



# THE MANTICORE

A GRAPHIC MEMOIR  
BY

ADAM HOSSEIN FULLER

ILLUSTRATIONS  
BY

AMANDA BURNHAM

# About **The Manticore**

“Iran was the epitome of evil and to be Iranian was a heavy burden to bear. It was easier to lie than to assume that burden.”

— Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis 2*

“The father knows the son whole, but the son can never know the father.”

— Daniel Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey: A Father, a Son, and an Epic*

“The son saves the father.”

— Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude*

In the mid-1970s, one month before Adam is born, his father boards a plane to return home to Iran. Shortly afterward, formal U.S.-Iran diplomatic relations are permanently severed, closing the door on any return. Adam grows up in the shadow of two fathers – the one he never met, who he assumes to be dead, and a dismissive, abusive stepfather who never fully accepts him as his own child. His physical difference from his Black stepfather and bi-racial siblings further isolates him within his family, while his intimate vantage on the racism they face in the deep south, and his direct confrontations with islamophobia in 1980s American culture at large, teach him to lean into his own racial ambiguity for the sake of survival.

When Adam’s son is born, he struggles to find himself as a father in the wreckage of his troubled upbringing. Meanwhile, a startling revelation forces him to finally grapple with his buried Iranian identity, and, through it all, to craft a new, positive sense of family and belonging that he can give to his children.

A coming-of-age graphic memoir for adult readers in the mold of Riad Sattouf’s “The Arab of the Future,” Craig Thompson’s “Blankets,” and Marjane Sartrapi’s “Persepolis,” “The Manticore” engages contemporary readers through its interweaving of numerous thematic threads as it follows Adam’s tumultuous and ultimately redemptive path: racism, identity, cultural hostility, domestic instability, loss, and the longing to belong.



Once upon a time, there was a woman...



...and a man.

Mary was the daughter of a farmer from upstate New York, an enlisted airman in the United States Air Force, and an administrator in an on base hospital.

Hossein was the son of an architect from Northeast Iran, and a Technical Sergeant in the Imperial Iranian Air Force, training in radar systems at several bases throughout the U.S. South.



The particulars of how they met and their subsequent and brief relationship aren't clear to me, but, forty-six years later, I'm old enough to have engaged in plenty of equally brief relationships of my own to have an idea of what may have happened.

What is indisputably clear to me is the fact that, at some point in their relationship, they spent the night together At least once. And, in the process...

...conceived me.



It was unintentionally implied to me that my conception occurred after a party celebrating the Shah of Iran's birthday in 1976.

Again, I don't know the details, but I'm old enough to know about the sorts of things that happen after parties.

What is certain, per information obtained by FOIA requests to the U.S. Air Force, is that Hossein completed his state-side training and was ordered back to Iran...

...a month before I was born.

Because he wasn't there when I was born, because Mary and Hossein weren't married, and because the State of Mississippi has some funny laws about how birth certificates work, my last name is "Fuller" and not "Izadi."

For a child with my lineage, growing up in America with a definitively white-sounding last name instead of a vaguely foreign name might have been one of the best things that could've happened to me.

That's because, in less than two short years, Iran, "an Island of stability in one of the most troubled areas in the world," was seized by revolution.

The Shah was forced to abdicate, and all diplomatic ties between America and Iran were irrevocably broken...

...all before I was three years old.





My earliest memories are blurry snapshots of the summer I turned four.



My babysitter's kitchen



Her older blonde daughters



The sun-drenched sweet tea she left brewing in a jar on her front porch.



That summer I saw my first movie in a theater: Star Wars. On our way to the movie, my mother and I met up with "The Movie Man."



That was Gus, the man who would become my stepfather that November.



