asked why. I doubt they would have attended anyway. His paternal aunt and uncle declined to attend, as did their adult children. François’s paternal grandmother did decide to attend, enlarging François’s side of the wedding party to a whopping four family members.

In contrast to François’s family, mine were busy making plans for a joyous occasion. My parents, like Santa Claus, were faced with a long list of names. This was the first wedding among my siblings, and my parents could not possibly fathom leaving anybody out. The reception hall had a maximum capacity of 165, which is a problem when just the aunts, uncles, cousins, and second cousins add up to 98 people. My parents agonized over the guest list, recalling every one of their friends back in Abadan. “We can’t possibly leave them out” became a regular refrain. I didn’t know half the people on the list. “Who are the Abbasis and why are we inviting them?” I wanted to know. “They invited us to their daughter’s wedding last year. Plus, they live in Australia. They won’t come.” They came, and they brought a niece with them.

On a dozen occasions, invitations addressed to “Mr. and Mrs.” came back announcing that six would be attending. Since our wedding was taking place in the summer, our guests who themselves had houseguests decided to just bring them along. We invited 140 people, 163 accepted; 181 showed up.

François and I had agreed that we would be married both in the Catholic Church and in a traditional Persian ceremony. The tough part was finding a Catholic priest who would be willing to
officiate at a mixed marriage. François called several churches but was told that he would have to go to the church where he was a member. François had attended church a handful of times in his entire life. He was as Catholic as I was Muslim.

I decided to try contacting the Catholic church in my neighborhood in Newport Beach. I called and told the priest that my future husband was French but we hoped to get married in Southern California, where my family lived. I told him that of course I had never attended church because I was Muslim, but if I were Catholic, I would have attended his church, since it was my neighborhood Catholic church. “Well . . .” he said.

I continued: “I’m a very decent person. I could be Catholic, Jewish, you name it. All religions basically say the same thing and I would just fit right in in any of them.”

“Well, that’s not exactly—” he said.

“What I mean is that they all work toward the same goal,” I interrupted.

Maybe he knew no other way to end the conversation, but the priest agreed to meet with me.

Father Christopher turned out to be a kind and enlightened man with a wonderful sense of humor. He agreed to marry us, although our wedding would not include the communion—it was sort of a Catholic ceremony lite. We had to meet with him a dozen times to discuss married life and religion. We also had to attend a retreat, held at a convent, which was aimed at preparing us for the challenges of marriage. On the first day, one of the speakers mentioned a seminar about the “unique challenges faced by mixed marriages.” I attended, but found out that the “mixed marriages” he referred to did not involve Jews or Muslims, but rather Protestants, Orthodox Christians, and others
who still believe in Jesus Christ, but with a different set of details.

Planning the Persian ceremony, or *aqd*, was by far the simplest part of our wedding. Ever since immigrating to America, my aunt Sedigeh and uncle Abdullah had earned a living by translating official documents and serving as notary publics. Uncle Abdullah also officiated at *aqd* ceremonies, a job that allowed him to utilize his in-depth knowledge of Arabic and the Koran. More important, this job meant that Aunt Sedigeh had the scoop on every impending marriage for miles around.

The *aqd* ceremony is traditionally held at the bride’s house and is limited to family members and close friends. Our guests also included my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Sandberg. Since my parents’ condominium was too small, my uncle Ali and aunt Linda kindly allowed us the use of their house. This was a fitting choice, because Uncle Ali was the first person in my family to marry a non-Iranian. He had met Linda, a blond nurse, when he was a medical resident in America. Initially, there was much concern about his choice. Although none of us had ever met Linda, obviously she did not know how to make Persian food. What would become of my uncle Ali? Could an Iranian man survive life without basmati rice and lamb stew?

Not only did Linda become a fabulous Persian cook, she also learned Italian cooking and became the quintessential hostess. She accomplished this while being employed full-time helping Ali run his medical practice. Now the family wonders what my uncle would have ever done without her. “He got lucky,” they all agree.

In preparing for the *aqd*, we needed a *sofreh*, which is traditionally a hand-sewn cloth, roughly the size of a queen-size bed-
spread, on which the family arranges foods and objects, all of which hold special meaning.

