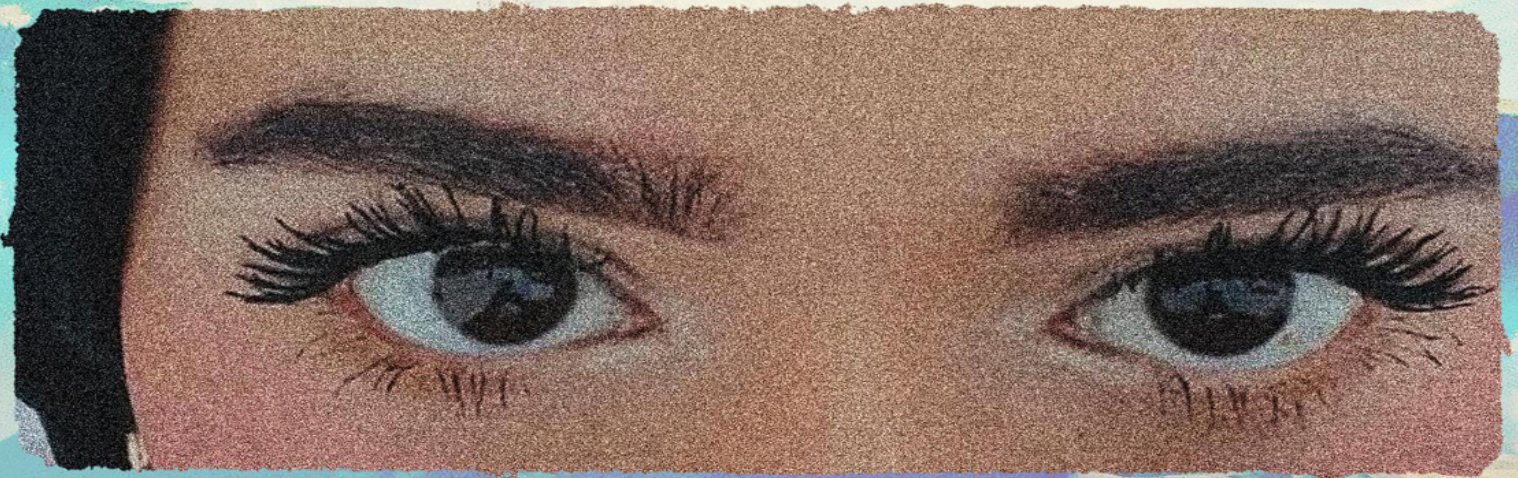


THE LAST FREE WOMEN



**A Daring Escape from Afghanistan
& Coming of Age in America**

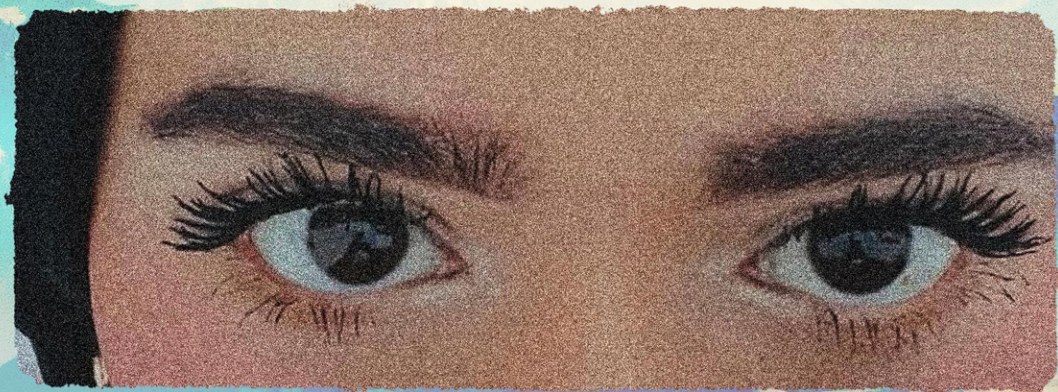


**REBECCA BLUMENSTEIN
& DIANA KAPP**

THE LAST FREE WOMEN



A Daring Escape from Afghanistan
& Coming of Age in America



REBECCA BLUMENSTEIN
& DIANA KAPP



THE LAST FREE WOMEN

A DARING ESCAPE
from AFGHANISTAN and
COMING OF AGE *in AMERICA*

**BY REBECCA BLUMENSTEIN
AND DIANA KAPP**



New York Boston

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*For Marwa, Maryam, Mursal, and Samira:
Your bravery and resilience astound us.*

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A portion of the authors' proceeds from this book will go to the Journalism Refugees Education Fund.

JREF supports journalists and local staff in exile and their families. The organization was founded to help them restart their lives by providing financial assistance to attend college or pursue career-related training. Around the world, journalists are at greater risk than ever. Contact www.journalismref.org for more information.

No one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.

—Warsan Shire

Authors' Note

When Kabul fell to the Taliban on August 15, 2021, every Afghan who had worked for *The New York Times* suddenly faced a substantial risk of reprisal. The collapse of Afghanistan and its capital shocked the world. There was legitimate reason to fear that the new regime would imprison, kidnap, or even kill those who had worked for a Western news organization. I was then a deputy managing editor at the *Times*, and I became closely involved in a furious effort to evacuate and resettle more than two hundred Afghan journalists, staff, and their families. Led by publisher A. G. Sulzberger; David McCraw, the *Times*' deputy general counsel; and Joe Kahn, now executive editor, the operation included a long line of heroic reporters, editors, and staff, especially those on the ground in Kabul.

The *Times*, other organizations, and many vets scrambled to evacuate the Afghans who had taken great risks to help them over the course of a war known for its brutality. Close to 200,000 Afghan people reached the United States in the aftermath of Kabul's fall, representing the largest influx of wartime refugees since the Vietnam War. Two weeks after the fall of Kabul, the *Times* was able to get a group of 124 employees and their families to Houston in what is believed to be the largest private sponsorship in modern American history.

From the moment I got to know the young people in our group—especially the women—they worried about how they could restart their lives and education. I became obsessed with helping them. One of the first acts of the Taliban was to ban school for girls past the sixth grade. The girls and young women who escaped, as well as those who continue to try to study behind closed doors in Afghanistan, are part of a revolution that can't be easily extinguished. They also represent one of the most enduring accomplishments of the longest war in US history.

At the *Times*, we refused to accept the typical expectations of resettlement: that these newcomers should appreciate their safety and freedom and accept a life of poverty, waiting for the next generation to take advantage of the opportunities in America. They hadn't sought out this fate. They had been forced into it by a turn of events far beyond their control and had often had only minutes to decide whether to flee for their lives. It took a conversation with my friend and fellow writer Diana Kapp to realize that we should tell the stories of four of the young women fighting to take advantage of their newfound freedom in America.

I am in the unusual position of being both a character in and an author of this story, though the real heroines of this book are Marwa, Mursal, Samira, and Maryam. That dual role means that I sometimes appear in the third person, which is not a writing quirk but an honest reporting fact.

—Rebecca Blumenstein

This was a hell of a story. It was early 2022; I was catching up with Rebecca Blumenstein, a close college friend, over dinner in New York. We first met at the University of Michigan roaming the halls of a sprawling hotel while attending a formal, both of us having managed to lose track of our room numbers—and dates. She was sharing all that had gone into getting 124 Afghans out of Kabul in the hours and then days after the country's shocking fall to the Taliban. She had told me bits and pieces along the way about her charge—evacuating them, resettling them in Houston—but now I was hearing the details. I had reason to be moved by their rescue from what had once again become the most repressive place on earth for women.

A decade earlier, I had traveled to Takhar Province in far northern Afghanistan to write a magazine profile of the British physician Sarah Fane, OBE, who through her nonprofit Afghan Connection had helped build or improve 130 schools in remote Afghanistan. Starting in 2002, Sarah had determined that the greatest impact she could have on the country, and on Afghan women in particular, would be to improve education. So she built

one school and just kept going.

On that trip, I glimpsed a golden age for women and girls in Afghanistan. It was 2013; just over a decade had passed since the Taliban had been driven out and schools for girls had reopened. Every school building tucked into another windswept, almost unfathomably remote landscape was filled with engaged, bright-faced girls with tightly wrapped white headscarves practicing penmanship, labeling human cells, and working math problems. In one classroom of girls, Sarah asked, “How many of your mothers can read or write?” Not a single hand went up. Yet sixteen girls from the school were heading to university, three more than the year prior and seven more than the year before that. They told us they wanted to become doctors, teachers, engineers, and scientists. What their being educated would mean for their children and their children’s children and, truly, the future of Afghanistan was everything. These girls have stayed with me.

Before Rebecca and I said good night, we decided to write the details down, focusing on a handful of the young women, and keep following along on their journey. That became thirty-some individual trips, hundreds of hours on their college campuses and in their homes, observing their lives, hearing their self-reflections, their fears and hopes, and learning from them as much as about them. In between visits, we stayed in frequent touch. I was drawn to them in a way that I had not previously experienced in my writing career. Surely it was the sense of continuing a broken circle, tracing what had been built, what had been lost, and what might endure. The opportunity to get to know each of these four young women so intimately has been a true honor. I am grateful to each of them for their willingness and bravery to use their voices.

—Diana Kapp

Prologue

Marwa bolted upright in bed.

It was 1 a.m. She'd bought a new pink-and-white dress to wear for her first day of in-person medical school classes since the pandemic, and she was intent on ironing it. She'd set an alarm because in Kabul, the grid was perpetually overtaxed; the electricity switched on and off all day and was reliable only in the dead of night. Since she was a young girl, Marwa had dreamed of becoming a doctor—a reach for a woman, particularly one from Kunduz. The city had no medical school and thus required living away from home. Now, at age twenty-one, she was ecstatic to return to real labs and in-person lectures at Afghan Swiss Medical University.

Marwa managed to fall back asleep, but only for a few hours. She was awoken again just after 7:30 a.m., this time by her mother, Gulalai, who was wearing a long-sleeved tunic and standing pressed against the bedroom window. Marwa couldn't understand what her mother was muttering, but she saw worry lines appear alongside her eyes as she stared at the scene five stories below. "Her eyes were talking to me," Marwa remembered.

Marwa jumped up from the mat on the rich burgundy carpet where she had slept beside her older sisters. She crowded beside her mom and took in the buzzing street below. Cars were honking, teenagers were gunning mopeds, Humvees with military personnel hanging off the sides were speeding by. The sidewalk was chaotic for the early hour. Oddly, everyone was moving in the same direction.

The street vendors who usually sold melons and pomegranates, cell-phone chargers, and samosas were closing up their kiosks, hurriedly tossing rugs over the tops. Marwa, who has long dark hair and sparkling eyes, was alarmed. She was fixed on one man who walked with a stilted gait, as if stuck in slow motion. He was in stark contrast to the masses rushing by with sacks of rice and bottled water or clutching documents, backpacks slung over their shoulders. The man was a heavyset, middle-aged

policeman, cheeks ruddy, his expression zombielike, dressed in full uniform though missing his hat. He was holding only a bag of grapes.

“At that moment, seeing him, I thought that nothing will be the same,” Marwa said. “He is losing all his hopes. He is an officer. He knows.”

Maybe, in retrospect, she was misremembering. Maybe, given all that she now knows about what would happen that day and in the weeks that followed, she was overstating what she recognized in the officer’s manner. But what she said she felt in that moment was terror that this man in a position of authority had a posture of defeat. “This is a picture I will never forget,” Marwa said.

It was early morning, August 15. By their bedroom window, her mom was quietly listing each of the provinces the Taliban had taken over in their 2021 offensive, starting with Nimruz on August 6 and then Kunduz, the northern city close to Tajikistan that was the Rahim family’s home, and then Takhar Province and Sar-e-Pul on August 8. Gulalai had been in Kunduz just days before. But with the Taliban’s takeover gaining speed, she and the rest of the family had fled to Kabul to stay with Najim, the second-eldest son. Najim had been a reporter for *The New York Times* in Afghanistan since 2015.

Marwa and her middle sister, Mursal, who was twenty-four, a striver, and so striking you might think she was a model if you passed her on the street, were already living with Najim so they could go to school in Kabul. Mursal had graduated from law school in 2020 and was attending English classes with hopes of going abroad to pursue a master’s degree likely in international relations, and Marwa had transferred to Kabul to finish her medical studies.

As Gulalai finished her list of provinces, she named Charikar, a town on the ring road surrounding Kabul. This meant the Taliban were getting close—very close.

Marwa knelt on her bed mat and rooted around for her phone. Scrolling quickly, she saw that every post on her social media said the same three words: *They are coming*.

She also saw a text from the driver who was supposed to be picking her and several classmates up for school in an hour.

“Can I go?” Marwa asked, peering up at her mom.

Her usually resolute, formidable mom replied softly, “I have no idea.”

Gulalai's dark eyes glassed over. "Really, I don't know."

All morning, Marwa, her mom, and Mursal stood with their foreheads pressed against the bedroom window. The sidewalk teemed with people buying provisions in a panic. The snarl of traffic slowed to complete gridlock. The growing masses were all still headed in one direction: toward the airport.

Marwa and Mursal were in the vanguard of an embattled but increasingly democratic and modern new Afghanistan, an eager generation of girls coming of age assuming that their voices mattered. A vast horizon of opportunity had opened for them under a dramatic expansion of the education of girls, a priority of the American occupation.

Mursal went to school for the first time within months of the Americans' arrival in 2001. When she graduated from law school at Salam University, the number of Afghan girls enrolled in primary school had increased from practically zero to an estimated 2.5 million.

Afghanistan's treatment of women's rights has swung for better and for worse over the past century. Women won the right to vote in 1919, a year before women in the United States and decades before women in many other parts of the world. As early as 1928, Queen Soraya Tarzi earned an honorary degree from Oxford and, bucking a long tradition, opened schools for girls; her husband, King Amanullah Khan, abolished child marriages, imposed Western dress codes, and promoted universal education. These reforms were later repealed under opposition from conservative *mullahs*. By midcentury, with massive aid from the Soviet Union, Afghanistan embarked on modernization. There was a new understanding that women needed to be economically active for the country to meet its development goals. The 1940s and 1950s saw women becoming nurses, doctors, and teachers.

The 1970s brought a new constitution granting women increased rights. In Kabul, women started wearing miniskirts and attending mixed-gender university classes. But again, those advances evaporated. When the Taliban first controlled Afghanistan in 1996, they halted education for girls beyond sixth grade.

Marwa and Mursal's mom, though, refused to turn the clock back. She taught her daughters and other neighborhood girls in secret. When a gruff pair of Talibs pounded on the door and questioned her, Gulalai said she was teaching the girls to sew. She moved her students from one location to the next to avoid being discovered.

Under the twenty years of US occupation, beginning in 2001, a new era of openness emerged. This was most pointed among the young women and in Kabul and other big cities, but it extended to rural Afghanistan as well. "It was just a moment," said Fatima Faizi, the one female Afghan journalist in the *Times* group and one of few female Afghan journalists. "All of a sudden, the doors were open. Like a prison, they were all free." She recalled at age seven being suddenly in a classroom packed with seventy girls, all desperate to go to school. Some were as old as sixteen. "We could not even move," she said. More women earned an education to become professors, doctors, and government ministers; joined soccer and robotics teams; and pursued careers they felt passionate about. They could hang out with friends in co-ed cafés, listen to female pop stars, work out in the gym, and have their hair and nails done at the salon. Social media, on now ubiquitous cell phones, provided them with a view into a world beyond.

Fatima, like Mursal and Marwa, and the millions of other women and girls working hard to achieve bright futures, would never have imagined that this progress could all come undone in less than half a day.