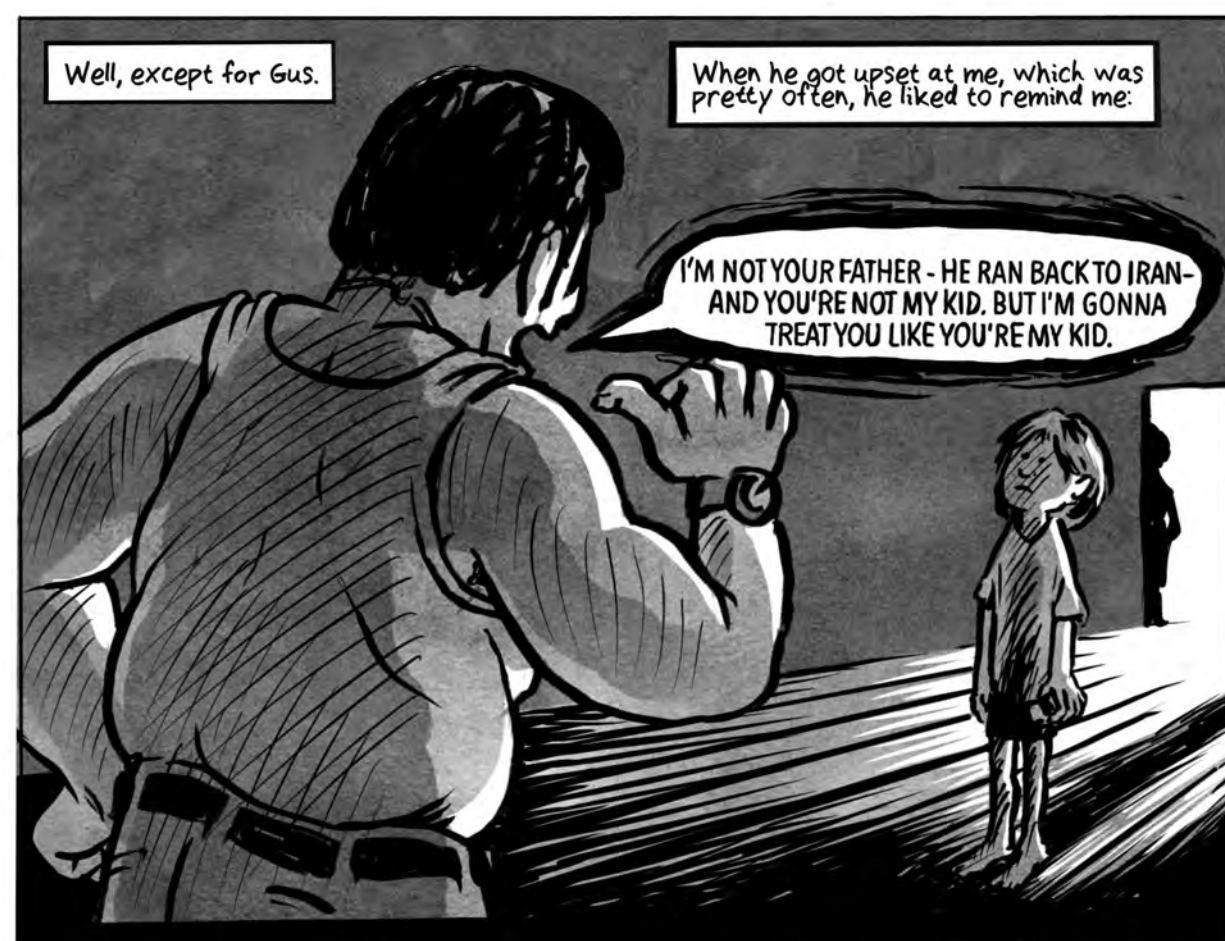
We lived a block and a half down the street, my mother and I, in a tiny, two-bedroom, single-floor brick duplex in Air Force base housing.

The theater was close enough to walk to and specialized in movies that had already finished their main run in theaters off base. This made it cheap to get into—even for 1981. Maybe a few quarters or a dollar.



The only other memory I have of that day was sitting in the theater, watching the climactic space battle, and shivering because the air conditioning in the theater was cranked so high.