At the head of the sofreh are the mirror and candleholders, symbolizing purity and love. Iranian families pass these objects from generation to generation. My father, the hopeless romantic, sold theirs after they were married. This was shortly before he decided to sell my mother’s wedding band so they could stay at the Caspian Sea for an extra week.

We ended up renting the sofreh, the mirror, and the candleholders from an Iranian woman who does a brisk business providing the apparatus for aqiq ceremonies. For many Iranians, moving to America meant having to leave the large mirror and candelabrum set back home. Thus, a unique rental business was born.

The sofreh also holds an assortment of sweets—sugar-coated almonds, baklava, almond cookies, and rice cookies. All the sweets were prepared by Aunt Dordooneh, who is technically not my aunt. She is my cousin Morteza’s wife’s aunt, but she has baked her way into everybody’s heart, including my husband’s, who also calls her khaleh, “aunt.” The week before my wedding, she showed up at our house every day and held marathon baking sessions, filling our house with the aroma of rose water, butter, and roasted nuts.

In addition to the sweets, there was also a basket of almonds and walnuts, representing fertility, and a bowl of honey, for a sweet life. A platter of feta cheese and herbs and flat bread represented happiness and prosperity. Finally, we had a small wooden tree with carved radishes placed on the tip of each branch, which didn’t represent anything but looked cute.

The ceremony began with François and me sitting facing the mirror with everybody crowding around the sofreh trying to get a
good view. Uncle Abdullah began his speech in Persian, read
passages from the Koran in Arabic, then translated everything
into English. While he was doing his part, several aunts and fe-
male cousins held a small cloth over our heads and rubbed two
sugar loaves together. This is supposed to ensure the raining of
happiness into the couple’s life.

When we were finally asked whether we wanted to marry
each other, the groom is supposed to answer yes right away, but
the bride is expected to take her sweet time and cause a little bit
of last-minute anxiety for the groom and his family. When my
uncle asked whether I wanted to marry François, I said nothing.
My family yelled the traditional response: “She has gone to pick
flowers.” My uncle repeated his question. Again, I said nothing.
The family yelled, “She has gone to bring rose water.” My uncle
asked a third time. This time, I said yes. Everyone cheered as my
uncle declared us husband and wife.

When I call my parents at home, I usually speak to my mother
first. When I ask to speak to my father, I often hear him yell in
the background, “Tell her I’ve gone to pick flowers.” If I happen
to be in a hurry, I’ll tell my mother to ask him to stop his non-
sense and pick up the phone. Then I hear him say, “Tell her I’ve
gone to get some rose water.” He finds this very amusing.

After the aqd was over, everybody hugged and kissed, then
hugged and kissed some more. This was followed by everybody
taking pictures, and everybody crowding into everybody else’s
picture. The picture taking went on for a couple of hours, during
which François complained that his face hurt from having to
smile so much. “And,” he added, “I’ve never been kissed by so
many people in one day.”

It’s difficult to separate Iranians from their tradition of end-
lessly hugging and kissing on both cheeks. Women kiss women,
men kiss women, and big hairy men kiss other burly men. Foreigners, especially men, tend to find this tradition a bit disconcerting. Since the French also kiss twice on the cheek, François was not completely frightened by the throng of relatives waiting to give him a peck. He did, however, complain about certain relatives whose pecks were a little juicier than he would have liked. I’ve known Americans who, unaware of the kissing ritual, have wanted to run for the nearest exit at the sight of a puckering Iranian uncle approaching with open arms. Even after my church ceremony, when everyone is supposed to leave the church quietly and in order, my relatives broke into a major kissing ceremony, making us look as if we had never been to a church wedding before, which was true.

The most difficult part of my wedding was finding a location for the reception. Iranian weddings usually start at ten P.M. and end at two A.M. This eliminates all clubs and outdoor venues. Iranian food must be served. This eliminates all hotels, which make most of their money from their own catering. We had a small budget. This eliminated all locations with landscaping or English-speaking employees.

Our reception ended up in an Indian-Chinese restaurant near the airport. The business had started out as an Indian restaurant, but sales had been slow. Showing true immigrant tenacity, the owners added Chinese items as well. This was a place where one could order tandoori chicken or crab fu-yung, lentil soup or fish ball soup, and where the condiments included both soy sauce and chutney. The restaurant reminded me of a Pakistani rug shop I know in Northern California, which in addition to carpets, started selling used computer parts and eventually added falafel. I assume, given a few years, leg waxing will also be a part of their repertoire.
The manager of the restaurant was a large Indian man with an overhanging stomach. The big tummy worked on Buddha but not on this guy. To add to his appeal, the whites of his eyes were the color of egg yolks and were further highlighted by being permanently bloodshot. This man could have easily been in Star Wars.