Against all odds, *The New York Times* rescued a group of 124 through a mad push amid the chaotic fall of Afghanistan. The group grew to include anyone who had worked at the bureau over the two decades of US occupation—not only reporters and their translators but also cooks, gardeners, security guards, and their immediate families. Their evacuation came after a two-week nonstop operation to save them that spanned the globe: a critical assist from Qatar, an unlikely offer of refuge from Mexico, a failed attempt to get the group to the American-controlled side of Hamid Karzai International Airport that left them running for their lives—and, finally, a brave meeting between two *Times* staffers and two Taliban soldiers that allowed them to take off, leaving their home behind, probably

forever. The escape concluded in Houston, Texas, where they would begin a new and uncertain life.

This is the coming-of-age story of four young Afghan women: Mursal, Marwa, Maryam, and Samira. They belong to a place and piece of history America would like to forget.

All four were in the process of becoming, cresting into adulthood when they had to flee.

Marwa, at twenty-one, was ripped from medical school two-thirds of the way through her studies. A dutiful youngest daughter with a telegenic smile and rosy cheeks, she embraces change and tests limits but can be stymied by self-doubt.

Mursal—Marwa’s self-assured older sister—was a newly minted law school graduate when Kabul fell. In America, she white-knuckled her way into the Ivy League and a coveted internship at the UN, where she had long dreamed of working, but eschews assimilation.

Maryam was on the verge of graduating from high school in Afghanistan. So ambitious she’s nicknamed “GPA,” she is gunning to become a neurosurgeon, but she can be stubborn and insists that she doesn’t need friends.

Samira earned a bachelor’s degree in business before the Taliban’s return and intended to pursue a master’s in economics. She is small but strong; haunted by the abuses of a mother who burned her books, she is determined to create the family she never had.

At the precipice of a bright future, their world fell apart. Almost overnight, their homeland would again grow so repressive that women are prohibited from leaving their homes except in “cases of necessity.” They can appear only with a burqa covering them from head to toe, and, per Taliban morality law, their voices cannot be heard in public. House windows are painted black to keep women hidden away inside, and in store windows, female mannequins’ heads are bagged in dark cloth or plastic. Girls, as during the first Taliban takeover, cannot attend school past sixth grade, and women and girls are forbidden from seeking medical treatment or even catching a taxi without a male relative as chaperone. The actress

Meryl Streep told a gathering of the UN General Assembly in 2024, “In Kabul a female cat has more freedom than a woman.”

These young women are part of the unseen collateral damage of America’s longest war. Just as the Vietnam War haunts the US fifty years after its end, so too does Afghanistan cast a shadow. The US occupation was an entanglement full of miscalculations and shifting end goals that took the lives of 2,461 Americans and tens of thousands of Afghan soldiers, police, and civilians. The war cost the US some \$2 trillion, an outlay that exceeded the Marshall Plan’s cost to rebuild Europe (adjusted for inflation).

Much has been written about the fall of Kabul and the desperate push to evacuate Afghans who worked with the US military and humanitarian organizations. *But what happened to the refugees of that war who made it out?*

The first time Rebecca spoke with the women in the *Times* group, she was struck by their desire to take advantage of their newfound freedom in America, given the crushing restrictions the Taliban had imposed on women back home. They felt that it was their duty. Those who were illiterate wanted to learn to read, and the young women who had grown up going to school, and assumed that higher education and fulfilling careers were in their future, were desperate to resume their studies and professional tracks.

We seek to spotlight a truth that has been largely overlooked: the single biggest achievement of the US occupation may well have been the liberation and opening of opportunities for women and girls. Even behind the closed doors of Afghanistan, where many girls continue to strive to be educated, this achievement can’t be entirely extinguished.

“I have the opportunity to cry, to kick, to fight, to read,” said the former *Times* journalist Fatima, who has been distressed by the increasing restrictions imposed on women who didn’t escape. “I really hope that the generation after me gets to experience the things that I got to experience. The good things. The relatively small freedoms I had. The freedom of choice, the freedom of having friends, male friends.”

Theirs is a story about carrying on in the face of it all, when there is no other choice. It is a meditation on responsibility, on what humans owe one another, on what organizations and governments owe those who enable and protect them. The dedication of *The New York Times* in recognizing its commitment and seeing it through is nothing short of heroic.

Challenges emerged along the way. The pull of home, of familiar culture, deep ties, and community, regardless of how imperfect it might be, is a powerful thread. Many in our group had never imagined ending up in the US before that fateful day and mourn the life they left behind. They have also grown more concerned about their place in America. Immigration politics became increasingly polarized, especially after an Afghan national who had worked for the CIA in Afghanistan killed a National Guard soldier and gravely injured another in a horrific attack in Washington, DC, in November 2025. Suddenly, a welcoming America seemed to turn against the Afghans as threats to deport them mounted.

But what triumphs are the immeasurable acts of generosity and the many who gave selflessly to aid these young Afghans on their journey as they resettled in America.

What prevails is hope. A story of unflinching hope.

PART I

THE FALL

Lunch Interrupted

AUGUST 15, 2021

Marwa

On August 15, 2021, a day that began slowly, full of unknowns, came instantly into alarming, stark focus. Najim, the brother of Marwa and Mursal and a well-sourced reporter for *The New York Times* in Afghanistan, called from the Kabul bureau in a panic as the family ate their midday meal. “We need to leave. Everything is over here even though we don’t know where we will go,” he told them.

Najim had been pushing the *Times*’ new Kabul bureau chief, Thomas Gibbons-Neff (widely known as “T. M.”), to get the family on a list being hurriedly assembled of those given top priority to evacuate. As the Taliban advanced with alarming speed, T. M., who had served two tours of duty in Afghanistan as a US Marine, scrambled with others across the *Times* to find a way to evacuate the Afghans who worked in the bureau. Tension and fear rose as the Taliban closed in. Everyone realized the danger.

“Just get one small bag, and pack only a few necessary things and your important documents, not something else,” Najim told his family. “Take no more than thirty minutes to pack and head to the airport,” he warned.

Marwa, Mursal, and the rest of the family of nine bolted from their lunch, scattering rice, okra, and bits of dried apricots across the floor as they hurriedly rolled up the oilcloth they were eating on and grabbed what they could carry. They left a sink full of dirty dishes.

“For my entire life, one backpack,” Marwa said.

Mursal stared into the stuffed closet, momentarily frozen. She fingered a few items, particularly a special dress her oldest sister, Sosan, had brought from her years studying in India, which she had not yet even worn.

If Marwa had had her wits about her, the first thing she would have grabbed was the stethoscope her father had given her when she had started

medical school. She had been planning to have photos taken in her white physician's coat with the stethoscope around her neck. Instead, she took a pair of black high heels and her hair curler, somewhat surprisingly since she prides herself on prioritizing substance over style. ("It was brand-new!" she later said in her defense.) In an act of defiance, she pulled on the pink-and-white dress she had meant to wear back to classes that day, topped with a long blue coat.

When she stepped out on the street for the last time, into the airport-bound flood of humanity, Marwa looked up and said to no one in particular, "Who is staying back to fight for our country?"

Kabul Came Knocking

AUGUST 13, 2021

Rebecca

For me, Kabul came knocking all at once, almost out of the blue. And quickly, it became all-consuming.

I had never been to Afghanistan, but I had long helped manage the scrappy and brave foreign correspondents who chose to go to war zones, both at *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. As *The Wall Street Journal*'s China bureau chief in Beijing from 2005 to 2009 and later as the paper's foreign editor, I saw firsthand how pivotal local staff is to enabling us to understand what's truly happening on the ground.

Our correspondents can't do what they do without local staff. They find sources, translate dialects, establish trust, navigate to nearly impossible-to-reach places, cook meals, fix tech, and often literally save the lives of our writers and photographers. Our Afghan reporters were highly respected journalists whose sources and stories distinguished the *Times*' coverage of the war.

I moved to the *Times* in 2017 as a deputy managing editor. In early 2021, I was asked by publisher A. G. Sulzberger, who had taken over the role in 2018 at the age of thirty-seven, to work as his partner.

A. G.'s family has owned the *Times* for more than a century. Known for his quiet, thoughtful style, A. G. worked a stint at one of the paper's more humble posts in Kansas City. In 2014, he authored a critical report that found that the *Times* was falling behind in the shift to digital, spurring many changes that ultimately proved prescient. He still had a lot of work to do to change the paper's sprawling operations, and it was my job to help him manage it.

The *Times* took great pride in our commitment to having a bureau in Afghanistan for the twenty years of the US occupation and our coverage of

the deadly conflict, despite the fact that many readers had grown weary of the topic. The bureau became one of the largest across the world because of the complexity and security risks of reporting there.

By early summer 2021, the situation in Afghanistan was careening toward a crisis. Our deputy general counsel, David McCraw, grew increasingly concerned about the safety of our people and launched an effort to obtain visas for our local Afghan reporters and staff who were considered to be most at risk. In June, he enlisted A. G. to help set up meetings with top State Department officials. Their ask was for what's known as "P2 visas," which would allow safe passage out of the country. In July, news organizations banded together to ask Congress to step in. They kept pressing as warning signs mounted that the Afghan security forces might not be able to hold the Taliban back. Finally, in early August, they received permission to begin a lengthy application process. David was so relieved to get the email that he remembered exactly where he was: at a Starbucks in New York.

By then, it was too late for the lengthy visa process to work. The Biden administration had signaled that the US occupation was to end by September 11, twenty years after 9/11. Despite years of training by the US military, the Afghan security forces started crumbling.

The first provincial capital fell to the Taliban on August 6, and others soon followed. From there, the advance was stunningly fast. Pressure and desperation grew, not only among the Afghan journalists who had covered the Taliban's brutality for years but also among everyone who had helped the *Times* cover the war, including drivers who had risked their lives to take our journalists wherever the story required. They were convinced that they wouldn't be able to hide their affiliation with the *Times* from the Taliban, who would hunt them down. Some were breaking down in tears at work. "Fear had infested the bureau," T. M. said.

On August 11, one of our leading Afghan journalists, Fahim Abed, sent a note to top editors saying the *Times* needed to do more to protect the staff who had long worked for us in Kabul. "If you have had a bureau in Afghanistan for twenty years, you know the Taliban," Fahim recalled writing. "It seems like you don't have a plan." He said he thought he might lose his job, but he wanted to "fulfill my responsibility" to his colleagues.

Fahim's note, along with the Taliban's shockingly rapid advance,

spurred us into overdrive to rescue the whole group as soon as possible. Michael Slackman, then the international editor, set things into motion. The State Department offered alarmingly few assurances as the pullout accelerated. Suddenly, it was clear that there was no firm plan for those left behind who had helped the US military, nonprofits, and news organizations like the *Times*. The country was collapsing—and we were on our own. “We had anticipated a very different set of circumstances than we ended up with,” said David. “They kind of washed their hands of it all.”

T. M. printed out a copy of Fahim’s note and pasted it into his journal as his own personal call to action. On a map of Afghanistan mounted on a wall in the Kabul bureau, Fahim and T. M. started putting a pin in each province as it fell, a visual reminder of what suddenly seemed to be an unstoppable, though unthinkable, advance.

Back in New York, the paper’s then executive editor, Dean Baquet, and his no. 2, Joe Kahn, asked newsroom leaders to jump in to help with the mounting crisis. Dean was widely viewed as a hero of journalism, admired for standing up for investigative stories like the Harvey Weinstein bombshells that had opened the door to the MeToo movement. Joe was known for his steady leadership, deep international experience, and uncanny eye for stories that held leaders to account.

A. G. defined the ask: to find a country that would accept a group of the Afghans who had worked in our Kabul bureau and their families and to get them there. It was a tall order.

David became our “general.” Revered in journalism and legal circles, David is witty and caring but also a pit bull, a not-so-secret weapon for the *Times*. He is brilliant at suing for access to information, shutting down legal threats with withering letters to opposing counsel, and getting journalists out of harm’s way. Hour by hour, Afghanistan was quickly becoming one of the biggest crises that even David had ever faced.

With time running out, we pressed every connection we had. A. G. tried the emir of Qatar and others around the world. David worked contacts throughout the US government and military. I set up a call with India’s foreign ministry and tapped contacts from Canada to Singapore. Elisabeth

Bumiller, our Washington bureau chief, tried a contact at the Uzbekistan embassy.

A guiding principle that governed the *Times*' approach from the beginning was to treat everyone who worked for the *Times* as equally as possible—whether they were our Afghan reporters, cooks, or drivers, including those who had worked for the *Times* years earlier. Our belief was that any Afghan affiliated with a leading US news organization that had reported aggressively about the Taliban had good reason to fear serious retaliation.

A. G. wanted to avoid a repeat of a dark episode from the past. His view was shaped by the experience of *Times* reporter Sydney Schanberg, who had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1976 for his coverage of the fall of Cambodia. A defining moment of that conflict occurred when American journalists fled Phnom Penh in the wake of the sudden, violent takeover by the Khmer Rouge in April 1975. Their local staff were left behind, and many perished in a bloodbath that killed an estimated two million people. Schanberg was one of the few to stay behind with his Cambodian assistant, Dith Pran, but he too was forced to flee the violence two weeks later. He was haunted by his abandonment of Dith, though he was able to get Dith's wife and family out before the worst of the violence. Schanberg later wrote about it in a book that became the basis for the acclaimed movie *The Killing Fields*. Dith miraculously survived and escaped across the Thailand border four years later. He came to America and was long employed as a photographer by the *Times*. Still, the guilt remained.

"I watched many Cambodian friends being herded out of Phnom Penh. Most of them I never saw again. All of us felt like betrayers, like people who were protected and didn't do enough to save our friends. We felt shame. We still do," Schanberg wrote in a 1975 article for the *Times*.

More than forty-five years later, A. G. vowed not to make the same mistake in Kabul. "The whole time this was playing out, I was determined that this wasn't going to happen again," he said. "We needed to rescue the whole group."

On the ground in Kabul, time was running out. The initial plan was to get our people on a flight to Mexico, Doha, Pakistan, or Ukraine. Anywhere. We had hoped to make an orderly exit. The list of evacuees grew ever larger as many others with ties to the bureau pushed to be added,

along with their family members.

It fell to Lauren Katzenberg, an indefatigable editor on the international desk in New York, working closely with T. M., David, and Fahim, to collect names, photos, and passports of our group. The first pass at a list was a disaster—few full names, children identified by numbers, and many missing documents. She had to ask people thousands of miles away to text images of their IDs and the names of their family members. The list, known as a manifest, swelled to one hundred as requests kept pouring in. By that Friday, August 13, the Taliban was almost to Kabul.

“I worked probably twenty hours a day. I would cry. Take a Xanax. Sleep for four hours and start again,” said Lauren.

As the pressure mounted, it was impossible to include everyone who had worked for the *Times* and wanted to flee, as well as their families. Initially, it was decided that only immediate family members would be allowed. But some of our current reporters and staff like Najim argued that since they were not married, they should be able to bring their parents and siblings. Afghan families tend to be large, and our list swelled as some entire families like the Rahims, with a total of nine, were added. We depended on T. M., Lauren, and Christina Goldbaum, a second *Times* reporter on the ground, to deliver decisions. In most instances, parents had to be left behind, and at least one fiancée.

And there were still more who wanted to come. Translators and others who had worked directly with the *Times* over the past twenty years also wanted out. But the group was already getting too big and unwieldy. David and Lauren, consulting with others, decided the group couldn’t grow any larger. We reassured those appealing to join that we would try to get additional waves out. Our fabled security staff, usually charged with keeping our reporters safe from attacks from Taliban insurgents, helped collect passports and documents as the Taliban advanced toward Kabul with alarming speed.