Or sometimes, not even that.

Sometimes, it was just a smack on the hand...

...an ear twist...

...a swift kick in the butt...

...a head yank by the hair...

...or a punch in the chest.

...a smack on the face...

You know, something quick and attention getting, but nothing capable of leaving a lasting mark.





The infractions could be anything.



Getting in trouble at school—usually talking too much



Getting any grades lower than a B



Not doing chores in a timely or satisfactory manner



Watching TV with the volume too high



Biting my fingernails too much



Eating all the sweet cereal too fast.

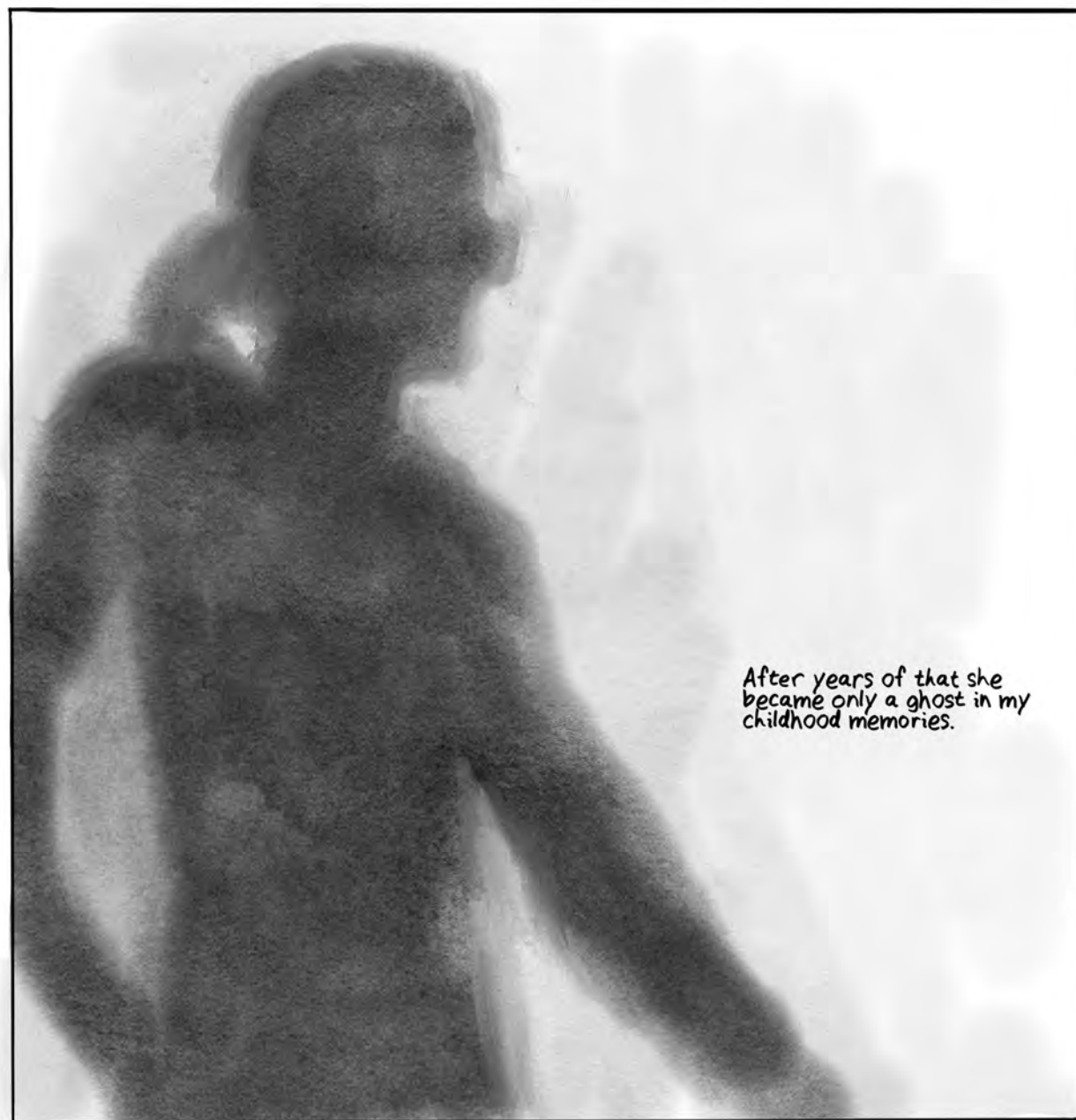


The whippings, that happened a lot. Almost every day it seemed.

