

## **Erik and Ani: 1925**

The only thing they had left were each other. Fleeing Armenia to escape the genocide by the Ottoman Turks, they knew they had to leave and never return. Erik and Ani had known each other their entire lives. They had grown up together, gone to school together, and told the other everything. When the killings began, their parents knew it was only a short amount of time before they, too, would be slaughtered mercilessly.

Eventually their families pooled enough of their money to buy two tickets across the sea. So off they went to America, the land of the free. Their families insisted they pretend to be married in order not to be separated. Erik's mother was so insistent, she gave them both her own rings in case anyone questioned them. And it worked.

The boat trip was rough and Erik felt sick most of the way. They arrived in Boston together, eyes upturned to the gray sky, salt in the air. Large buildings stretched towards the sky, and there were people everywhere. The lines were unbearably long, their feet hurt because all seating had been taken and most of the floor was occupied. Everyone around them seemed to have contracted every possible disease and everything seemed impossibly slow.

Walking through the industry-filled streets was incredibly intimidating. Factories everywhere, houses that had many many floors to house all the other immigrants, and a couple trolleys dominated the road. Their simple single story house and horse-drawn carriages seemed so far away.

Life was in no way easy for Erik and Ani. They felt as though they were truly alone; the only familiar thing was each other. They were immigrants, barely spoke three words of English, and only had enough money to get a small house in Jamaica Plain, at 31 Burroughs Street. They struggled to get by, living day-to-day. Eventually Erik found a job working fairly close by, only a twenty minute walk away, building a new park: Franklin Park. Ani's job soon followed as a mother's helper, taking care of the richer people's children who lived on the corner in the big white mansion that spread over two properties and looked out over the pond.

When Ani and Erik went to the market to buy what little food they could for themselves, older men would stand slightly too close to Ani when Erik wasn't in sight, or talk slightly too loud at the young woman. One of them was even so bold as to ask her out on the spot.

"Scuse me, miss? You wouldn't be too concerned helping a fellow out, now wouldja?" He drawled in a Scottish accent. He seemed twice her age with half the brains. The young woman gave an indignant huff, trying to act annoyed and nonchalant, when in reality, one could see her knuckles turning white from clenching the basket so tight.

"I would, sir. Good day" she replied, turning away. The man grabbed her arm and roughly turned her back around.

"It wasn't a question," he hissed, a feral grin spreading across his face. It soon fell as a large hand gripped his shoulder uncomfortably tight.

"Are you bothering my wife?" Erik rumbled, standing a solid three inches taller than the intruding man. Ani hid a smile as she watched the man's face pale. Time and time again,

it seemed that this whole “marriage” thing allowed the two out of some more unwelcome situations.

The two fell into a daily rhythm: Erik going to his job in the park, Ani to the mansion. Life seemed normal, in some strange sense. However, this comfort would be fairly short-lived.

As Erik glanced around, he watched couples stroll around the newly-opened park. He wiped his hands as he finished planting the small trees, needing to get the tulip bulbs next. He walked towards the main greenhouse. Everywhere he looked there were couples: couples sitting on benches, laughing, couples strolling the paths, and couples sitting on a blanket, a picnic arranged around them. He shook his head and picked up the bulbs. As he was leaving, the head gardener said something that struck him surprisingly hard.

“There’s a lot of love out there—picnics, strolling leisurely— now that’s true love. That’s how you know a guy loves a gal; he takes her out and brings her here.” Erik froze, listening. He gave a curt nod, and left, mind swirling.

He soon got back to work but he could hardly focus with the thought of not actually truly loving Ani as a husband should. He soon got a few strange looks and glanced down to find he had crushed a tulip bulb. He sighed and set it aside, beginning to plant the rest.

*Would he ever get to actually marry? What would happen to Ani? How would he know what love actually felt like? How did Ani feel?*

Meanwhile, Ani was having her own doubts. She had heard her boss talking behind her back to a friend about Ani’s relationship with Erik and how they were only together

because of need. Ani had been passing through the hall and had paused because she had heard her name. Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she quickly walked away.

As she returned home, she walked slowly, thinking about what she had heard the Mrs say. Was this truly a loving relationship? Or was it mere loneliness that kept her and Erik together? She shook her head, clearing her mind as she arrived back home.

A few days later Ani stopped by the new Armenian bakery on Centre Street. She perused the selection until something caught her eye and her nose. Authentic Armenian baklava. *Perfect!* She thought before her eye was drawn to another treat. Bird's milk cake, her favourite. She shook her head. No, this trip was for Erik, not her, and Erik loved baklava.