Joe was asked to make the final go or no-go decisions as various options were debated. He and the team started a rhythm where they would be up much of the night so they could capture developments on the ground in Kabul in real time.

A Cross-Country Road Trip

AUGUST 13, 2021

As we made calls, I was also caught up in more pedestrian concerns half a world away. On Friday, August 13, I was home in Maplewood, New Jersey, packing for a road trip to a family wedding in Columbus, Ohio. From there, I was to drive my son Eli to Boulder, Colorado, to move him back to college after a year away because of Covid shutdowns. It would be our family's first major trip since the pandemic, and we were a bit nervous.

From the moment we left, the situation in Afghanistan overshadowed everything. While my husband drove, I was glued to my phone, trying to find a country that would take our people. I finally reached someone senior in Canada's foreign office, only to find that there was no way that anyone in our group would be accepted into the country quickly.

It was a core tenet of the *Times*, from A. G. on down, that we do anything possible to support the journalists whose work puts them in harm's way. We also don't ever ask or accept favors from those we cover. There are occasional moments when those two principles come into tension, but even when advocating for our colleagues, we always have to make it clear that our coverage remains completely independent. I was excited when I finally got through to a top official in India's foreign ministry once we got to Columbus, only to be frustrated by the response: they didn't think our coverage of India had been sufficiently positive. And besides, why should they help us when thousands of others were clamoring to get in, especially given India's proximity to Afghanistan? The conversation ended quickly.

We finally caught a break when our Mexico bureau chief, Azam Ahmed, who had been a reporter in Kabul, convinced Mexico, through its foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, to take our group in. Azam argued that the move would show that Mexico could play a leadership role in a global crisis.

It was an incredible feat. But we needed to get our group out of Kabul

first.

I knew instinctively that Qatar was a promising option, as it was the only country that had been hosting talks with the Taliban.

Suddenly, I thought of a former colleague from China: Matt Pottinger, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter who had deep experience in Afghanistan. His career had taken an unorthodox turn after he became convinced that China's rise posed a threat to democracy: he trained in secret for more than a year to get an age waiver to join the US Marines at age thirty-two. I had briefly been Matt's bureau chief in China and remember being shocked when he told me he was quitting to enlist. Still, I told Matt he had my full support.

We stayed in touch through his two tours of duty in Afghanistan. In 2010, he tapped his skills as a journalist to coauthor with Michael Flynn, deputy chief of staff for intelligence in Afghanistan, a critical and highly influential report of US intelligence in the country. The report's indictment foretold the ultimate defeat of the US effort. "The vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which the US and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade," Matt wrote.

After returning from Afghanistan, Matt became the deputy director of the National Security Council during President Donald Trump's first term and played an instrumental role in shifting the US toward a more adversarial view of China. He resigned from the Trump administration on January 6, 2021, following the attack on the US Capitol.

Before collapsing into bed at our hotel in Columbus, I emailed Matt, asking if he knew anyone who could help get our group out of Afghanistan.

I was stunned to wake up Saturday morning to an encouraging reply. Matt wrote that Qatar could help. Nothing was final, and I should be discreet regarding the information. But during a quick call, he told me that I needed to compile a manifest of every person we wanted to evacuate as soon as possible.

I reached out to A. G. and our top editors to let them know Qatar might be able to help. A. G.'s outreach to the nation's leaders, along with Matt's contacts, had coalesced to give us an opening. Hopes for an assist from the US were fading, and we needed to nail down a plan to get our people out. And though there were questions about Qatar's record on human rights, it

was also seen as a rare arbiter in the region, willing to use its connections to resolve crises. We had little choice—the Taliban was now almost to Kabul.

Matt's warnings of defeat in Afghanistan were coming true. As he helped us find a path out, in parallel, he was attempting the same things for his own network of translators, intelligence officers, and others who had worked with the US military during the twenty years of war.

Matt determined quickly that the US government was not going to help. "The White House completely cocooned," he said. "They were paralyzed." Working remotely with other vets, he tried "to create an underground railroad" and began a continuous frenzy of WeChats and Signal chains. He pursued Qatar as the best option.

My email request for an assist apparently landed before those of any other media organizations. Though Matt was focused on the vets, he had remained friendly with me and other journalists and was well aware of the danger they faced.

Back at my hotel in Columbus, I was impressed to find that Lauren had all the names and passport info ready to go in a spreadsheet. I ran a draft of a letter by A. G. in case we needed to move fast, but as Saturday wore on, we didn't hear anything further. Hours passed. I was beginning to think it all might be a false alarm and felt a bit silly. I finally went for a run to calm my nerves.

Halfway through, Matt called. I was to email a letter on behalf of A. G. to Deputy Foreign Minister of Qatar Lolwah Al-Khater. Matt told me she was a rising force in Qatar and could get it done. I remember being surprised that a woman held such a senior position in the region as I tried to hide the fact that I was out of breath. I typed some notes into my phone, hoping to get everything down correctly, because Matt wasn't easy to reach. I was to request Qatar's help to urgently evacuate our group, emphasizing that we needed Qatar only as a transit point, which Matt explained was the Qataris' only condition. This was a possibility only because Mexico had committed to accepting our entire group, thanks to Azam's efforts. Matt gave me an email address to send a formal request.

I ran back to the hotel as fast as I could. "The situation is dire and many of the staff who have been on the front lines of our Kabul bureau for years and their families are in grave danger," I typed in a letter that A. G. and I crafted to Minister Al-Khater. Kabul could fall in a matter of hours, and by

sending an aircraft, Qatar “could provide a tremendous humanitarian gesture to the *Times*—and the world,” I wrote. Then I put the message on A. G.’s letterhead, along with the manifest.

I pressed send just in time to join the wedding. Amazingly, Minister Al-Khater wrote back quickly, pledging to get our people on the first plane Qatar could land. She instructed that they should gather at the airport immediately. The group had already started moving toward the airport in hopes of getting on alternative flights that David and the security team were trying to line up as the situation on the ground deteriorated. The most pressing issue was to get out of Kabul, and Qatar’s permission to land in Doha and move on to Mexico was a lifeline.

As August 15 dawned in Afghanistan, the Taliban had reached Kabul’s outskirts. We still hoped that the takeover would be just slow enough for our plan to work.

A Narrow Opening

AUGUST 15, 2021

Fahim, the reporter who had sounded the alarm with his letter, noticed that the world had changed before even arriving at work on the 15th. The Afghan soldiers typically stationed at the three checkpoints he passed to get to the bureau were all missing. When he got to the *Times* compound, behind high walls and metal gates in the Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood, the staff were breaking laptops and shredding documents.

The Kabul bureau was the pride of the *Times* and of all who worked there. It was strategically located in a house in the diplomatic area of Kabul near the British and Indian embassies, a neighborhood widely seen as one of the safest because it was one of the most guarded parts of the city. The bureau was a world unto itself. It was where the foreign correspondents both lived and worked, thousands of miles away from home. Next to the living room, where a fireplace kept the bureau cozy on cold nights, was a newsroom where the local Afghan journalists had desks and worked with the expat reporters. There was a kitchen and cooks who made impressive meals for visiting dignitaries and special events—and also made sure there was always a stash of freshly baked goods for late-night snacking. A small yard had been turned into an enclosed gym with weights so the staff could stay in shape without leaving, a garden that was tended to, and an annex where the drivers hung out.

Suddenly, it was all coming undone.

Omar Ahmadi, whose father was a longtime cook at the bureau, arrived at the telecom company where he worked to rumors that Afghanistan's president had fled. Omar didn't believe the news, but just two hours later, he and his family were running for the airport. His brother had to leave behind his fiancée. "You didn't know if you were coming back alive," Omar said.

T. M. and our American staff had been ordered to report to the side of the airport still controlled by the US military by 5 p.m. He pushed his US military contacts to get our local staff on a flight out of Kabul as well.

Amid the mounting chaos, we got a lucky break. Mujib Mashal, a venerated reporter for the *Times* from Afghanistan who had recently moved to a new post in Delhi, happened to be in Kabul visiting his ill mother. He was supposed to go back to India on August 14, but as word spread about the Taliban's advances, he decided that he wanted to be in Afghanistan if something significant happened.

Soon, Mujib was pressed into duty. His first task was to help T. M. get people to the airport. The two of them became a formidable team, one a US veteran and the other an Afghan with deep roots in Kabul. Mujib made calls from the porch of his parents' home, going down the list. "I was telling people, 'Forget about your life. Just run to the airport.'"

Fahim spent his final hours collecting all the diaries he had kept since the fifth grade and through building his career and family. He feared they would be too suspicious if they were found. So he poured diesel on them and set them on fire.

It took hours for our entire group to reach the airport. Already, the Taliban had seized much of the area. Our people gathered in a small parking lot outside the civilian side of the airport as we pushed to get them to the side still controlled by the US military. Mursal and Marwa's family memorialized the moment in a photograph, taken where they were waiting. They understood that this might be their last family picture in Afghanistan.

Many of our people were meeting for the first time, because they had worked for the *Times* at different points over the past twenty years or because of strict hierarchies in their roles. I had never met any of them.

By nightfall, most people had made it to the airport. Thus began an interminable wait. The initial plan was for them to board a charter flight to Ukraine. Fahim led an effort to get forty people in the group on the plane, but it was far from the terminal. There were no gates and no semblance of order. They found a copilot of the plane and arranged to pay a van driver \$500 to take them there, but they could fit only half the group in the van.

"I saw the nervousness in the face of all the drivers," Fahim said. "If the reporters got out, no one will care about us." Time was running short, and it fell to Fahim to make the call. He decided that it wasn't right to

divide the group. They fled from the van into the dark night and sent the copilot on, watching as the plane took off without them. “We tried to make sure that if we were in, everyone should be in,” said Fahim in what became a mantra for our group.

While Fahim had been a trusted *Times* reporter for years, others were amazed to be included in the group. Samira Rustami felt particularly lucky because her husband, Wais, had worked for the bureau for only three months as a handyman, and she had no passport because her mother had destroyed it in one of many fights over Samira’s education. In addition, her marriage to Wais was just nine weeks old. She had a solid command of English but a shaky sense of herself, having cut all ties with her family. A twenty-year-old with a round face, short ponytail, and boyish figure that made her look more like fourteen, Samira remembered being panicked about her fingernail polish should the Taliban storm the airport. Her fear was the dictate of Muslim doctrine that hands be clean for prayers to count as valid, which makes polish problematic. She recalled hearing tales of fighters in the first Taliban takeover yanking off women’s whole fingernails if they found that they were colored. As she sat there in quiet terror, she scratched the polish off her nails as best as she could.

Soon after the sun rose on August 16, Mujib arrived, bringing some thirty loaves of bread from the only store he’d found open. The group was tired and running short of water but basically OK.

With T. M. now in Qatar, Mujib led on the ground. We needed to do two things—to find a plane out of Kabul and, most importantly, get our group to the side of the airport controlled by the US military. To draw them closer to the US side, Mujib moved the group to the foot of the watchtower.

Thousands of people, all desperate to leave, descended on the airport, complicating the evacuation. During the day, the sun baked, and some of the children fainted in the heat, covered in dust and dirt, their cheeks bright red and splotchy.

Mujib was in constant communication with T. M. and Charlie O’Malley, a top *Times* security official who had decades of experience in Afghanistan. The appeals from the *Times* reached all the way to an official at the highest level of the US military, who gave approval to get our group to the US-controlled side of the airport. But his promise held no sway on the ground. “I knew we were in trouble when the junior commander on the ground in

Kabul said, ‘I don’t care who you spoke to on the phone,’” A. G. said. “Even talking to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff wasn’t enough.”

Even worse, David was told by a top US military official that our group had been inside the US terminal for a day, a fact that was easily disproven by the photos of our group outside waiting for help. “I sent them a picture of our people, how to find them. The message comes back: ‘They are already inside the terminal,’” said David. “It was less than stellar. It was incompetent.”

In his more than twenty years at the *Times*, David became best known for his role defending the *Times* from legal challenges and administrations that tried to clamp down on press freedoms. Known as one of the foremost defenders of the First Amendment, David wrote a first-person account in 2019 of the legal battles that had helped shape the *Times*’ coverage of Donald Trump and other national security issues. But David also held another vital and high-pressure role: heading up the security team that was responsible for keeping our people around the world safe. Over years, he had led us through a number of crises, including kidnappings and rescues. Within the *Times*, he was revered for his fierce advocacy of journalists and journalism. As this crisis in Kabul unfolded, we were relying on his sage judgment, as well as Joe’s.

On the ground in Kabul, our group had aroused the suspicion of others because it was clear we were in communication with someone. That became a major hurdle in any plan. If our people were allowed in, how could the US Marines prevent thousands of others from rushing in?

Hours ticked by as various scenarios were debated across time zones. Around midmorning, our group witnessed one of the most horrific scenes of the fall of Kabul, when people desperate to leave clung to a plane taking off, their bodies falling to the ground.

At one point, the Marines suggested that our group walk single file across the runways separating them from the US side. Mujib rejected that proposal as far too dangerous.

Scorching heat had given way to a freezing, jet-black night. Fahim was clutching his infant son, who was crying and hungry. He was still drinking formula, but with no water, they couldn’t mix a bottle.

Another plan was hatched. The group, which now included journalists from *The Wall Street Journal*, would go to the edge of the runway. The US

military would drive a vehicle toward them in hopes of separating the crowd so our group could walk through the opening. To be sure the Marines could identify our exact location, Mujib asked that two little girls in red dresses, the daughters of a *Journal* staffer, sit in the front.

“We can see the little girls. We are going to move toward you with our vehicles in hopes the crowd will move back,” a Marine told Mujib. But the plan went awry. “As soon as the vehicles moved toward us, the crowd kept pushing. They overwhelmed us, and we could no longer maintain the cluster,” Mujib said.



Literally a world away in Columbus, I was rushing to leave the postwedding brunch to drive to Colorado. Eli’s possessions were in storage there, and I was semiobsessed with reclaiming them and helping him put his bed back together. I couldn’t control a single thing at the Kabul airport, but reassembling college furniture was something I could accomplish.

Knowing me well, my husband, Alan Paul, suggested that perhaps he should make the road trip instead while I returned home to keep working on the Afghan situation. But I was determined to show up for a rare mother-son experience, a drive halfway across the country, as well as to help reassemble Eli’s college room. “No,” I insisted, “I want to go. It will be fine.”

Of course, it wasn’t fine. Eli drove for hours on end as I worked the phone.

I learned to call Minister Al-Khater “Your Excellency” and repeatedly asked her for updates. With the situation on the ground becoming ever more dire, some on our team were skeptical of why Qatar hadn’t been able to land the plane.

Minister Al-Khater wrote me to reassure us that they were trying, but the security situation was constantly changing. She stressed that Doha could accept the group only if we had clear plans for their departure from there to other locales. “We are getting requests to evacuate thousands of people,” she wrote. “We need to ensure clear plans for all for security and logistical purposes.”

I quickly wrote back that we had both the documents and a pledge from

Mexico's government to take our group, glossing over the fact that we didn't quite know how we would get them there.

After a full day of driving, Eli and I checked into a hotel in St. Louis, and I got on a Zoom call for an update. Then the unthinkable happened.