I screamed for my mom every time Gus hit me with his belt. Then I was grounded to my room.



If my mom was home, I knew better than to call for her or cry loud enough to be heard outside my room.



After years of that she became only a ghost in my childhood memories.





I'm a parent now myself, and, on an intellectual level, I understand the emotional draw of spanking. Or just a hand smack.

It's cathartic for the parent.

It's quick so longer punishments don't need to be maintained or prematurely rescinded.

And it carries the force of conditioning behind it.

A raised hand or a particular look is all that's needed to remind the child of the violence they would be solely responsible for bringing upon themselves.



But I can't hit. I won't ever hit.

It wasn't until I left for college that I learned to stop flinching anytime someone close to me moved too quickly or even lifted a hand to scratch a face while standing next to me.



Almost exactly one year after my mom married Gus, when I was five years old...



...my sister Emma was born.



A year after that, my brother Paul, was born.



Shortly after that, Gus took it upon himself to teach me about the birds and the bees...

YOUR BROTHER WAS AN ACCIDENT. THE CONDOM BROKE.

ANYWAYS, LIKE I WAS SAYING, IF YOU WANT THE BABY TO BE A BOY, KEEP PUMPING. IF YOU WANT THE BABY TO BE A GIRL, STOP PUMPING AND JUST LET IT COME OUT.



Emma and I weren't very close growing up, but Paul and I were.

Paul was six years younger than me, but we were inseparable.



It helped that our best friends Tony and J.C., were also brothers with a similar age difference between them.



They lived on our block (base housing for lower-ranked airmen), and the four of us comprised a long-lasting core of neighborhood kids that changed every year or so as the military shifted families from base to base.

Tony and J.C.'s family was a mixed bag just like ours. Where Gus was Black and my mom was white, their dad was Black, and their mom was Vietnamese. This was a common thing for the area.



Chris was from the projects across the street from the school.



CALL ME BROOKE SHIELDS

He liked to wear sweaters on his head like they were long hair. He'd sweep the sleeves out of his face and over his shoulder with a flourish.

Matt's dad was a Master Sergeant. We liked to sit over the wheel wells at the back of the school bus and jump out of our seats when the bus drove over potholes.



On base we had a few friends with Vietnamese mothers and Black, white, or Latino fathers. Off base, the Gulf Coast had a tremendous Vietnamese diaspora. My middle school yearbook is a testament to that.

James lived in off-base housing, which meant one of his parents was highly ranked and important.



I'M JUST SAYING, IF I WERE FORCED TO HAVE SEX WITH A DUDE, IT WOULD BE BETTER TO BE THE ONE PUMPING. 'CUZ WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? IT'S JUST ANOTHER HOLE!

Van was the first kid in school to get a Member's Only jacket.



I have no memories of him not wearing that jacket.

The presence of the military base meant the area was also a rich social and economic mix. Just among my immediate school friends:

Adrian's family lived in on base officer housing. We both played sax in the school band.



CHARLIE PARKER IS THE TRUTH

Ben was from a nearby trailer park. In 7th grade, our home ec teacher gave an impromptu lecture about how, before Roe v. Wade, women had to get back room abortions with wire coat hangers.



Poor Ben puked in class right after that.

José was the only boy in 7th grade with a mustache..



Nobody knew where to get Donruss baseball cards except him, and he wasn't telling anybody.

Scotty was from the nearby neighborhoods.