Ten minutes later an exhausted Erik walked into the new Armenian bakery on Centre Street. Delicious scents wafted through the air and he took a deep breath. It smelled like home, like baklava! Just as he was about to purchase the sweet, syrupy goodness something caught his eye in the next window over: bird's milk cake, Ani's favourite. *If I can't show her the world, I'll at least get her favourite treat from home.* He decided as he purchased it.

They arrived home five minutes apart from each other, both holding a small paper bag from the bakery. As Erik walked into the small kitchenette he spotted Ani gently rustling around in a bag.

"Ani? What are you doing?" he asked. She turned around and they locked eyes before bursting out laughing.

“I guess we both had the same idea.” She giggled, holding out her bag to Erik, who handed her his. They opened the white paper bags and both grinned.

As they sat down to consume their small piece of home, Ani paused.

“It tastes like home!” Ani exclaimed.

“You’re my home now,” Erik muttered. Ani gently teased him, before whispering, “same.” Their first kiss was sweet.

## **Alian and Julio: 1982**

Alian typically arrived home first, around 5:00, having worked as a teacher's assistant since 7:30 AM. He was always exhausted and his feet hurt when he opened the door. He was pretty sure he only got the job because he was bilingual, but that didn't matter. At least he had the job finally. Julio, on the other hand, had been almost immediately hired to work in the Arnold Arboretum. It made sense, considering his bolder personality and confidence in what he could and could not do. Julio arrived home no later than 6:00, smelling like grass-clippings and dirt. He took off his shoes on the mat, or else Alian would scold him. If it was cold out, he hung up his jacket before padding into the kitchen, following his nose. Typically, Alian was so concentrated on perfecting whatever dish it was, that he jumped slightly as Julio draped his arms over his shoulders with a soft "hi." Alian returned the greeting, before ducking away.

"Go shower. You smell like you brought every blade of grass home." He teased. Julio rolled his eyes good naturedly but complied, heading to the small second floor of their home at 31 Burroughs. Five minutes later he returned, hair shiny with excess water.

Once dinner was finished, both of them sat on the porch, sharing a cigarette.

"You know, I think we should see if we could find a bar," Julio said softly, practically a whisper. Alian sighed and watched his gray breath swirl away.

"I guess so." Alian finally responded, voice uneasy. Julio gently bumped his shoulder in a loving gesture, which Alian smiled and looked more certain at the idea of trying to find a bar where they could be themselves.

It was a lot less difficult than they had expected to find a gay bar in the Back Bay as they walked into Buddies. They were amazed to see so many just like them, and thanks to Julio's outgoing and friendly personality, they were quick to make many good friends. It was a good year,

full of fun, drinking, and dancing to Queen. The normally quiet, secretive couple became louder and more easygoing the more time they spent at Buddies.

Within the next year, everything had changed. AIDS had hit their friends hard. It had started off small, such as fatigue and excessive headaches. Then it had turned to fever, and one friend had gotten pneumonia from their weakened immune system. Every week, it seemed like the bar became less and less crowded. However, what hit Alian and Julio the hardest was the situation with their closest friends.

Within the first week of going to this bar, Alian and Julio had become friends with a lesbian couple, Sam and Jasmine. They were a similar couple to Alian and Julio, as Sam was adventurous and loud with long frizzy red hair, while Jasmine (Jas) had short black curls and was more reserved and observant. Both also came from immigrant families and understood the daily struggle and silence of their identities with their families.

However, Jas soon found out she had HIV, and was seen less and less. Soon, it was just Sam, but she rarely came around anymore. Everyone was thrown into a state of shock and disbelief. What was this disease that was slowly claiming their friends?

One evening, after their shared cigarette, Alian gave a frustrated growl and swung his fist towards the wall. Just as it was about to hit, a larger hand blocked it, and then pinned his arms to his sides.

"I fucking hate this!" Alian spat, struggling against Julio's grasp before relenting. "Jas is sick, Sam is gone, and nothing is happening to change the situation!"

Julio sighed. "I know. The president of this country is a fool."

"I thought America was supposed to be the land of opportunity and freedom."

"I know, I know." Julio comforted. "I'm just as upset as you are. But at least we have our home and each other."

“I’m just—fuck—I don’t know. I hate that we can’t do anything!” Alian huffed. Julio was quiet for a moment, a pensive look on his face.

“What if we could do something!” He exclaimed after a minute. Alian gave him a blank look.

“Hear me out. We have more space than we need here. It was meant for a family and we can bring our family here. Let’s convert the extra bedroom, the living room, the dining room. Let’s get rid of all our furniture and put in beds and chairs. Let’s make this a safe place for our friends and family to take care of each other.”

Alian liked the idea, but was still hesitant.