When the Marines moved the vehicles toward our group in an effort to create an opening, our group came under attack. A group of us and Joe were live on a WhatsApp call with Mujib, and we could hear screams as people descended on our group, wielding clubs. We could also hear shots. "Oh my God, they are shooting," someone said. A number of us broke down in tears, distraught that we could do so little to help our people, thousands of miles away, even as we listened to them being assaulted in real time.

The temperature extremes, the screaming, "to put in a simple word, it was apocalyptic," Fatima recalled.

Mujib decided there was no choice but to retreat. "This is too dangerous. Someone is going to die!" he yelled to his colleagues. "We have to go home."

The attack forced the group to literally run for their lives, abandoning their possessions. Families were split in the mayhem. Making matters worse, the exit was a narrow passage, and many more people were trying to enter. Mujib worried about a stampede.

Marwa and Mursal's sixteen-year-old brother was beaten until his back bled and then dragged away. He escaped only when his captor began tangling with someone else. The gunfire mercifully appeared to be shots in the air. It was 7 p.m., and the city was pitch-dark as they ran away from the airport into the night.

"People were acting like hungry wolves," said Maryam Alokozay, then a high school senior who should have been taking her midterm exams. "They were going to attack anything they see." Her family managed to find a taxi, but her feet bled from running in heels. She was so scared that she asked the driver to shut off the car lights while she ducked out of sight. Seventeen, with a creamy complexion and a good figure, she knew she was a target. "I was like 'I wish I wasn't born a woman, I wish I didn't have this fair skin, I wish I wasn't pretty,'" she said.

Omar bolted with his father, the bureau's cook, but lost his mother and younger brother, Shabir. It wasn't until the next morning that they learned that Shabir had walked to the hospital for help with a badly hurt hand.

Fahim, running from the terminal, alternated between lifting his son, Aasad, over his head, where he feared he would be hit by a bullet, and pressing him against his chest, where he worried he might suffocate in the crowd.

Listening to it all from the hotel in St. Louis, I sent an urgent plea to Minister Al-Khater to ask if our people could seek refuge in Qatar's embassy. The US had now completely withdrawn from its embassy, and it was not clear where else they could be safe. She responded immediately: our people should go to the Serena Hotel and take refuge there until we could try again.

The anger at the US and Qatar among the *Times* staff was palpable. David, who had been up for days appealing for help, called the US response "shameful." Why was Qatar not able to land the plane? When no one in our group showed up at the Serena Hotel, Minister Al-Khater pressed to know why. It turned out that in the frantic escape from the airport, the message about regrouping at the hotel never reached our people. Now, other groups were pressuring her to access this safe space. I tried to put her off.

After they came under attack, many of our group scattered around Kabul in houses of friends and family. Some hung blankets over the windows to not be seen; there was no water or electricity. Several had been injured. Marwa hid her brother Najim's computers on the roof of their house under a metal covering, recognizing that they held damning evidence should Talibs search their home.

From Qatar, T. M. provided critical assists. He sent a note to John Kirby, then the White House national security adviser, telling him that the US urgently needed to secure the civilian side of the airport. "The Americans did not have enough troops on the ground," he said. He also pushed to get back to Kabul to complete the mission and flew back on August 17.

Eli and I finally made it to Boulder. With no one showing up to the hotel in Kabul, I asked A. G. if I should tell Minister Al-Khater that we didn't need Qatar's help. I didn't want to overstep and understood the frustration on all sides. "No, no," he told me. "They may be the only way."

By that point, I had noticed that the minister had started signing her emails simply by her first name, Lolwah. I considered it a good sign to be on a first-name basis and went for it. I told her that we needed a bit of time but that we would take her up on her offer to reassemble at the Serena Hotel as soon as we could.

As I waited anxiously for updates, I fixated on reassembling Eli's bed. We hauled the pieces out from storage and found the screws, but no directions. It took several tries over two days, searching online for instructions as we tried multiple configurations. I reassured myself that perhaps the bed coming together was a good omen for our group.

It had become clear that the Afghan crisis would be with us for some time. The *Times* needed someone to manage the evacuation and, fingers crossed, the resettlement. Because I was working closely with A. G. and had experience across the company, I was asked to oversee the ballooning project. I was happy to have an official role. I had no idea how it would change my life.

Another Try

AUGUST 18, 2021

On August 18, after three days of urging, Mujib convinced the families to reassemble at the Serena Hotel, a task A. G. described as one of the hardest and most critical of the entire evacuation. “All of the families were scared and in hiding,” Mujib said. By then, Kabul was completely controlled by the Taliban, and only Qatar could provide an escort through the city. Over the course of the day, our group braved their way through Taliban checkpoints using a code phrase: “Qatar One.” At the gate of the Serena, they showed what documents they had to security, matching their names to our list to get in.

Once they were inside the hotel, Mujib was called to the lobby. The Qatari ambassador was in a room nearby, eating a meal with two senior Taliban soldiers. One was a tall, striking commander. They all shook hands and talked. Qatar’s ambassador made it clear to the Taliban that he wanted our group to be given safe passage to the airport and that they needed to make it a priority.

Since Qatar was one of the only countries with a relationship with the Taliban, the request appeared to register. “They knew this was very high profile,” said Mujib. Both sides had skin in the game and mutual interests that would have been utterly unthinkable just days earlier. They came up with a plan. Mujib would ride in a pickup truck with the two Taliban soldiers, ahead of two buses carrying our people, and navigate their way through checkpoints set up across the city to reach—and hopefully get through—the airport gates. The Taliban, long the enemy of the US, was now our best hope.

Just before midnight, our group formed a line inside the hotel. Minister Al-Khater sent me photos in real time from her staff on the ground as our group boarded two tall buses. Charlie had pulled off a miracle in finding the

buses to transport the entire group. This time, each person carried a bag filled with water and some food.

Their journey through the now occupied city was surreal. In the pickup, Mujib sensed that the Taliban soldiers expected him to be scared to be so physically close to them. But he felt strangely calm, realizing that they didn't know quite what to make of him, an Afghan who was fluent in English and had deep roots in two cultures. A native of Kabul, Mujib had attended high school in the US at Deerfield Academy and graduated from Columbia University. Mujib was also fascinated by the tall Taliban soldier, a commander who seemed smart and increasingly vested in their mission.

Once they left the Serena, Mujib stayed on the phone the entire time with T. M. and Charlie, who was coordinating security and logistics from the UK. T. M., who had made it back to Kabul, was stationed inside the airport on the US military side, which we needed to reach to get a plane. Our group initially tried Abbey Gate but found it crowded with tens of thousands of people.

As they were attempting to get into the airport, I was taking a final walk with Eli in the Flatirons behind Boulder before flying home. I tried to be present in the moment, as the trip had been a bonding experience, though vastly different than the one I had envisioned. But throughout our hike, I privately agonized, waiting for any ping on my phone. Nothing. Finally, I texted Joe for an update. "They didn't make it through," he responded.

There wasn't much else to say.

I was blinking back tears when I hugged Eli goodbye, happy for him but drained by what appeared to be our failed effort.

Back on the ground in Kabul, the Taliban commander and Mujib tried another way. With some difficulty, they turned the buses around and headed to a roundabout at a different gate but found it blocked with military tanks. "What if you try to move the tanks?" Mujib suggested to his Talib counterpart. "That's a good idea," he told Mujib.

The commander started calling to try to figure out who from the Taliban was in control of the airport. But as the buses idled, a crowd came up from behind. Other Taliban soldiers started pointing their guns at the crowd to shoo them away. Sensing the mounting danger, Mujib suggested that they get out of there.

While they debated options, the buses circled the airport with their

headlights off to avoid detection. Mujib fretted that they had no plan. Then, the Taliban commander received word about who was in charge of the airport and realized that it was one of his former subordinates. He ordered the tanks moved but was told the official was sleeping. “Then wake him up,” he ordered. “Do whatever you need to do to move the tanks,” Mujib recalled.

As they waited, they stopped at a roadside stand to buy drinks. It was deep in the night. Finally, they received word that at least one of the tanks had been moved. They decided to go for it.

As they approached, another problem arose. The buses were too tall to get through a passage. Mujib decided that the rest of the journey would need to be on foot and ordered that everyone disembark. They ran past a first checkpoint gate to a fountain. But then, the guards at the first checkpoint gate realized what was happening and pointed their guns at the group. Mujib ordered everyone to the ground while he attempted to work it out.

Mujib recalled that the tall commander was athletic and ran across the blast walls of the airport like a gymnast to come to their rescue. He established his seniority with the man at the second checkpoint and explained the plan, saying that he had a list of the people and approval of the Taliban leadership.

The guard at the second checkpoint said, “How do you know the Americans won’t shoot you?” recalled Mujib, who was on the phone with T. M. the entire time.

They reached a compromise—the guy at the second checkpoint would not let everyone through, but he agreed to escort Mujib to the American side, where T. M. was. They wanted to hear for themselves that the group had been cleared. Everyone but Mujib had to lie on the ground, with the other Taliban soldiers keeping an eye on them.

Mujib and the two Taliban soldiers walked toward the Americans. When Mujib saw T. M., he asked if they had a translator. They did not, so Mujib volunteered his services. They suddenly found themselves at the barricade separating the American and the Taliban sides. Everyone shook hands, and the American in charge of the evacuation acknowledged that he had approved the plan. “This is *The New York Times*. We will take them,” Mujib recalled him saying.

There was a bit of small talk and amazingly little tension. They exchanged notes about Helmand Province, where one of the officers standing with them at the barricade had fought. “It was very friendly,” said Mujib. “We had been at war for years. Our people were on the ground. And they were chitchatting.”

Mujib walked back to the group with the list and started calling people to walk through. After more fits and starts, they were finally under the protection of the Americans and were taken to the US side of the airport. It was now dawn—the operation had taken all night.

While I waited for my plane at the Denver airport, my phone rang. It was A. G. “We got them in!” he told me. I was stunned. “Congratulations,” I said. “Are you sure?” I couldn’t believe the turn of events, and my elation grew as A. G. explained how we had gotten the group through the narrowest of openings. I put my head in my hands, unable to believe our good fortune.

Once our group was on the US side of the airport, the relief was fleeting. They waited hours longer as Mujib and T. M. ran around trying to secure a plane out. Much of the day passed before the group was finally given bracelets that served as boarding passes. Everyone else filed out, leaving only T. M. and Mujib.

Suddenly, the two discovered that much of the group had been put on a flight to Pakistan. They panicked and yelled at the officer. “What difference does it make? At least they are getting out of here,” Mujib recalled him saying.

They had to get our people off the plane so they could fly to Qatar, but it was unclear how to identify which plane was heading to Pakistan. There was a line of gray military jets from different countries with people boarding from the back. T. M. and Mujib literally ran from plane to plane, yelling, “Where is this going?” They finally found our group in a darkened plane and hauled them off, acquired new bracelets, and got them on the floor of a packed US military plane to Doha.

“Until we actually took off from Kabul, it was chaos and uncertainty,” said Mujib. “But we kept the group together.”

Before leaving, Mujib spotted members of the Afghan Air Force, who days earlier would have had their own planes. Now they were clamoring to get out, along with everyone else.

Our group never would have been able to leave Afghanistan had it not been for T. M. and Mujib. “T. M. was so brave,” Samira said. “We were being led. He came back from Qatar to help and told the Taliban to let us go.”

Mujib has thought about the elements that came together at that moment. “T. M. had the military experience. I had exposure to these Taliban guys, and we somehow bridged it all.”

In Transit in Doha

AUGUST 19, 2021

Rebecca Blumenstein

We would not have been able to take off without Qatar's approval to land in Doha from Minister Al-Khater. We were in touch with her almost constantly via WhatsApp. They were also stunned by the speed of the Taliban takeover. At a meeting of various ministries to discuss the deteriorating situation in Kabul, they concluded they had six months to prepare. Instead, it happened in a day. "For us, it was all new as well," said Minister Al-Khater. They scrambled to make accommodations for our group in housing being built for the World Cup, allowing us to avoid going through teeming crowds at immigration and days of Covid tests while we worked to arrange a flight to Mexico.

Qatar and Minister Al-Khater would go on to evacuate more than 195,000 of Afghans who were in danger—with a particular eye on young women, whose fate, she feared correctly, would be crushed under another Taliban regime. "For us, it started as a job, and ended up being part of us, a mission," said Minister Al-Khater.

They included more than eight hundred journalists and their families from the *Times*, other news organizations, and groups ranging from the Afghan robotics team to the Afghan National Institute of Music, who fled to Doha carrying only their instruments. They were not allowed to stay in the country, but Qatar's permission to allow them entry was critical amid the chaos.

Minister Al-Khater later reflected on her motivation behind the massive mobilization, when so few other countries came forward. "I take deep issue with the ongoing weaponization of women's rights," she said. "Islam obligates the pursuit of knowledge upon women and men alike. It situates all believers to be equal, regardless of sex and race, with the defining

element between them being good deeds; knowledge, its acquisition, and dissemination, are a form of such deeds.”

Qatar’s efforts gained wide recognition, including from Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist known for defying the Taliban to advocate for the education of girls and the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate, in a post nine days after the fall of Kabul, praising the government for “helping so many people—students, women’s rights activists, journalists, and more—safely evacuate Afghanistan.”

Marwa arrived in Doha still wearing the pink-and-white dress she had ironed for her first day of medical school. The dress was in tatters. When she finally took it off, she rolled it up and put it into her backpack. *I will never throw this away*, she thought.

Samira couldn’t rid herself of the long dress and black headscarf she wore quickly enough. She ducked into the bathroom in the Doha airport and changed into pants and a T-shirt. Once Samira settled into her room, she wadded up her modest garb and used it to wipe down the floor. The room was immaculate, but this was about so much more. “A lot of problems in my life are because of that stupid thing,” she said to Wais, her husband, about the headscarf.

In New York, we were all still absorbing the complexity of our operation. Our group, we learned, included two women who were in the late stages of pregnancy, which meant we probably needed to find a doctor to accompany them to Mexico as a precaution.

We soon learned that Doha and Mexico City are two of the spots farthest away from one another on earth, separated by 8,784 miles. Any flight would require a refueling. And refueling in any country would have to be approved. That was no easy task, we learned, given concerns that refugees could claim asylum during even a brief layover.

“It wasn’t on anyone’s bucket list to get two hundred people out of Afghanistan,” David said sarcastically, long afterward.

Qatar offered a novel solution: a military plane that could get the group to Mexico City. It would still need to refuel, but there was no sign of when we would be able to secure a commercial plane.

We knew we could not simply accept this help from the Qataris, no matter how urgently needed, without providing fair payment for the service. Doing so could create the impression that we were accepting favors from a

government and might raise questions about the independence of our coverage, though our stories about the outsized role this small country plays in world affairs in coming months would leave little doubt of that.

Some of the staff had reservations about working with this country because of its mixed human rights record. Then again, Qatar was one of the only countries stepping up to help evacuate Afghans. Without it, we likely wouldn't have made it through Kabul and into the airport.

We ultimately agreed to the military plane on the condition that the *Times* would repay Qatar. Qatari officials say the money paid by the *Times* was used to fund further evacuations from Afghanistan. It appeared to be the only way to keep our group moving. The flight was set for a couple days later. That afternoon, the families began filing onto buses to head to the airport, and it felt like a big moment.

But we ran into more obstacles. On the first try, Morocco denied us permission to fly over its airspace, which forced us to scrap the planned takeoff. We made plans to try the next day. But as our group was leaving to board the plane, Joe called with an unnerving message: the US government had flagged several of our people for appearing on a terrorist watch list because of alleged contact with the Taliban. We debated what to do. Joe pointed out that we couldn't really vouch for everyone in our group—many of them were family members of our employees. What would happen if something or someone went awry? We decided we needed to be completely transparent.