He loved to pick his nose and brag that his farts were the best smelling in the whole world.





One day, probably in first or second grade, I went to school with belt-shaped bruises along the backs of my thighs. I didn't know they were there, otherwise I would've worn pants instead of shorts.

WHAT HAPPENED TO YOUR LEGS?

MY DAD SPANKED ME

WHAT ARE THOSE MARKS ON YOUR LEGS?

I FELL DOWN.

HOW DID YOU GET THOSE BRUISES ON THE BACKS OF YOUR LEGS?

I WAS JUMPING ON MY BED AND LANDED—

Eventually I was examined by a woman in a small room with a single large window looking out over the P.E. field. The window was the only light in the room.

I could see my friends playing outside.

HAS HE EVER HIT YOU BEFORE?

HAS HE HIT YOUR MOTHER?

I don't remember what I said. I do remember feeling very ashamed for having done something wrong.

Luckily, Gus explained everything to me.

THAT WOMAN WAS FROM CHILD PROTECTION SERVICES. THEY KNOW YOU'VE BEEN BAD. IF YOU DON'T START BEHAVING PROPERLY, IF YOU DON'T START LISTENING TO ME, THEY'RE GOING TO TAKE YOU AWAY AND PUT YOU IN A FOSTER HOME.

THEY CAN DO THAT BECAUSE I HAVEN'T ADOPTED YOU YET.

Maybe my mom was sitting next to Gus as he explained this to me.

Maybe she hadn't gotten home from work yet.

Or maybe I'm confusing this moment with the many other times he threatened to have Child Protection Services take me away for talking too much at school or for biting my fingernails or for not eating my vegetables or for getting home from school five or ten minutes late.

This became a common carrot and stick while I was growing up.

Would I like to be adopted?

To have a real father?

To have my last name changed to his, have the same last name as my mom, sister, and brother?

Then stop getting in trouble at school, turn the volume down on the Saturday morning cartoons, and eat my spinach. Otherwise get ready for a whipping. Or grounding.

Or for Child Protection Services to take me away.



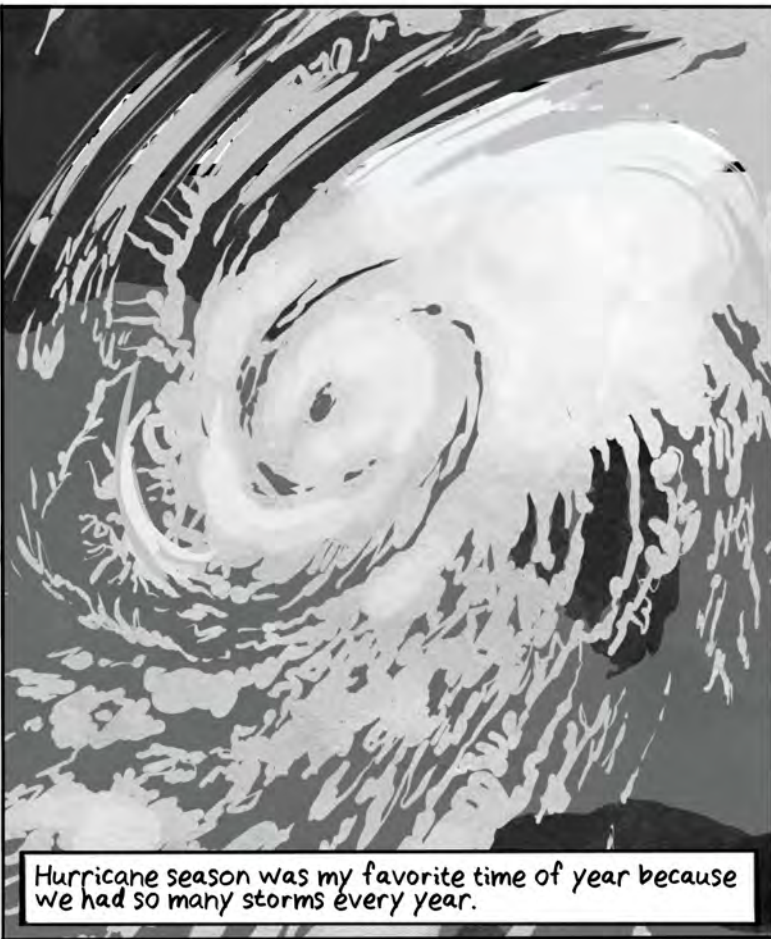


Labor Day Weekend, 1985:  
Hurricane Elena destroyed  
my school.

