

## **Symphony for Piano and Fire**

**By Bill Tope & Sam Kandej**

Maysam was a writer from Iran. For three months, he had dreamed of this trip. He had met an American writer, Mr. Robert Hawley, online. They emailed about books and writing. One day, Mr. Hawley kindly invited Maysam to visit him in America.

Now, Maysam was here. On his second night, he was invited to dinner at the Hawleys' large, beautiful home in an exclusive gated community known as The Village. He was nervous. As a Muslim, he did not eat pork or drink alcohol, but he did not want to explain his religion. He wanted to be a normal guest.

The first time Mrs. Hawley offered him wine, he politely declined. Before dinner, guests stood around discussing the issues of the day. When Maysam was introduced as “our Iranian friend,” people were taken aback.

One thick-chested man said, “Tell me, why do you Arabs want to murder all Americans?” Maysam gulped and attempted to persuade the man that that was not the case. He explained that he was not Arabic, but rather, of Persian heritage, which predated even Islam.

Next, a very thin, expensively-dressed woman, resembling a fashionable stick figure, regarded him archly and soundly renounced Sharia law for marginalizing and restricting the behavior of Iranian women.

“I’m sorry,” apologized Maysam, “but I don’t feel comfortable discussing religion or politics.”

“The Ayatollahs leave female babies on the mountainside to perish!” she charged, and refused to let the issue lie. Mrs. Hawley tempted him with wine a second time, but again Maysam demurred. The thin woman then rebuked him for the daily public stonings of young Iranian women who had fallen from grace. Maysam sighed.

Another man, a professor at the university, thought that all Iranians lived in the desert and rode asses and camels. “They eat camel humps too,” I understand, said the prof., who was clearly intoxicated. Maysam asked him where he’d learned that and he slurred that another professor had so informed him.

At dinner, when the hosts served a main dish with meat, Maysam smiled and said, “Thank you, but I am vegetarian.” It was a lie. For dinner, he ate only plain toast and boiled cabbage from a side dish. He felt alone and foolish, pushing

the simple food around his plate with his fork. He stared bleakly at his cup of tepid tea and Mrs. Hawley offered him wine for the third time. This time, with some misgivings, he accepted.

The wine was strong and new to him. He drank it quickly, wanting to feel less awkward. A warm, strange courage filled him. This feeling was compounded as both the Hawleys plied him with other potent libations as the evening went along. After dinner, he had “post-prandial drinks” of Cointreau, Cognac and something called Drambuie. With each successive drink, he found his vision rosier. He felt happy!

Mr. Hawley, trying to be friendly, and anxious not to neglect his guest, talked about his favorite writer, Ernest Hemingway. “You loved his stories in our emails, remember?” he said with a smile.

Maysam put down his glass with a little click. The truth pushed its way out. "Mr. Hawley," he said, "I must tell you. I do not like Hemingway. I only said I did because I wanted you to like me."

The room, with its small, intimate gathering, became very quiet. Mr. Hawley's face changed. He looked hurt and confused.

"How about my stories? Do you like them?" Hawley asked quietly, his voice tight.

Maysam looked at him. The wine spoke. "No," he said simply. "Not really. None of them."

A shocked silence filled the room. Then, suddenly, Maysam started to laugh uncontrollably. He walked to the grand piano in the corner, and sat down. He began to play Beethoven's "Für Elise," but his fingers were clumsy and

fast. The beautiful music sounded strange and discordant and desperate.

“I don’t even like English!” Maysam announced loudly over the music, still laughing. “I wanted to study Spanish! I could’ve been eating Mexican cuisine rather than this...camel hump! His laughter was wild now, but without joy. He switched to a fast, happy song, playing it loudly, as if trying to drown out the world.

Behind him, Maysam heard a gasp. He didn’t turn, but he could see in the reflection of the piano’s polished wood: Mr. Hawley was at the fireplace. He was pulling his own books from the shelf—the books he had written—and throwing them into the flames.

“Robert, no! Stop!” his wife cried, rushing to him. Guests jumped up, trying to pull his arms, to save the books from the fire.

Through it all, Maysam kept playing. The happy piano music filled the room, a crazy soundtrack to the disaster. He laughed and played, while in the bright firelight, the pages of stories curled and turned black.

Finally, Maysam's hands fell from the keys. The music stopped. In the sudden silence, the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and Mrs. Hawley's quiet sobbing as she held her husband. Robert's face was blank, as if it had been erased.

Maysam stood up. No one looked at him. He walked past the ruined dinner table, past the people huddled around the fireplace. He took his coat, opened the heavy front door and stepped out into the cool, dark American night. The door closed softly behind him, leaving only the smell of smoke and a terrible silence inside.