With the plane idling, I had to call Minister Al-Khater and ask her to cancel the flight. Causing a bottleneck was excruciating when she was so concerned about making room for other refugees. The next day, we got some good news—with a new twist. The US authorities determined that our people had had good reason for contacting the Taliban: they were journalists, and they'd been asking for comment on stories.

We were all still working remotely due to Covid, and I spent many of these days curled up with my phone on a chair in our backyard. I was touched when my eighteen-year-old daughter, Anna, brought me breakfast one morning after I had been up much of the night monitoring the situation.

A third takeoff was set. I had learned not to relax until the plane was in the air. That night, an urgent message from the minister came in at 1:48 a.m. "Can I call?" she wrote. "The pilot is saying he can't fly with two pregnant

women, 8 months and 9 months.” Though we had arranged for a doctor to accompany them, the pilot refused to fly with the women on board. The minister wanted permission to take the pregnant women and their families off the plane. I needed to make a big decision in the middle of the night, without conferring with any of my colleagues. I decided to consent to removing the women and their families, reasoning that it was better to keep the rest of the group moving forward. The two families and their newborns would follow weeks later.

I collapsed into bed when I was told the plane was wheels up, hoping I’d done the right thing. It was August 25, ten days after the fall of Kabul.

Colleagues from the *Times* flew in from around the world to greet our group in Mexico City. Azam; Michael, the international editor; and our team on the ground came up with an ingenious idea: to separate the group into colors, give them tags to wear, and use that as a nonverbal means of communication to organize and direct them, given the language barrier.

Mexican officials had to develop a legal framework on the fly to admit our group in a way that wouldn’t hurt their chance to apply for asylum elsewhere. They were the first of many Afghans to seek refuge in Mexico. “We pioneered it,” said Azam.

Our group landed on the Qatari military jet in Mexico City just past 4 a.m. and departed from the cavernous plane in a daze. A photo captured Marwa in a flannel shirt and bright yellow pants, Mursal in a maxi-skirt and army-green jean jacket-style coat, wrapped in black headscarves and masks, walking down a ramp in sneakers without socks, looking both shocked and exhausted. Marwa had her slouchy black cloth backpack with some pink and red fabric patches slung over her shoulder. Our teams waved red, yellow, blue, and green signs so the refugees knew where to go. They took them to a corporate hotel our team had scouted and were able to give each family their own room.

Many of the families were reeling from the rapid turn of events. Just a couple of weeks earlier, such a journey would have been unimaginable. But they also knew how fortunate they were to get out. On the day our group arrived, a suicide attack at the Kabul airport’s Abbey Gate killed 193,

including 13 US troops, a staggering loss that became a symbol of the botched US withdrawal and underscored the narrowness of our group's escape.

I flew down to Mexico City, charged with answering a difficult question: what next?

All the pressing of the US government by A. G., David, and others had finally paid off: we'd been told we had permission to take our entire group of 124 into the US. The only stipulation was that we had to land in Houston for processing.

But we couldn't leave Mexico without a plan for what to do once we arrived. Anna Nordeen, a talented former musician who was my able assistant, worked day and night to help keep track of it all. Most of my colleagues went back to their day jobs. This became ours.

We learned that Houston is known for its affordability and pride in welcoming immigrants and quickly established contacts through Manny Fernandez, our longtime Houston reporter. We also learned that Afghans who fled Kabul would likely be admitted to the US under a system called humanitarian parole. It had originated decades earlier as a way to admit individuals into the country in extreme circumstances, such as when someone pregnant or ill arrives at a port of entry. After Congress rewrote immigration laws in 1932, humanitarian parole evolved into a loophole for responding to humanitarian crises or pressing political imperatives. President Eisenhower used parole to let in 30,000 Hungarian students and others who were involved in protest activities supported by the CIA. Humanitarian parole was granted to 130,000 refugees from Vietnam after the US withdrawal and was used to bring in Cubans after the Cuban Revolution, but its use receded in the 1980s.

The fact that it hadn't been used in many years meant that even resettlement experts were trying to figure it out. We eventually signed a contract with Catholic Charities, which was willing to take on a group as large as ours and keep them together in Houston.

One night in Mexico, one of our most fabled war correspondents, Alissa Rubin, introduced me to the bureau's cook, Sardar Omar. His wife, Sabra, was in tears as we spoke about the family she'd left behind, and she was clearly traumatized. Sardar told me with great pride about his recipes for both Afghan and Western food that he had cooked for the *Times* staff in

Kabul and lamented that he'd had to leave his beloved recipe book behind in the rush to escape. When I asked him what his favorite thing was to cook, he told me apple pie. Alissa told me it was a favorite of the correspondents who had worked over the years at the bureau, words that made Sardar beam.

On Sunday, August 29, I had my first official meeting with our entire group at the hotel to detail the plan to take the next step of the journey to the US. I was nervous. There was so much I wanted to say to these people, who had abandoned everything they knew. I also worried about promising too much in our efforts to assure them that the *Times* had a plan for them. In the end, I just put it to them simply: "We are happy to let you know that we have confirmed a flight to the United States on Tuesday. Thank you for all of the resilience and strength you and your families have shown during this long journey. You have truly inspired all of us."

Finally, in the wee hours of August 31, our group lined up by color once again for transport to the airport. We had arranged for a charter flight from Mexico City to Houston, where Catholic Charities had buses waiting to take them to an Extended Stay America hotel.

Nothing about the day went smoothly. At check-in, we spent hours haggling over more names that raised more red flags. I was in constant touch with David, who needed to verify each name with US officials once again. The caution was understandable but required a painstaking response. The flight, originally scheduled to take off at 9 a.m., was delayed past 5 p.m. Finally, we got down to one name—a toddler whose name raised flags because it was similar to a terrorist at Guantanamo Bay. David, in New York, spent hours convincing officials that a mistake had been made. Applause rang out when the family with the three-year-old finally reached the boarding gate.

We all felt the significance of the moment when the families started climbing up the steps to the plane, the kids carrying new backpacks they had acquired in Mexico City. A *Times* photographer traveling with us captured one father carrying his young daughter, a look of determination in their eyes. We finally went wheels up and landed in just over an hour. As we finally descended, a girl behind me reached out and stroked my hair, and I tentatively touched her hand.

Our group made history by reaching US soil, among the first Afghans to

make it to the US out of Kabul. Without quite realizing it, we had become one of the largest privately sponsored groups of refugees to make it to the US in modern history.

En route to Houston, we told the group we would stay with them through customs. But those plans vanished when we pulled up to the gate. Immigration authorities ordered the US citizens off and waved us through customs. Each Afghan family was carefully vetted. Most of the group was cleared, though it took close to twenty-four hours, and finally arrived at the hotel, one family at a time.

My introduction to Sardar the cook turned out to be fateful. I was driving to the hotel that night with my colleagues when my phone rang with an unfamiliar number: it was a US customs agent calling to see if I knew Sardar and his family. I pulled over, and we frantically went through the list. I knew so few people in the group, but I recognized his name. When I told the agent that Sardar was our cook and well-known for his apple pie, he and his family were waved through because this detail matched the story he had told them.

The *Times* did a short news story on our arrival, which quoted a note A. G. had sent to all employees. "It is hard to overstate my admiration for the courage and perseverance these colleagues and their families have shown through this difficult journey," A. G. wrote. "They were supported at every step by caring, tireless and at times truly heroic colleagues from around the company, who worked around the clock and moved mountains to get this group to safety and are continuing to do the same for others still on the ground."

Still, I, and we, had no idea exactly what we had gotten ourselves into, taking responsibility for so many lives.

Houston Calling

AUGUST 31, 2021

On the first full day in Houston, sixteen days after the fall of Kabul, our team ran all over town buying electric teapots for each of the families' rooms at the hotel so they could make Afghan tea. There is a sizable Afghan population in Houston, and food and supplies started pouring in. I was amazed by the spontaneous mobilization as word of our group's arrival spread throughout the city.

Later that day, Cynthia Colbert, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, gathered the group outside the hotel to welcome them. Our team, including T. M., joined the group. As had been the case in Mexico, it was mostly the men who gathered, while the women stayed inside.

Fahim, the de facto group leader, offered thanks to *The New York Times* and the agencies. Then, he spoke directly to his Afghan colleagues.

"We have arrived here far faster than we dreamed. We are so grateful," Fahim told the group. "The next steps are going to be a struggle. But it is worth it for the girls and the women, and what they will have in this country that they won't be able to have in Afghanistan. It will be worth it. You must endure."

I met Ardiane Ademi, vice president of Refugee Services at Catholic Charities, who would work most closely with our group. She knew their experience intimately, having been a refugee who had fled from Kosovo years earlier. She described what her organization would do. Immunizations first, and then medical checks as they did intake of each family to determine their needs. They, like all of us, seemed a bit overwhelmed by the size of our group.

While many Afghans were sent to military bases for medical care and resettlement, the *Times* group was allowed in as what's known as private

sponsorship in immigration circles. Sponsorship is a concept that came into being in the US under President Ronald Reagan, following a long practice in countries such as Canada and Germany. The idea is to have companies, religious groups, and individuals, rather than the government, sponsor the cost and take on the responsibility of bringing in refugees. The Afghans were the first wave of this renewed experiment, which would later be deployed with Ukrainian refugees and others.

No one had seen a private sponsorship anywhere near this size in the US. “I’ve never heard of anything of this scale since the passage of the Refugee Act in 1980,” Kathryn Libal, a professor at the University of Connecticut and an expert in private and community sponsorship of refugees, said of the *Times* effort. “This is something very unique.”

Our case didn’t turn out to be a strict case of private sponsorship. The *Times* did not know initially whether our group would be eligible for any government support or we would have to do it all ourselves. But the government did provide funding for Afghan parolees in late October 2021, retroactive to the start of October. The funding was for housing, food, furniture, and some direct assistance. The *Times* supplemented this significantly.

The Wall Street Journal followed a similar route through Qatar and Mexico City. It evacuated eighty-one in a first wave in August to Mexico City and a handful via Kiev; it would eventually resettle the majority of its people in Canada, which also accepted three subsequent waves of our group. All of the refugees spent a considerable amount of time in Mexico City waiting for acceptance to Canada, which required a referral from the US State Department. Canada didn’t give them a say in where they were relocated—some went to far-flung parts of the vast country. But once they arrived, their basic needs, housing, and education were almost entirely covered.

In Houston, I saw incredible acts of generosity and faith. Representatives from the city’s Muslim community dropped off food almost every day. We quickly learned that real Afghan bread, made in a special oven with high heat, is treasured. There was one genuine Afghan bread oven in Houston, at a restaurant called Afghan Village. The owner made it his mission to bring over a hot Afghan meal to welcome the refugees upon arrival.

Dawn Blitz heard about our group from a friend in Houston, and within an hour reached out to see how she could help. She brought supplies and food to the hotel. She kept asking if she could do more and proposed something simple but profound: a trip to a local park that could get everyone out of the hotel. Many of the families had barely left the premises, which were located on the side of a busy road near the Texas Medical Center. At night, when the intense heat of the day lifted, groups would sometimes walk around the parking lot. Catholic Charities said they could provide a bus, and within a few days of their arrival, the entire group got off the bus at Levy Park.

Dawn had asked a group of girlfriends to help, and they quickly mobilized. “I sent a text and it was immediate,” said Dawn.

Initially, the kids were hesitant. But before long, they started kicking around the soccer balls and playing. Dawn remembers noticing the three Rahim sisters and striking up a conversation with them. She observed that their English was better than that of many other women in the group. And she was blown away when they told her what they had done in Afghanistan. One was training to be a doctor (Marwa), one was a lawyer (Mursal), and another already had an MBA (Sosan). “They were accomplished and driven, similar to my girlfriends in Houston,” she said.

Dawn had a bit of a feeling of what it was like to be a newcomer. In 2005, she and her fiancé evacuated New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and were part of a wave of displaced residents who moved to Houston. She recalls feeling totally unmoored but also moved by small acts of kindness. At one point during their journey, a woman in a Kinko’s copy shop refused to let them pay to fax her fiancé’s résumé to various hospitals in Houston as he looked for a job. By the time they arrived in Houston, he had several interviews.

“We were the evacuees that came to Houston,” said Dawn. “So many stepped up and supported us. When this global incident was happening, I knew there were some small ways I could help.”

After the park outing, Dawn regularly checked in to see how she could help and tap her connections. She reached out to local chefs to help find a job for Sardar, the Kabul bureau’s cook. Amazingly, Sardar was hired at the restaurant of a James Beard–nominated chef, one of the first in the group to get an outside job.

Another opportunity came in for Marwa, Mursal, and Sosan. They were dying to feel useful, and the volunteer job was a perfect fit. A Houston couple was gathering clothes and furniture for the sea of arriving Afghans and needed extra hands in their huge warehouse. These refugees came with their lists of needs and stories of months waylaid on military bases, which made the Rahim sisters acutely aware of their privilege in coming with the *Times*.

But we clearly needed help beyond volunteers. I had been flying back and forth, and the *Times* chief legal officer, Diane Brayton, had been reminding me that we needed an expert on the ground. A colleague said she knew of someone who had worked for years with refugees in Houston and connected us.

When I first spoke to Aaron Tate by phone from the newsroom in New York, it was a bit of a disjointed conversation. He wondered why we needed him if the *Times* had already contracted with Catholic Charities. We were a very big group, I explained, and we wanted to make sure the needs of the group were addressed, and then some.

A couple weeks later, Aaron and I met at a restaurant in Houston after a long, steaming-hot day. I had considered canceling, given that I still had no clear idea of the role we needed to fill. But almost immediately, I found Aaron to be a gentle soul and expert who had worked with refugees all around the world, a passion he'd fostered growing up in a church outside Houston. He was a founding member of Caedmon's Call, a Christian rock band with multiple breakout hits, and had written all the songs on their debut album. After several stints abroad, Aaron had settled into a job as a high school teacher, though he longed to get back to working directly with refugees.

Once again, he asked what we were looking for. Channeling A. G., I explained that we wanted "to do a bit more" for our group than the services usually given to refugees. We wanted to be sure they had access to enough resources and support to have a meaningful chance of resettling and restarting their lives successfully in the US.

I knew this was costing the *Times* a tremendous amount, as our group had bypassed the military bases where refugees often go. We also tried to be clear to our group that the support was not open-ended. But for now, the *Times* would shoulder much of the expense, as generous financial support

was seen as critical to its mission.

I shared with Aaron that we needed help to take care of 124 people in Houston, a city where I didn't live—not to mention the next steps we needed to take to get our people out of the hotel. The kids were starting to go stir-crazy and were pulling the fire alarms on an almost daily basis. The group was so big that it felt paralyzing.

“Oh, I get it. You want to be able to sleep at night,” Aaron finally said. “Exactly,” I replied. He then asked what specifically was keeping me up at night, and I rattled off a top-of-mind list: how to get our people out of the hotel into apartments, how long we should support them, how we could push for their work authorization. “OK, then,” he said, “that’s my job description.”

From that moment, we were completely in sync as Aaron began to establish his own relationship with members of our group, who soon trusted him fully. All the issues I listed became our work streams.

After several weeks at the hotel, the group seemed stuck, quite literally. They were unable to find apartments to move to. The large Afghan families, like that of high school senior Maryam, which numbered six, soon to be seven, were part of the challenge due to local ordinances that limited the number of kids per room. Most landlords were turning down our families because they lacked the standard three months of pay stubs, an obviously absurd requirement for our newly arrived group.