The school district relocated us an hour away at Jefferson Davis Elementary. The kids who already went there got the school from 7am until noon. Then, we had classes from noon until 5pm.



I still remember the red sunsets  
during the bus rides home.



Hurricane season was my favorite time of year because  
we had so many storms every year.

School would close, and we  
never knew when it would  
reopen.



During the actual  
storms, we sheltered  
with other families at  
my mom's work place,  
the base's hospital. The  
building was built to  
withstand a direct  
nuclear strike, and its  
labyrinthine halls were  
perfect for playing with  
friends or just getting  
lost for the fun of it.

We never sheltered at Gus's place of  
work because he was unemployed.



After he put in his  
four years with the  
Air Force, he  
became a stay-at-  
home dad. This  
happened pretty  
quickly after my  
parents married.

As Elena's eye passed over, Gus took  
me back home to grab some supplies.

It was perfectly still everywhere.  
Roof shingles were scattered across  
everyone's lawns. A large oak tree  
had split in half. Trash cans from a  
couple blocks away had spilled their  
contents across the nearby  
intersection.

HURRY UP!  
GRAB THIS BAG!

WE'VE ONLY  
GOT ABOUT 20  
MINUTES BEFORE  
IT GETS BAD  
AGAIN



Rising up in the distance,  
completely surrounding us,  
was the hurricane's gray  
and white eye wall. An  
uncanny patch of blue sky  
directly above.



In 2005, Hurricane Katrina  
wiped away my entire  
childhood neighborhood.



It was a bustling neighborhood full of families, a  
grocery store, a base exchange, tennis courts,  
playgrounds, and that second-run movie theater.



It's all gone now.



All wiped out.





The base exchange was rebuilt, but the remainder of the 100 acres is either parking lots or fallow fields cut across by the ghosts of old streets.



# About the creators of **The Manticore**



**Adam Hossein Fuller** is an Iranian-American living and working in Baltimore, MD. He is a software engineer, a husband, a father of two kids, and an insignificant piece of lint in the eyes of his cat. Adam has written two unpublished novels and is working on his third. In the O.E.D. under “slackademic” is a picture of him and his four degrees: an M.A. in creative writing and an M.S. in planetary science, both from Johns Hopkins University; a B.S. in astrophysics from Columbia; and a B.A. in journalism from the University of North Carolina.

**Amanda Burnham** is an art professor at Towson University in Baltimore, Maryland, and an award winning visual artist and illustrator whose drawings have appeared internationally in museums, contemporary art galleries, books, and numerous other publications. Her illustration credits include *Quorum Call* (Antenna Press, 2018), *Rage Faces* (held in the permanent artist book collections of the National Museum of Women in the Arts and the New York Public Library), and *Never Cry Woof* (No Tell Press, 2007). Her work has been shown in the Smithsonian Institutions, the Delaware Contemporary, the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, the American University Art Museum, the Berman Museum, and the Phillips Museum. A former art editor of *The Harvard Lampoon*, Burnham holds a BA from Harvard and an MFA from Yale University.



# The Manticore - Full Synopsis

“The Manticore” opens on an image of three year old Adam, sitting on the porch of the tiny duplex he shares with his single mother on an Air Force base in the Deep South. It is 1980, three years removed from the forced return of Adam’s father, whom he has never met, to Iran. The Shah’s expansive arms deal with the US Government had led Hossein to the States for training; now, a year on from the Shah’s overthrow and in the midst of the infamous hostage crisis, it’s clear that Adam’s father is gone for good.