The night of my wedding, he stood in front of the locked door to the restaurant and said, “I will only let you in if you give me an extra four hundred dollars in cash right now.” With the guests arriving in an hour, my father, who is significantly smaller than the manager, didn’t have many options. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I did not hear about this until a few weeks after the fact. It’s fair to say the bride’s yelling and screaming would not have made for the most memorable wedding-day moment.

Our reception was a typical Iranian party with lots of music, too much makeup, and great food. As François and I entered, everyone stood up and cheered. We went around to each table, receiving more hugs, kisses, and wishes for a happy future. Aunt Sedige followed us, throwing tiny fake gold Persian coins over our heads. In ancient Persia, the gold would have been real. Everyone, even the busboys, knew the coins were fake. Everyone, that is, except for my new sister-in-law, who spent the evening feverishly collecting them.

When it came time to eat, we were the first ones in line, followed by Father Christopher. (“This is one reception I don’t want to miss,” he had told us.) The meal consisted of the traditional sweet carrot rice with almonds, saffron, and chicken; lima-bean rice with lamb shanks; eggplant stew; herb stew; stuffed grape leaves; and cucumber, tomato, and herb salad. My parents had also ordered an entire lamb to be roasted.

The Persians, like the Romans and Greeks before them, be-
lieve in slaughtering a lamb when something good happens. This is supposed to ward off the evil eye. Marriages, job offers, new cars, and new babies are always accompanied by this ancient ritual. In Iran, families who cannot afford a lamb use a chicken. Wealthier families usually donate the meat to the poor.

Iranians in America have had to tweak this tradition a bit. Slaughtering a lamb on one’s front porch in Los Angeles might not do much for the neighborhood, so when something good happens that calls for a lamb slaughter, who ya gonna call? Relatives in Iran, that’s who. Lambs are now slaughtered long distance and distributed to the poor in Iran. Your son bought a Lexus? There goes a lamb. The grandson graduated from UCLA law school? Don’t forget the lamb.

For my wedding, the Iranian caterer told us that for an extra $250, which in Iran buys an entire flock of sheep plus the sheepherder’s wages, he would roast a lamb and present it as a centerpiece. My response was, “Oh God, no.” But it’s not like the bride’s opinion stands a chance against tradition.

With more fanfare than my own entrance got, the result was wheeled out at the beginning of dinner. François and I gasped. There on the cart was, not a lamb, but a lamb carcass, all the meat having been already carved off. On top of its skull was a conical party hat, and where its eyes had once been sat a pair of sunglasses. This creature did not belong at a wedding but on the cover of a Stephen King novel. Father Christopher announced that he was ready to perform the last rites, a perfectly funny Catholic joke wasted on this crowd.

Dinner was followed by more dancing. The D.J. played everything from Persian songs to Top Forty hits to salsa. The dance floor remained full until the time came to throw the bouquet. This is not an Iranian tradition, but any ritual that might lead to
finding a husband is quickly and readily adopted into my culture. With all eligible females holding their breath, I threw my bouquet, then turned around to see who the next bride would be. There, standing at my reception, at my wedding, was a complete stranger holding my bouquet of yellow orchids. As the photographer scrambled to take her picture, I found my mother to ask her who that was. “That’s Soheila, the daughter of Mojdeh khanom, who is baby-sitting your aunt Zari’s grandkids tonight. She wants to get married, but she’s really tall so it’s hard to find an Iranian husband so your aunt Zari brought her thinking that she might meet someone at your wedding, although personally I don’t think so. She really is too tall.”

I could only hope that my wedding would work a bit of magic for this uninvited guest. I like to think that she eventually found a husband, a tall Iranian doctor maybe, or perhaps a short Mexican businessman with a big heart, or a medium-built Irish Catholic book vendor whose family thinks she’s the best thing that ever happened to their son. But regardless of her husband’s ethnicity, one thing’s for sure. If she did get married, there are a couple fewer lambs in Iran.