I flew down once again, hoping to break the impasse, armed with a letter from A. G. stating that the *Times* would be responsible for the rent. On the morning of September 17, I went out with a group of the men and one of the Catholic Charities managers to press our case. We traveled in a van to a number of apartments. I showed apartment managers the link to the story of the group’s arrival in Houston the month before. At apartment after apartment, many run by corporate chains, they told us they would get back to us. I could tell they were just trying to be polite.

Finally, we visited Woodchase, a low-lying complex with a courtyard and even a playground. It felt like it had potential. I was encouraged that Norma Church, the property manager, seemed genuinely interested in our group’s story. She allowed our entire group of ten to see an apartment, and the father of one of our families burst into a smile, saying it would be perfect for his wife and two young daughters.

By the time we left the leasing office, Norma had found two apartments. She and her corporate management agreed to waive the application fee and security deposit and forgo other required paperwork because they knew our group had arrived with nothing, and the *Times* and Catholic Charities were vouching for them. “These people, they didn’t have anywhere to go,” she said. By the end of the month, due to an all-out push by its painters and maintenance people to ready more apartments, Woodchase had accepted a good portion of our group, ten families, into its beige stucco garden complex. It became their unofficial new community.

The Women Emerge

DECEMBER 2021

Along the way, I met the women, first slowly and then powerfully.

During a visit in December, Aaron and I went to the Woodchase courtyard for a lunch with the families. I caught up with the men, many of whom were anxious about when their work authorization would come through. After a few minutes, Aaron encouraged me to cross an almost invisible line separating the men and the women.

The moment was immediately transformational. With the help of a translator, I quickly struck up a conversation with Fahim's wife, Mina, who always had a broad smile on her face as she managed their young son. I finally got a chance to speak to the cook Sardar's wife, who had been so despondent that night in Mexico City about having to leave her family in Afghanistan.

The women embraced me almost immediately. They appeared much happier than in my glimpses of them from the early days and had clearly formed strong bonds with one another. By the end of the afternoon, we posed for a photo with our arms linked. They asked me to come back more often, and I told them to reach out if they needed anything. I was embarrassed that it had taken me so long to make an effort.

A day later, the *Times* arranged a party. The twenty-six families were now all living in their own apartments and were beginning to get work authorization. We wanted to mark the milestone. We flew in one of the *Times'* best photographers, Meridith Kohut, who came up with the ambitious idea to take a portrait of each family that they could hold on to for years to come. Meridith was spurred to take this on by some in the group who shared how devastating it was to leave their family photos behind when they fled Kabul. Aaron, Anna, and our entire team embraced it, and we picked a spot beside an American flag in the church hall where

we were hosting the party for the photos.

Before the meal, Aaron addressed everyone. He held up a framed five-by-seven black-and-white photograph of a well-dressed young couple standing against a ship railing. “This is a picture of my grandparents in 1947,” he began. He explained that they had just left the island of Cyprus, immigrating to New York in search of greater economic opportunity. Though she didn’t look it in the photo, the woman, just nineteen, was pregnant with Aaron’s mother. She would go on to become a doctor. Aaron said at first, life in the US was very tough for his grandparents. They lived in tiny quarters and struggled with “many of the same challenges you all are facing.” But they worked hard, saved their money, and had three children. The next generation, and then his generation, did even better. “And here I am today, seventy-five years later, telling this story about how their migration made a better life for their kids and their grandkids.” His voice soaked with emotion, he continued, “So imagine seventy-five years from now, your grandchildren holding the photo of you we’re about to take and telling the story of how you had the courage to come and make a better life for your family.”

It was a happy occasion and long afternoon as Meridith and Anna gathered each family for their photo. At one point, the women cleared the floor so they could dance to Afghan music on their own. Soon, the dance floor was full of women, young and old. The men later had their turn.

On the ride back, the families told us they wanted to do something for us at Woodchase. It was a chilly night. But not long after we arrived, the men started fires to grill meat for a feast, with Sardar heading up the effort. The women, despite the long day, retreated and emerged with an incredible spread of rice dishes, salads, and fruits as if they had spent days organizing. The seared meat was added to the table, and it was the perfect meal. More than I had observed before, the women and men came together and sat with our team. Aaron later told us that it meant a lot to the group to be able to host us after all the *Times* had done for them.

Six Months In

FEBRUARY 2022

In February, A. G. decided to come to Houston to meet the group and see their progress for himself.

Aaron, with his years of experience resettling refugees, had warned us that we were entering a difficult period, about six months after their entry. The frenzy of the initial days often gave way to a more sober realization of their new reality. “They are still running for their lives when they arrive,” said Aaron. “In my experience, resettling refugees is pretty much resettling people into poverty. But they are safe,” he said, noting that most of his peers would never put it so bluntly. It’s all about the “long story... for the next generation,” he said.

Aaron remembers having many debates with me on that point, especially when it came to getting the young people back into college. He recalled me saying, “We can do better than that,” and him thinking, *Well, maybe*. He eventually accepted that the *Times* wanted a higher standard and made that the goal.

Aaron obliged us, but he also taught us so much along the way. “Success is not dying. Having a country to call home that you can be a citizen of and enjoy the full rights and protections. We take for granted. I never want to get away from that. Ultimately this is a life-saving operation, getting people out of a situation where they will die to the basics of safety.”

Our group seemed different to us. I could see the youngest children already picking up English from grade school. But I worried about the older kids, who were taking longer to learn English, and college-aged kids like Marwa, Mursal, and Samira, whose entire trajectory would be changed by returning to college in their new country. I grew more concerned when we spoke to a refugee specialist one day who said young refugees often ended up joining gangs. It spurred us on to get them back into school.

A. G. flew in early one chilly morning. I was nervous picking him up. Here was my boss, the millennial publisher of the *Times*, coming to check on our work resettling 124 people. Years of working in newsrooms made me comfortable talking to him about any journalistic or news business matter, but I had absolutely no experience resettling refugees. A. G., of course, knew that and was extremely grateful for our work. But there was a lot at stake here. In perhaps a tell of my nerves, I initially drove us into a parking garage instead of the Houston freeway when I picked him up at the airport. I was far from an expert on the twelve-lane highways that bisected Houston, and I was the appointed driver of the day.

With the help of an interpreter, A. G. sat down with several families, including their children. He asked about their work for the *Times* in Afghanistan, how they were faring in Houston, and their plans for work. I could tell that he was moved. At night, we had a gathering at a restaurant, and nearly every person in our group came to offer their thanks. I stood by his side and introduced them. It was a deeply touching moment for all, especially when A. G. met Najiba Munadi and her two sons. They were the family of Sultan Munadi, a *New York Times* office manager and translator who had been killed in a predawn raid attempting to rescue him and a correspondent for the *Times* from Taliban captivity after they had been kidnapped.

Later, A. G. told us he noticed a lack of progress in learning English, especially among the moms and older women. He was concerned that the language barrier would leave them isolated, a worry Aaron had raised as well. Catholic Charities and local agencies offered some English classes, but transportation across the wide expanses of Houston was an issue. Online classes didn't seem to be taking hold.

A. G. recommended that we set up a class for the women and also offer childcare so the women could have some dedicated time to focus. His suggestion was such a simple but powerful idea that I kicked myself for not thinking of it first. But I was also relieved to have his hand at my back, pushing us to constantly do the right thing to help our people. We immediately got to work to set up the program in two locations.

The Loveliest Purple Slippers

FEBRUARY 2022

The Women in the Group

The next day, I met with the women in two groups. The first gathering was at Woodchase. A number of them were from more traditional families, and several of the women were not literate, which was still common in Afghanistan. But when I asked how many wanted to work, all their hands went up. The women talked about how they had started going for long walks outside, and one had even started running. While they were mourning the extended family and lives they'd had to leave behind, they were amazed that they had the freedom to move around as they wanted and to wear whatever they wanted.

My next meeting was at the apartment of the Rahim family. Our biggest families had settled about twenty minutes away, in apartments that had more space and a bit more independence. Samira came, as did Marwa and Mursal, who, along with their sister Sosan, helped with translating. There were plates upon plates of food, heaped with chicken and aromatic rice, dates, vegetables, and fruit. This time, the women had had even more time to prepare. I had rarely seen a spread like it. Afghans are famous for their hospitality and food, and I was clearly outmatched—whenever I ate something, my plate was refilled immediately.

We eventually settled in a circle of chairs around the room. I started by asking everyone to go around and talk about their lives before Kabul fell.

Gulalai Rahim, with her three daughters looking on, broke down when it was her turn. She didn't speak any English, so Mursal explained.

"My mother was an activist, woman activist," Mursal said, impressively without a translator. "In Afghanistan, it's different, because all mothers do a lot of things for their boys, but they didn't do the same thing for the girl. There was no difference between us and my brothers. She is so proud of her

daughters; all are educated,” Mursal said.

Their mother had worked as a teacher and a school administrator, had run for local office and helped open safe houses for women, and had been a visible and relentless agitator for change for women between the two Taliban regimes. She was high profile, making TV appearances and doing interviews with the BBC. She’d raised her daughters to take advantage of the education and opportunities that had flourished over the years of the US occupation. “Now,” Mursal translated as her mother wept, “all of that work is gone.”

Gulalai said all the hard-fought progress for Afghan women had been erased once again. Since she’d been a child, she explained and Mursal voiced, “I see all other countries, women are living their life, but not ours. In every regime, always, women are oppressed.”

Mursal then interjected her own thoughts, so profound that I didn’t quite know how to reply. “Every regime they come, their all focus is on women. Women should wear hijab. Women shouldn’t work. Women shouldn’t go outside. Women should do this, women this and women that. Women should be in home, she cover herself. They think all problem is women. Why is it always about the women?” she wailed.

Mursal’s life had been defined by two Taliban regimes, and she explained to the group that she didn’t understand their opposition to educating young girls like her. “I was born twenty-five years ago. I born in war, I raised in war, and now I leave my country in war,” she told the room.

But she also spoke about the well-known resilience of the Afghan people. “We should say Afghanistan people is the most strong. Whenever we fall down, we keep getting up. Our people are not perfect in any way, but they are survivors for so many years.”

The sisters spoke about the relief that they had been able to escape, mixed with sadness and guilt about those they’d left behind. Mursal was in touch with friends who could barely leave their homes. “They say, ‘Mursal, you are so lucky.’ When I post something sad, they said, ‘Mursal, you should be happy, you are in safe country in US.’ I say to them, ‘Our body is safe, but our soul is not. Our soul is still in our country.’”

In that moment, I realized that we had inherited an obligation to help them make the most of their newfound freedom here in America. It wouldn’t be perfect, but it would be far better than the conditions their

friends and family members were facing in Afghanistan. Gulalai had left five of her seven sisters behind in Kabul.

But in a rhythm I would soon learn with our group, the mood didn't stay somber for long. The Rahim sisters figured out that it was Anna's birthday. We had celebrated the night before with our core team, which now thankfully included Steven McElroy, the *Times*' head of operations, and Paul Moon, his deputy.

Anna had quickly become a confidante of many in the group, the young women attracted by her kindness, sense of style, and ability to juggle so much at once. With little notice, a gorgeous cupcake with a candle saying "Love" emerged for her. Anna was embarrassed by all the attention. She had complimented Mursal on the fuzzy purple slippers that she was wearing. Mursal was so flattered and adoring that she pushed Anna to take the slippers with her, but after a good long "Take them" and "No, I couldn't" battle, Anna won out and left them with their rightful owner.

This is the story of some of the last free women of Afghanistan.

PART II

IN AMERICA

YEAR ONE

Do I Even Have a Future?

SEPTEMBER 2021

Marwa

Marwa's first weeks in Houston were a blur, so much so that she struggles to remember many details now. She recalls not a feeling but a lack of feeling, a nothingness so intense that her limbs sometimes felt numb.

She arrived with her family at the Extended Stay America hotel after midnight, almost twenty-four hours after starting the day in Mexico City. In those early days of living at the hotel, she slept much of the day. All the Afghans in the group did. "It just felt all, like, fake," she said now. "How was it possible that in one month, our life completely changed? We didn't know if we should cry or we should be happy."

Normally a ringleader with an infectious smile and peppy affect, in Houston, she was often expressionless, walking around in ill-fitting donated clothes. In her family of three daughters and four sons, she was "the sibling each of the other siblings was most likely to call their favorite, and my parents too," as her sister Mursal once joked. Now she found it almost impossible to live up to that reputation, even as she knew she had to try.

For Marwa, the momentary burst of relief, of hopefulness, at having gotten out of Kabul was morphing into something darker and foggier. *Now what?* she fixated over.

It was hard for her to stomach the fact that had things not collapsed in Afghanistan, she would have been four semesters from completing medical school and beginning her practical rotations at a hospital. Now, she feared, the closest she was to her lifelong dream of becoming a cardiologist was living in a hotel three-quarters of a mile from the Texas Medical Center.

Three or four hours would slip by with her in a trancelike state, fingers sweeping across her phone screen as she consumed social media, following every Taliban edict and distress posting. She was texting with friends on

WhatsApp, particularly her best friend in Afghanistan, Karishma, writing some iteration of the same sentiment over and over: “It will be OK. Taliban will go. We will be free again.” At the time, she believed that.

After several weeks of this doomscrolling, she deleted all of her social media apps. In the years ahead, she would occasionally redownload the apps, then delete them again when despair overwhelmed her.

Mealtimes were the most depressing part of the day. The Rahims had always been a spirited bunch when eating together, constantly interrupting each other in a friendly competition for airtime. Now the nine of them sat on the floor in one of their two rooms, one for men and one for women, foil pans of halal food laid on towels, in eerie silence. “Only if they asked a question, we’d answer,” Marwa said. Maybe they felt that simply puncturing the void would make the situation feel real, and they were still hoping they were dreaming.

“We argued so fast,” Marwa said, though she can’t even recall about what in particular.

Some in *The New York Times* cohort were struggling emotionally. One mother went to the ER with shortness of breath and high blood pressure, fearing she might be having a heart attack, but her tests came back normal. A clinician diagnosed panic attacks and prescribed her Zoloft. Several new mothers battled what looked like postpartum depression. It seemed that many of these newly arrived Afghans faced some level of PTSD.

Marwa worried about her sister Sosan, who was a newlywed. The thirty-one-year-old former math teacher with a narrow face, who had proudly instructed girls from rural areas, now had her husband thousands of miles away in Turkey, and no sense of when she might see him. Their nikah, the Islamic marriage contract and ceremony that legalizes the union, had occurred over video in February 2021. Remote weddings are not unusual in Afghanistan; in this case, the video ceremony was due to Covid travel restrictions and their wish to not further delay. He was teaching high school near Ankara, so they were formally engaged and married before they ever met in person. They had a chance to spend only a short time together in Kabul before she had to leave.

Her sister Mursal, the recent law school graduate, who had frustratingly received her first request to interview for a legal assistant job on the very day Kabul fell, was grieving the Taliban’s obliteration of the Afghan legal

system. (She had forgotten about the interview email in the chaos and remembered only after a few days in Houston, which made the sting of her lost career even more painful.) Her degree was effectively useless. “All the law I studied doesn’t exist,” she said. “There is no anything.” The reasoning for doing away with the existing system was that the Taliban had pronounced that it wasn’t Islamic. Mursal knew that was a fabrication. “We had to know the roots. It *was* Islamic. It *was* sharia.”