A year later, Adam’s mom marries Gus, a black man from the North, and Adam gains a tangible father for the first time. Gus, however - perhaps seeing his wife’s past rather than a boy in need of guidance – struggles to treat Adam as a son. Reminders come daily in the form of Gus’s abuse – quick with a belt, slap, or punch, he never misses a moment to reinforce the shame Adam should feel for having been born out of wedlock, the child of an Iranian. Adam’s isolation within the household is furthered as a sister, Emma, and a brother, Paul, are born. While Adam forms a tight bond with Paul, his physical difference from his Black stepdad and biracial siblings are undeniable. He bears witness to the considerable racism they face while continually being assumed by outsiders not to belong to his own family. Meanwhile, the specter of the Iran Hostage Crisis, the Iran-Iraq War, Iran-sponsored airline hijackings, and the movie “Not Without My Daughter” loom large in how others perceive Adam, and after numerous dangerous brushes of his own with an intolerant broader culture, he learns to distance himself from both his family and his cultural heritage and “pass”.

The racism and xenophobia faced by Adam and his family worsen when they move from the relative diversity of the Air Force base to North Carolina, where Adam attends high school and college. School bullies mockingly call him a terrorist for his Iranian middle name and attack him when they see his Black grandfather drop him off at school. He and Gus are thrown out of a bank after Adam rebukes a white security guard for assuming him kidnapped. He’s threatened and insulted at the mall video arcade and harassed by an old white woman at the DMV because of his parents’ racial identities. Meanwhile, Adam feels no less welcome at home, subject to Gus’s relentless abuse.

But it’s not all bad. Adam and Paul, already incredibly close, fall in with a diverse group of neighborhood kids, including a couple of Greek brothers with whom they while away their Sunday afternoons driving around town, hunting for pickup basketball games on local church hoops. Adam discovers his talent for writing, and he falls in love with Bop-era jazz. Still, his home life feels increasingly treacherous. When a teacher suggests Adam might have a chance at college, he sees a way out – and throws himself at it.

College is a revelation. Here, no one asks about his background, already assuming who he is. When a Jewish fraternity invites him to join, Adam is intoxicated by the warm glow of acceptance – never mind that it’s predicated on a fiction. He majors in journalism but soon discovers an aptitude for math and science and finds a new community of shared interest. After a disastrous journalism assignment, he decides his future lies in technology.



# The Manticore - Full Synopsis, cont'd.

It's now 2001. A freshly graduated Adam has proudly joined the ranks of a Fortune 500 technology company in the wake of a tech boom – awash in optimism, confidence, money, and a jocular communal work culture. But the veneer of belonging is ripped away the fateful morning of September 11th. While watching in shock on tv as a second airplane strikes the World Trade Center, a coworker abruptly embraces him and implores: “It’s the Iranians. They’re attacking us. They’re attacking the Jews.”

A few years later, looking for another fresh start, Adam moves to New York City. He finds a job at a company owned and operated by Orthodox Jews who assume that he, too, is Jewish; surreptitiously, he finds fellowship in otherness with an Egyptian coworker. He fills his free time running in Central Park, taking math classes at night, and dating – another new life light years from his past in the Deep South.

But even here, 600 miles and ten years away, his past finds him. An unknown number pops up on his cell phone in the middle of the night – it’s Adam’s mom. Adam’s beloved but longestranged brother, Paul, has died. A car accident. He hasn’t spoken to his family since leaving for college, and yet grief knocks him flat and threatens to subsume him.

Returning to New York after Paul’s funeral and freshly reconnected to his family, Adam, stung and reeling, upends his world one more time: he quits his job, and, following Adlai Stevenson’s old advice about living for two now, he returns to school full-time to become an astrophysicist. This turns out not to be as easy as taking a single math class. He struggles to keep his head up, academically and emotionally. An ADHD diagnosis answers questions but also dredges up new ones: maybe the abuse he suffered as a kid was really his fault for being “difficult?”