“Won’t people notice? All the coming and going? All the gay men? What about my job? What if they find out at the school and I get fired?” But his concern didn’t last long when they saw the faces of their friends at Buddies, get thinner, more exhausted. It was a risk they were willing to take, and if anyone asked, they would say they were taking care of the family from back home.

They filled 31 Burroughs with beds, bought lots of fresh sheets, pillows, and things to make everyone comfortable. They hung curtains to keep privacy. At first, their friends were also hesitant, but they needed the help and accepted it. The beds filled up. It was sad watching their friends wither away with time, but they knew their actions were making such a difference in their friends’ lives. Their friends were loved and not alone. They were comfortable in the home at 31 Burroughs, and could die in peace and togetherness. Alian and Julio set up a fund to help pay for cremations, because so many men’s families wouldn’t speak about them. The Buddies community helped out and pitched in, even as the community struggled and shrank.

“If we can’t get the president to admit the AIDs crisis is real or cure our friends, the least we can do is provide them with a safe and loving environment for the rest of their time,” Julio said, one arm draped around Alian. Alian nodded.



“Family is so important. I’m glad we created our strange family where we can love each other freely inside these walls,” he responded.

## **Alex and Heather: 2019**

It wasn't a loveless marriage, no, quite the opposite. Alex and Heather had been together for five years now, married for the past three. They had met at Whole Foods in the dairy aisle. Alex was buying a carton of soymilk while Heather was examining the smoked salmon and paté options seven feet away. They had awkwardly bumped into each other which was immediately followed by many apologies and tense smiles. After that as they saw each other fairly frequently in other stores they would give knowing smiles and nods before finally they both ended up waiting for bouquets in New Leaf. They got to talking about their jobs and hobbies, Alex being an anesthesiologist who loved the outdoors and Heather being an interior designer with an uncanny fascination with Jane Austin. They eventually came to the conclusion that if they were to continue seeing each other around Jamaica Plain, why not just make a date out of it? The rest was history. The two loved cooking organic dinner and shared neoliberal political views.

They lived in a small house in Jamaica Plain at 31 Burroughs with their three cat children: Shadow, a bombay cat, Mindy, a ragdoll, and Thomas, an oriental shorthair. Alex had fostered them and convinced Heather to let them stay as well. Heather disagreed, as she said cats were too weird and they were always staring into this one corner of the house. Eventually, Heather relented after Mindy had smushed her face into Heather's.

They were a happy couple in love. They walked around Jamaica Pond, visited Franklin Park Zoo and fed the budgies. They got ice cream at JP Licks and went often to the Whole Foods where they met, to get ingredients for meals they cooked together.

Heather came from a well off family, while Alex did not. This was a constant source of tension whenever a bill came in that was higher than normal. Heather, being an interior designer with ever-changing opinions and moods, would often go on shopping sprees for her one weakness:

throw pillows. Alex, who came from a middle class family, but who made the most money as an anesthesiologist, couldn't imagine such a frivolous luxury. Eventually, Alex could only take so much before she snapped.

"You don't understand, Heather! You have to think about these things! Ask, goddammit!"

Alex exclaimed. This conversation was not new.

"I don't need to ask your permission to buy things, Alex." Heather sneered.

"You should when they add up to *thousands* of dollars!" Alex spat.

"Sorry I didn't grow up like you. You're acting just like your mother!" Time seemed to freeze as the words came out of Heather's mouth. Alex's face went blank, eyes hard.

"I see how it is," she said, words dangerously soft.

"Babe, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that-"

"Then how *did* you mean it?" Alex hissed. Heather's mouth opened and closed a few times like a fish but nothing came out. "That's what I thought," Alex muttered, eyes glistening with tears.

With that, Heather grabbed whatever possessions she could quickly and stormed out. Alex slid down the wall, palms pressed into her eyes as tears slipped out faster and faster.

Later that night, Heather came home with bags of clothes and other merchandise. Shopping always comforted her when she was upset and gave her something to be happy about again. Alex went to her and put her hand on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry I said those things. I really love you. I want this to work," Alex said sweetly.

"I don't know if I can live with you, constantly judging me for how I spend money. It's mine and it makes me happy." Heather was on the verge of tears again. "I need you to change."

"Happier than I make you?" The silence said everything. "And it's not your money! I make most of it anyways, and I feel like you are just using me," Alex added softly.

“I make money too, you know,” Heather retorted, voice shaking. They realized they had different philosophies about money, but in the end, money was the most important thing for success and happiness, more important than even each other. Heather moved back in with her parents in Milton. Alex stayed at 31 Burroughs with her three cats, and saved all the money she earned, sometimes spending it on herself and the cats or on improving the condo, but never spending or sharing with anyone else.