Marwa’s constant state of stress was causing her skin to break out. She was reliving scenes from the escape: a mother covering her baby’s ears each time shots rang out; militants clubbing her little brother with their rifle butts; a moment at the airport when the Taliban descended and she was certain her family would be killed on the spot. “I want to forget it, but I can’t,” she said. “I don’t even write about it in a journal.” Her older sisters were taking sleeping pills. They were having group sessions that Catholic Charities called “culture bumps,” which covered topics from ATM use to 911 calls to funeral costs in America. Daily life felt surreal.

Early on, Marwa and her family’s only outings were for their endless appointments: intake with resettlement case workers, immunizations and TB tests, sign-ups for Social Security numbers and SNAP. Marwa, her mother, and her sisters eventually ventured further afield, taking trips to Walmart and Target. Their hotel was surrounded by a web of highways, so they walked along the busy roads, cars speeding by at 70-plus mph. They had never encountered a crossing signal before, so they were confused when they did. In those days, they carried their IDs with them whenever they went out, fearful of being stopped by police. “Mursal and I acted like we were illegal, always with our passports in our pockets, even just to go to the driveway of the hotel,” Marwa said.

As they walked the superstore aisles with their oversized cart, the items looked strange and the prices shocking. They sought out rice, potatoes, milk, and onions. They could have bought thirty loaves of bread back home for the cost of one here. At these big box stores, packaged quantities, ironically, didn’t seem large enough to feed their family of nine. They were used to buying chest-high sacks of rice and crates of vegetables, which they stored in their basement to have food on hand in case a security situation shut the stores for days. Trying to navigate auto-checkout was another adventure. But they were pleased to be figuring things out, taking baby

steps forward. Loaded with heavy bags, they'd walk the thirty-five minutes back to the hotel.

As fall turned to winter and the haze in Marwa's head began to dissipate, she increasingly mourned the medical career that it now seemed she would never have. Whenever Marwa and Mursal raised the subject of continuing their education, the resettlement folks were discouraging. They were young women from a sophisticated and prominent family, daughters of a university physics professor and firebrand feminist mother, highly ambitious and poised to become standouts in their fields. But as Aaron Tate said, "It's really not the model, or even recommended, to go straight into college upon arrival. The reality is there is no money. People need to get working and figure out how to pay for themselves." In the frantic exit, Marwa had left behind most of her school transcripts and certificates. The credits likely wouldn't have transferred anyway—the differences in the two education systems were vast. The younger students in the *Times* cohort had it easier. They could simply enroll in public elementary and secondary schools. High school graduates were the tougher category. They'd been told they would likely need to pass the GED exam to apply to college, and that would be difficult. College was impossibly expensive, and there was the need to immediately earn money. Marwa and her siblings would have to collectively be the primary breadwinners to help the family survive.

As much as being sponsored by the *Times* made their circumstances easier, Marwa feared she would never figure out a way back to college.

Do I even have a future? she agonized on loop. Marwa tried to convince herself that this was not the worst thing. She was rueful but resigned. *Will I have to be a shopkeeper?* she thought, her future as a doctor fading away.

Have Someone to Love

SEPTEMBER 2021

Samira

There was so much Samira needed to break free from. Almost all of it stemmed from simply having been born a girl in Afghanistan.

Samira's mother had prayed six times for a boy, and five of the six times, she had been unlucky. She felt that girls were a wasted investment. They grew up, married, and left home to care for their husbands' families. Samira's mother deeply resented having to raise all those girls, nothing but mouths to feed, draining an already strapped family. When her anger boiled over, she could be abusive. "It's not like spanking," Samira said. "We have injuries." Samira and her sisters were treated like housemaids, or worse. She remembered wishing, praying, to be a boy.

Above all else, Samira was desperate to read and write. She was born smart, feisty, and industrious. She knew school was the key to a better life. Despite a new emphasis on education for girls in Afghanistan emerging with the American occupation, it was not supported in her family. Her mother went so far as to burn Samira's books.

Samira will never forget a day when she and her younger sister Nasima were eleven and ten, huddled around the stove. Samira, the natural student, was helping Nasima learn to read and lost patience. "What is wrong with your brain? Go away and learn the words!" Samira barked. As she pushed her sister from the room, her mother stormed in. "You don't deserve to study, either of you!" she screamed. She was so annoyed to find her daughters bickering over schoolwork when they should have been cleaning that she grabbed their books and tore out thick handfuls of pages. She pulled open the woodstove door and shoved the papers inside. She told Samira her school days were over; there was no need for girls to study.

But Samira was a rebel, her defiance forged from necessity. She found

her way back to school, choosing to disobey her mother and suffer the consequences. After finishing high school at sixteen, she applied, in secret, for a scholarship she discovered while scrolling on Facebook to study at the University of Gujarat in India. When Samira revealed that she'd been accepted, her mother was adamant that she couldn't go. Samira was surprised when her uncle pressed her mother to allow it and even helped with the arrangements. She studied in India from 2017 to 2020, earning her BA in business administration. She loved her independence there and slowly began to develop her own identity. Her only concern was that her three young sisters, the baby only one and a half when she left, would forget her.

Samira believed her mom feared her daughters becoming better educated than she was. Samira's mother was not literate, with no schooling past fourth grade. "She wouldn't then be able to control us," Samira said. Samira attributed her mother's cruelty to being "mentally not right." In Samira's eyes, her mother's bile seeped up from her own painful childhood. Samira's mother had grown up in impoverished rural Bamiyan Province. Her father had two wives, so Samira's mother was raised by two different mothers. The woman who was not her biological mother treated her terribly. "That lady was worse than my mom. Whatever she did to her, she's doing to us," Samira said. Samira's mother was largely responsible for the care of her twelve siblings. Made to feel worthless, she in turn treated Samira and her sisters similarly.

Samira was fourteen when she met the person who would take her away from such dysfunction, though she did not know this at the time. She and Wais Rustami were introduced at a family wedding by their mothers, who were close friends. The families were also distantly related. Wais's mother told him that Samira was a top student. Wais joked that he was the bottom student. Before the evening was over, Samira offered to help him with his studies.

Wais, who was one year older, compact like Samira with the same narrow eyes and a mischievous smile, was immediately smitten with the bookish brunette. She was sassy yet sincere. "I was trying to catch her," he said about their first tutoring session.

"It turned out he learned nothing," Samira said, deadpan. "He's still struggling." But over the years, a friendship formed.

When Samira was preparing to leave for India in 2017, Wais accompanied her on the bus to the passport office. “She was too short to reach the measurement bar when they needed to take her height,” he said with a laugh. “She is still the size she was then.”

During her first two years away, Wais and Samira kept in casual touch, mostly just comments on each other’s social media. Samira was careful not to lead him on. But during her third year, their communication shifted. As they shared about their daily lives, a deeper affection grew.

In Kabul, Wais had just turned nineteen, and his marriage was on his family’s mind. He told his father he only wanted to marry Samira. His mom had noticed his months of whispering into the phone. She’d figured out he’d been talking to Samira. “They knew,” he said, laughing. “They have CIA everywhere.”

Still, Samira was shocked when she answered her phone one night in India, and Wais’s mother and aunt were on the line. They had called to ask if she’d consider marrying Wais. “No! He’s like my brother,” she screeched. “He’s too young. Let him study!”

But while that was Samira’s public stance, she and Wais were falling for one another. Across the miles, they committed to a shared future. Wais has a tattoo of a black crown on the inside of his right wrist, and Samira got the same image put on hers plus 7-22-20, the date of their promise to one another to be together. Samira can no longer recall the exact meaning of the crown, just that it was trendy among teens then. She knew it would be futile to hide the tattoo from her mom when she returned home from India, so she didn’t try. Of course her mom was furious and accused Samira of being out of control. If her mom had discovered that the tattoo matched Wais’s, “she would have killed me for sure,” Samira said with certainty.

Tattoos are haram, meaning forbidden, in many interpretations of Islam because they alter the body Allah created. So getting one was a decided act of rebellion, an expression of Samira and Wais’s shared disapproval of societal constraints. They were already fantasizing about a life beyond Afghanistan, where “you never can be yourself, ever,” as Wais put it. Wais told Samira, *Someday, when we’re engaged, we’ll escape this place.*

When Samira returned from India, Wais met her at the airport. He was shocked by the transformed college graduate, in pants, with no scarf, “like a Western girl. Like she came from Europe or maybe the USA,” he said.

There was no kissing or hand-holding in the taxi ride home from the airport.

“God, no!” Samira said with a squeal. “That driver would pull over and slap you. Everybody’s police. Everybody’s God. They are going to tell you it’s a big sin. The only way they can correct you is to beat you up.”

Samira didn’t think anything more had to happen between them just then. She wasn’t ready for the responsibilities of marriage, particularly cooking and caring for Wais’s family, as would have been expected. She was planning to get a master’s in economics, ideally in Kazakhstan. She already knew they’d be together, so she felt no urgency to formalize their relationship.

But immediately after her return, Samira’s mother started pushing her into marriage. Samira’s parents still didn’t know she and Wais were in love. Their union needed to appear to be arranged, so Samira didn’t let on. Wais, though, had confided in his father and had him approach Samira’s parents. In Afghan arranged marriages, the man’s family must pursue a potential bride, never the reverse. Wais feared he’d lose Samira if she went abroad again to study. Samira was suddenly so modern, so progressive, wearing shorts, casually hugging family and friends, even boys.

The formal process of engagement began. This involved a very long day of Wais sitting in Samira’s family living room with both sets of parents, drowning in tea. Finally, he and Samira were permitted to sit alone together for one hour. They were supposed to be voicing what they each wanted from the marriage. Neither could be serious. “I told him to bring his résumé so I could see if he meets the requirement,” she said, laughing.

Even among the *Times* group of Afghans, Samira and Wais felt like outsiders. Wais was brand-new in the Kabul bureau when they evacuated. When whispers started around the office about a plan being hatched to get all Afghan employees and their families out, several coworkers told Wais he was likely too new to be included. But he pushed to go. Even after he arrived in Houston, he felt that some in the group talked down to him.

Among those who knew Samira and Wais’s backstory, they were affectionately deemed “the love couple,” a rare instance of having been sweethearts before marriage. But this was another aspect of the pair being

an island. They were strikingly modern in their affect and attitudes, equals in the relationship, more American-seeming than Afghan.

Samira and Wais are ethnically Hazaras, a group of Shia Muslims that is considered a persecuted minority despite being one of the largest ethnic groups in Afghanistan. This identity is visibly apparent in their distinct facial features. Hazaras descend from Mongolian ancestry—some histories say from Genghis Khan—with a centuries-long pattern of being outcasts within Afghan society, at times subject to slavery, forced displacement, and genocide.

In a region of the Muslim world where a conservative and patriarchal version of Islam dominates, the Hazaras typically hold more liberal views, including support for women's education and ethnic tolerance. As a result, their commitment to Islam is often doubted. "Because Hazara people are letting their daughters go to school, their daughters are 'bitches' or 'sluts,'" Samira said. In 1998, the Taliban brutally killed thousands of Hazaras, violence that included child beheadings, mutilations, and rapes. Being Hazara was an identity Samira and Wais couldn't escape as long as they were among Afghans.

After one month at the hotel, the young couple were happy to move into their own apartment. They deliberately picked a place nowhere near where others in the group were looking to rent.

Samira was desperate to continue her education, which she believed was the path to a well-paid career. Her hope, since she'd have to backtrack and return to college, was to pursue nursing or medicine. Medicine had been her goal when she'd left for India, but her scholarship would not cover medical school, which was pricier. After arriving in Houston, she tried to enroll in a nearby community college, initially to take college prep courses and English and then transition to nursing. But unfortunately, the school was at capacity, as were the many local community colleges. All she managed to register for was a class in study skills and time management.

She quickly lost hope of continuing her higher education. "I did the research; it's too expensive. OK, who's going to pay the \$60,000 again?" she said with a loud sigh.

Amid such alienation, Samira thought about babies. A baby would dull her pain. A child would provide instant purpose. She would right the wrongs of her childhood. She would be the mother she should have had.

Samira's wedding in June 2021 had been the breaking point with her family. Just before, her mother had tried to sabotage the union. She'd decided Samira needed to marry a wealthy, older man. She'd told Wais's family horrible lies about Samira, even saying she'd been promiscuous in India. But Wais went far out on a limb with his commitment, risking his own and his family's reputation. He told his father that it was a bald-faced lie. Wais's father supported him.

After their wedding, Samira and Wais felt immediate pressure to start a family. As soon as a marriage happens in Afghanistan, a baby is expected. "Because otherwise everyone will talk: 'Maybe there is some problem,'" Samira said. She declared that the overriding purpose of Muslim life is "to explode the population" of Muslims.

But the newlyweds knew they weren't ready. Wais was in his new job as a dishwasher and handyman at the *Times* bureau. Samira was working long hours managing the maintenance group at Kabul's poshest hotel, the Serena—the same one where Qatar had reassembled the group before their hasty exit. She was reeling from all her family trauma. Though she and Wais were not using birth control, "we were very careful," Samira said.

Within six weeks of touching down at George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, by mid-October, Samira was pregnant. They'd decided to stop being careful. She was twenty, and Wais was twenty-one.

Samira wished for a baby girl. With a daughter, she could write a new story of Afghan girls.



Samira was not alone among the women in the *Times* group in contributing to the population boom at this vulnerable juncture. By the end of the first year, the group of 124 had become 132. Each of those babies was a US citizen.

The first signs of Samira's pregnancy were nausea and reflux. Much of what she ate came back up into her throat in putrid, acid form. But she didn't yet have a doctor to help her. Catholic Charities worked diligently with every family to apply for Medicaid benefits, but the coverage took some time to kick in.

Samira had never held a drugstore pregnancy test. They exist in

Afghanistan, but not for people as poor as Samira's family. She and Wais ventured to CVS and bought one, and later she peed on the stick. After three minutes, the second pink line appeared in the circular window. But she didn't believe the result. Even a second pee on the second stick in the box that revealed the same definite parallel pink lines didn't convince her. "It just came out true, but I was not believing," she said.

By early spring, she was frequently throwing up. All she could tolerate were watery foods like watermelon, lettuce, and apples. Naturally, she wasn't gaining weight. At one point, Samira was hospitalized after barely eating for five days. She lay hooked up to an IV pumping her full of fluids. Tests revealed *H. pylori*, a bacteria common in Afghanistan, typically from contaminated food or water. She was prescribed pills to help, but they usually came right back up after she swallowed them.

Samira and Wais were working the types of jobs that are available to new immigrants. Samira entered license-plate data for the toll authority rather than pull all-nighters at an Amazon warehouse, her other option. Wais sold cell phones. They were periodically sending a few hundred dollars to Wais's family in Kabul, a considerable sum given how little they were making and their needs.

At her five-month appointment, the sonogram technician noticed a blur on the fetus's head. When the technician explained that the doctor wanted to test a bit of Samira's amniotic fluid to understand if there was a problem, Samira refused. Her modern outlook only went so far; she was still a product of her provincial upbringing, wary of medical intervention and overdiagnosis of problems. Plus, "I was committed to taking care of her either way. I was halfway through my pregnancy," she said.

That Samira wasn't thinking about how a baby might complicate her already precarious launch in a strange land reveals that having a child wasn't a rational, reasoned decision. The act was primal, a need to feel moored.

Becoming “GPA”

SEPTEMBER 2021

Maryam

Maryam had always dreamed of coming to the US for advanced training after medical school. The high school senior entering her final semester knew the specialized research and clinical opportunities in America were unrivaled. So once in Houston, she immediately had the giddy notion, *Wow, here I am now in the US, even ahead of my plan!*

She laughs now at how naive this first thought was, but it was fitting. She was single-mindedly intent on wielding a scalpel. She had been focused on America and its opportunities long before she landed there. Maryam had routinely been one of the top three students in her class in Afghanistan.

