

Zakia and Ali knew theirs was a forbidden love. She was Sunni and ethnically Tajik; he was Shiite and ethnically Hazara -- the Montagues and Capulets.

"From forth the fatal loins of these two foes / A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life" So begins, with gloomy prophecy, one of the most famous stories in English literature. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* would take their own lives out of despair.

Rod Nordland, a journalist who found Afghanistan's Romeo and Juliet, says that in that country, the despair all too often comes to an end in a so-called honor killing.

"I expected that the next and final article would be about how the girl's family came one night and dragged her from the shelter," he writes in his new book, "The Lovers."

"We would all be outraged and then turn the page. That's how such stories usually end, but I was wrong, and theirs was just the beginning."

Fleeing home with nothing but their faith in each other, they survived. "They're illiterate," Nordland told CNN's Christiane Amanpour. "They haven't gone to school; they have one or two years between the two of them. What the most surprising thing was what a big role poetry played in their lives. They couldn't read it, but they could get it from popular music."

In the book, Nordland writes of Ali's ringtone -- a contemporary Pashto love song: "Come here, my little flower, come! / Let me tear open my breast / And show you my own heart, naked!"

"Ali courted Zakia with poetry that he recited to her, the words from songs that he recited, and stories, old Persian love stories, that go back to the Bible and even before the Bible."

Zakia was **cagey** at first about accepting Ali's proposal -- she knew the **taboo**, and danger, in such a marriage. She would be offending her family's "honor," as they would put it, for running away with a Shiite, Hazara man. "One hundred percent, they would kill me," Zakia told Nordland.

"There's even a law in Afghanistan," Nordland told Amanpour, "that if you're a man and you kill a woman in your family because she offended your honor, the maximum penalty is two years. In Afghanistan, there are cases of families waiting six and eight years before they killed the girl. And sometimes they'll pretend to **reconcile**,

and then when everybody kind of forgets about the case, then turn around and kill the person. It happens over and over again."

They left their homes just after their parents found out about their relationship.

Her father was outraged, Nordland writes. "I swear to God that even if it costs me everything, I will try to bring my daughter back home," Nordland quotes him as saying. "She is a part of my body like one of my limbs -- how can I let her go with that boy?"

Ali's tenderness won her over, defying the near certain death she faced. "It was very hard," Zakia told Nordland. "Everyone in my family was against me."

In 2011, a Thompson-Reuters foundation poll listed Afghanistan as the most dangerous country in the world for women. According to Amnesty International, "any form of **immorality**, whether adultery or rape, is considered a way of dishonoring the family and may lead to 'honor' related violence."

Star-crossed lovers

Their story was even complete with its own balcony scene; Romeo wooing his Juliet. "If someone loves someone, she should have that bravery to do whatever has to be done," Zakia told Nordland. "It was very hard. Everyone in my family was against me."

As Zakia lay on the roof of her house, Nordland writes, Ali recited an Afghan song: "Your two dark eyes are those of an Afghan, / But the mercy of Islam is not in your heart. / Outside your walls I spent nights that became daylight; / What kind of sleep is this that you never wake up?"

"That poem moved me, it increased my courage," she told Nordland. "Those days were so cold, and he was coming to meet me anyway, even though I told him not to come, because the weather was very cold, and he came anyway, and then he recited this poem."

"They've become heroes to their generation because they're obviously not the only people that have fallen in love," he said. "Afghans fall in love, and then they put that aside and marry the people they're told to marry."

"What makes her case so **perilous** is that her family, if they were to kill her, they can rest easy knowing that nobody would be prosecuted. Or if anybody was prosecuted, nobody would be seriously punished."