During a public astronomy outreach program, Adam meets members of an Iranian student group. He attempts to embrace his cultural heritage, one which he knows nothing about other than what floats around popular culture and the news, and seems to successfully make new Iranian friends. But, at a social gathering in a bar a few weeks later, Adam becomes embarrassingly intoxicated in front of a new crush. In shame, he cuts off ties completely and retreats once more into the comfortable confines of his assumed identity.

A decade passes. Adam has moved to Baltimore, finished graduate school, met and married his girlfriend, Amanda, and bought a house. Snugly situated into a superficial version of the American Dream, he is nonetheless totally unprepared for the next chapter that faces him: fatherhood. Once his son is born, he begins to reflect on his own childhood with new clarity. How can he be A Good Father when the only models of fatherhood he’s had either beat him for spilling a bowl of cereal or simply disappeared before he was even born?

And then, another unexpected call from his mother. This time it’s Gus. After a fifteen-year battle with congestive heart failure, Adam’s stepfather has passed away. At the funeral, he is shocked by the sickly wave of grief that overtakes him. The pastor officiating the proceedings is taken aback at Adam’s refusal to address the congregation. When Adam’s now two-year-old son proves to be too squirmy for the indoor service, he instead watches the toddler play outside in a pile of autumn leaves next to the mausoleum.



# The Manticore - Full Synopsis, cont'd.

But Adam is the luckiest bastard in the world. His greatest fears that night – that he'd lose his wife, have to tell his son his mother wasn't coming home and raise him alone, and that his new daughter, if she survived, might suffer permanent brain damage – are forgotten like a bad dream. A week later, a miraculously mostly-recovered mother and her very large, robust baby girl, who was only in a rush to get out into the world, come home.

By the end of that summer, approaching the height of Trump's re-election campaign, Adam decides he needs to take a break. He hands the baby off to Amanda, but instead of taking a nap, he logs into Facebook. Fatherhood has been heavy on his mind since Gus's passing, and doubly so since the ordeal of his daughter's birth. With the same amount of idle curiosity, he does something he's done several times over the years: he searches his father's name. It's always fruitless – too common a name, too long ago. But this time, he's struck dumb by a new result: a decades old profile picture of a young man who is straight-up Adam's doppelganger.

Adam can't believe it: he's found his father.

In the final chapter, Adam's thoughts race. Stuck in beltway traffic on the way to the airport, Adam reflects on the whirlwind brought on by his fateful internet search: the frantic and emotional first contact over video conference with his father in Iran, the discovery of a trio of sisters and infinitely large extended family, the struggle to establish relationships mediated by Google Translate with people on the other side of the world, his ambivalence for Hossein, and the epochal shift of his racial identity in his own mind – all while a global pandemic raged on.

While the world raced toward a COVID vaccine, Adam worked diligently navigating the government's baroque immigration bureaucracy, filing endless paperwork, tracking down documents, making midnight calls to the US embassy in Turkey, all so that Hossein and Adam's youngest sister, Azadeh, can come to America – to Baltimore! – for medical treatment Azadeh can't receive in Iran. With the miraculous new COVID vaccines in late 2021 comes the equally miraculous medical visa for Azadeh.

And now, three months later, Adam crawls along beltway traffic towards Dulles International Airport, bracing for what had seemed impossible for his entire life: meeting his flesh and blood father in person. After all the scrambling and hustling, it's only now, on this drive, that he finds the space to process the enormity of this moment.

Their reunion next to the sliding doors of Gate 7, at an airport named for one of the architects of the 1953 coup that destroyed Iran's once-democratic government, is an almost impossibly idyllic, cinematic spectacle. After a series of communication snafus place Adam and Hossein at opposite ends of the concourse, they run towards each other down a long colonnade and finally meet in a tearful, cathartic embrace.

A door closes, a door opens.