But she was far from the kiss-up, rule-follower kind of striver. She was a study in contradictions: a classic dark beauty with thick lashes and high cheekbones, yet not particularly feminine, often dressed not to be noticed in a denim button-down or flannel shirt and jeans, black scarf around her head. She held herself like she was almost apologetic about her very presence, yet she was unfiltered and willing to swear.

As a child, Maryam learned Pashto, Dari, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. She intended to be formidable, like her aunt, a busy Kabul ob-gyn; her grandfather, a surgeon; and her rebellious grandmother, whom she said she was most like. Her grandmother had no issue with directing her husband, which is unheard-of for an Afghan woman. “Just like me, she doesn’t care at all. She just says it,” Maryam said. Maryam’s earliest inkling of her wish to pursue medicine was a drive to hold the most prestigious, well-paid profession available to women in her society. Just like Samira, much of her struggle derived from the fact that she was born a girl. She’d always felt she had something to prove.

Within days of landing in Houston, at age seventeen, Maryam became

fixated on three letters she'd never heard used together: GPA. Grade point average seemed to be the key to the most pressing issue weighing on her: how to get herself to a top American university so she could get on with becoming a neurosurgeon.

She knew absolutely nothing about the American education system, but she quickly intuited that one's GPA determines everything. GPA decides whether you go to college, where you go, and, as far as she could tell, how your whole life turns out.

Suddenly, "GPA" was dropping out of Maryam's mouth every other minute.

"Colleges all ask for the GPA," she told her mom.

I wonder what GPA is required for Harvard University? she thought, clicking around the school's website.

"I just know I will have more than a 3.5 GPA, because I have always been top of my class," she boasted to her brother Abu.

"The GPA gets added up at the end of high school for all four years," she lectured her dad.

Within a few days, she'd earned herself a nickname. "I was always saying 'GPA this' and 'GPA that,' so they called me GPA," Maryam said.

Maryam's energy around getting back on track scholastically was a welcome development. Early on in Houston, her whole family walked around like zombies. It was almost as if they'd shut down their brains so the circuitry wouldn't melt down in stress overdrive. "I felt like a robot," she said.

In Kabul, Maryam had gone to bed feeling excited for the next day. She experienced hardships as motivation. She'd lie there imagining how proud her family would be when she was accepted into Kabul University. When she lay down to sleep in Houston, she now recalls, "I was just blank. I was not happy. I was not sad. I was just empty."

She yearned for her past, her Afghanistan. "It's never gonna be cured," she said. "It's never gonna be the same. Even with all of the badness, I love it with all of my heart and soul. That's my country." Her face turned solemn. "It all got ruined just in one day."

She imagined her life as a series of sandcastles. "You build it, and a wave comes, and it just drowns everything," she said. "And you have to rebuild it and then hope that another wave won't come, but then again, it's

the wave, right?”

Sometimes Maryam felt like punching things so she'd feel pain, just to *feel*. She could get mean. “I speak venom,” she said, “so you could hurt the amount that I'm feeling hurt.” Other days, she couldn't speak at all. “I find a spot that nobody can see and I just sit there and stare at the wall and think and think. Finally, I get so tired that I have no thoughts going through my head, so I just go to bed.”

She hated how people were always telling her how lucky she was to be in America. Of course she knew that, and felt incredibly blessed, but her emotions were also more nuanced, a jumble. “The feeling when someone tells you that you should be grateful when you have lost everything. It just kind of boils my blood, like, am I supposed to be grateful to be thrown out of my life, go off balance that I worked sixteen years to find?” The same went for other young women in the group. There were moments when they did not know how to square their odd mix of extreme good fortune and unimaginable loss.

Maryam's sense of being ahead of schedule quickly evaporated in Houston. Her dad didn't have work. Her mom didn't, either, and would now be caring for a newborn. (She learned only after reaching Houston that she had arrived pregnant.) Maryam had no idea how she'd pay for college, much less medical school. The family had only a few months of resources to sustain them. “There is no one empty in our home,” she said, reflecting on life in a family overwhelmed by struggle.



In late October, Maryam's mom brought her to Stratford High School in suburban Houston, completed some paperwork, and left her there. Maryam was starting the year late because it had taken her family time to find an apartment, and the school district required a permanent address for enrollment. Stratford was a massive campus, with a large enough student body to field three football teams. On her first day, Maryam managed to find her classes and the cafeteria, but she missed her bus. She walked home, which she remembers as daunting, given how unfamiliar she felt.

The plan was for Maryam to start in tenth grade until administrators could assess which of her credits would transfer. It was a demoralizing step

back. She was a solid English speaker because classes had been taught in English at her private secondary school. Her English was so good that Aaron deemed Maryam the strongest speaker in their group of 124 people. She was scheduled to take the Kankor exam, Afghanistan's university entrance test, in December 2021. She still wonders how she would have done.

One month after she started at Stratford, Maryam had a meeting with her guidance counselor. She'd called Maryam to her office to discuss the transfer of her credits.

"I'm sorry," the woman began.

The moment Maryam heard that, she cast her gaze downward and traced the grain patterns in the desk. "We could not accept many of your courses, so you'll remain in tenth." Trying to sound perky, the counselor added, "You won't be a freshman, but you'll be a sophomore."

Maryam felt herself growing warm and started to cry.

She sat murmuring occasionally but uttering no words for several minutes. The counselor tried to console her, but Maryam remained icy. She was prideful and was not in a state to consider that maybe the counselor believed that she wasn't adequately prepared to be a junior and was acting in her interest. Eventually, she slid out of her chair, grabbed her bag, and left.

She felt her motivation seep out of her like a taut air mattress with a fresh puncture. Her identity as an overachiever had been erased, along with her country. The feeling, she said, was of "your whole social status being wiped out. In America, now nobody knows you. Your grandfather wasn't a surgeon; your dad wasn't a journalist. I was not the honor student. Being an immigrant, you realize how much things in life can be taken away in a matter of seconds."

So much of her drive to achieve was to elicit pride among her community. Without the prize of external validation, she felt her inner fire dimming. She'd rarely considered how status-seeking governed her life. Only when that fell away did she recognize its power. "I might be making a life here, but my existence was back home," she said. "When I moved to the USA, that was a hard thing to think—that I don't really matter."

Maryam got herself back to class. She rarely cried, but she couldn't get hold of herself. She hated Stratford. *I hate having to repeat one grade, let*

alone three; I'll be bored out of my skull having to go to school with such young students, she thought. Because the semester was so far underway when she started, she wasn't allowed to enroll in the AP science courses that interested her. Instead, she'd been put in music appreciation and business management.

When Maryam was given a chance, her teachers were dumbfounded by her capabilities. They didn't expect her level of language sophistication. Her English teacher thought enough of her talent to be demanding, sometimes forcing her to revise assignments four times before she'd issue Maryam a grade. By the end of the year, Maryam was a whiz with topic sentences and supporting evidence and was editing her own writing. She found it funny that people swooned when they found that she could work algebraic equations.

"I'm living like a cat's life," Maryam said, fuming. "I have to relive it like seven times."

Her dad would remind her that it didn't matter that she had to restart; the more she trained in high school, the easier college would be. He was so adamant because his kids' future, and most pointedly his two daughters' futures, was the reason he had left Afghanistan. Maryam believed he could have stayed and muddled through, and Maryam's older brother Abu could have gone abroad to study. "But for me, that would have been ten times harder. Yes, mostly because of me and my sister," she said about her father's motivation to come to the US. Her little sister, Hasinat, was seven.

Maryam finished the school year at Stratford but didn't make a single friend. She never tried to fit in. "They ask, 'Have you played this video game?'" she said. "I never played a video game. 'Do you like art?' 'What are your hobbies?' I never had time for any of that. 'Oh, do you go to the movies?' I'm not in a place to go to the movies."

She insisted she didn't need friends, which became a common refrain. She was the opposite of her one-year-older brother, Abu, who quickly had a posse at Stratford and at his job at the Cheesecake Factory, where he'd become one of the first in the *Times* group to be employed. Maryam maintained that she was so stubborn and opinionated, she would never be swayed by others' input, so why did she need companionship? She claimed that she didn't get lonely, didn't mind eating alone, didn't feel the urge for fun or company or to feel deeply connected or understood. If she needed

something, she said, she'd seek out the school counselor.

"It's like when you get into a prison, and you're not interacting with people because you are just thinking you need to escape," she said.

Despite the tough persona she telegraphed, these pronouncements revealed a sense of vulnerability, a fear of rejection. At times, she admitted, she took herself out before seeing how she might fare. Her reluctance, her self-protective instinct, did not come from being an outsider in America; she had always been this way. As she put it, "I just outcast myself from everything."

A Desperate Appeal

MAY 13, 2022

Rebecca

In May, we gave Mursal a unique invitation. The extended Ochs-Sulzberger family, which has controlled *The New York Times* since 1896, was gathering at the *Times* offices in Manhattan for the annual meeting of the various generations, an event known as the Family Assembly. The Ochs-Sulzbergers are one of the last founding families of the nation's newspapers to retain their ownership, and their steadfast support has preserved the *Times* as an independent news organization, a point of great distinction. A big part of their success has been staying united as a family through the generations.

The *Times*' evacuation and resettlement of the Afghans had been one of the defining events of the previous year. Sam Dolnick, a deputy managing editor and family member who had founded *The Daily* podcast, asked me to convene and moderate a panel discussion, along with David.

It was obvious that an Afghan woman should be on the panel, as they best represented the stakes of this whole endeavor. Mursal had emerged as the most poised and articulate in the group and was an obvious choice. David and I decided that the Afghan journalist and group leader Fahim should be there as well, along with the bureau's legendary fixer in Kabul, Fakhruddin Shoaib, who rode alongside Mujib and the Taliban during the evacuation. Shoaib had recently been hired as a security guard at the *New York Times* building.

Just before the panel, I planned a trip to Houston with my assistant, Anna, to check on the group and then fly back to New York with Mursal. Traveling to New York would be a big step, as she had never been anywhere without her family. Mursal seemed a bit nervous but was happy to sit next to Anna on the plane. The two had such a strong bond that it

almost felt like they were sisters.

We landed after dark and drove to my house in Maplewood to stay the night. I was intent on being a gracious host to Mursal, as the Afghans had continually been to me in their apartments in Houston. Alan, my husband, cooked us a nice pasta dinner. But unfortunately, I hadn't had any chance to buy treats for my guests since I'd been away in Houston. I did my best, serving tea and scrounging for any snacks I could use to create a platter of the sort Afghans habitually serve guests. All I could find were nuts, a few dry Fig Newtons, and one small mochi ice-cream round, which I cut in pieces. It was a paltry offering compared to the spreads the Afghans had provided every time I'd been invited in, as they pride themselves on always being ready to host. Mursal was appreciative, as always, but when I mocked my skimpy plate and admitted my embarrassment, Mursal, Anna, and I all burst out laughing. It was a bonding moment, as there had previously been more of a respectful formality about our interactions, and now she was seeing the real me.

The next day, we all went into the city. Before the session, Anna took Mursal to Zara, and Mursal bought a bright green blazer to wear for the event. With that and her black hijab, she looked striking. Mursal was anxious about awkward moments that might arise when men from the *Times* or attendees extended their hand to give her a welcome shake. She did not touch men unless they were family.

Not surprisingly, Mursal stole the show. She described, in spare but powerful words, how she and the refugees had had a moment to decide whether to flee the Taliban, how she wanted to fight for Afghan women's rights, and how, even if she had to start over, she realized how lucky she was to be here. As the three Afghans spoke and expressed their appreciation, it was hard not to be overcome with pride at their grace and resilience amid all the challenges that had been thrown their way. David explained the chaotic journey to the US and how he was organizing a massive legal effort, tapping a who's who of prominent law firms to handle the group's asylum applications pro bono. He said he was hopeful.

I knew we needed to wrap. But after I thanked our panelists and before anyone could leave, I spontaneously blurted into the mic, "These young people want to go to college. If there is anyone here who can help, please do." I felt self-conscious doing so, and I wasn't sure if Sam or A. G. would

be annoyed. But it proved to be a turning point.

Victoria Dryfoos, a family member with an impressive headful of black curls and glasses, came right over. She said she worked as a high school college counselor and would love to help the young people apply to colleges. I had no idea how integral she would become to almost everything we did from that point on. “These are young people who wanted to go back to school,” said Victoria. “Usually, you hear about horrible things and can’t do much to help. But I knew that I could help with that.” Other family members reached out and said they could offer connections at various schools.

We certainly needed the help. Spring was turning into summer, and we were already late in attempting to get them into college for the fall. It felt so intuitive to us that the best place for our young people to get a new start would be on a college campus. Many of the young people were either students at or graduates of Afghanistan’s universities. Their education had been cut off, and what they had completed was largely not recognized by US institutions. It seemed to us that the role of a university was to help in such a dire situation.

I kept thinking about the English house at my alma mater, University of Michigan, a supportive landing where foreign students learned English and adjusted to a new environment. I was intent on getting our young people onto a track that did not end with them becoming Uber drivers and retail clerks, and in America, that generally means college.

But we were far past the application deadline at most schools. And obstacles loomed, as was the case for many American students cobbling together money to afford college. If we did not manage to enroll the young people, they would lose another year and perhaps the chance to change the trajectory of their lives.

Almost everywhere, it seemed that we were banging our heads against walls.

We cast a wide net. Victoria contacted over fifty schools, prioritizing institutions that advertised themselves as a “Welcome Campus” for refugees. I had a connection at Bard College, which had distinguished itself with a willingness to take Afghan students. The college had brought 140 Afghans and waived tuition for all of them. “We do the right thing. We had some new housing coming on line, so that eased the thing,” said Executive

Vice President Jonathan Becker. But unfortunately, they did not have capacity for more Afghans.

Arizona State University had also generously accepted Afghan refugees. It ultimately hosted some 150 Afghans so also had no slots. SUNY Stony Brook was receptive, but discussions fizzled when funding was not available. We worked connections at Syracuse, Duke, and Columbia—nothing. Victoria tracked every contact, conversation, program, and aid offering on a massive color-coded spreadsheet. Anna had her own manic chart. “Every day, dialing for dollars. I was rabid!” Anna said.

Schools generally preferred students who had a clear path to citizenship. Another obstacle: the universities wanted English proficiency scores of 100–120 on a particular language test, and Mursal, even with some of the strongest language skills in our group, got just 76 on her first try. “I was naive,” Victoria said. “I’d thought, ‘Who wouldn’t take these amazing kids, especially Afghan girls?’”

“What about community college?” one editor at the *Times* asked, suggesting that we were being overly ambitious about what these young people could expect and handle. We actually did consider community colleges. Victoria explored a host of them. Samira tried to enroll in one in Houston. Community colleges don’t usually offer room and board, so despite tuition being far cheaper or even free, students sometimes would need to pay more out of pocket to attend than they would at a four-year college after receiving scholarships.

We recognized that the editor’s pushback was more philosophical: he wondered why we were shooting for the moon. But I had a different view: why not aim high? Even if our system was entirely different, and they would struggle a bit because they lacked the preparation, language skills, and finances of students who had grown up in the US, they deserved for us to think big. Because of us, their trajectory was blocked. What they lacked in academic training, they made up for tenfold in grit.

I continued to press for fellowships and school opportunities and recall a sense of frustration, bordering on outrage, building. The dean of one school with a journalism fellowship told me they’d had an Afghan journalist once and it hadn’t worked out. I remember almost shaking when I relayed the conversation to A. G.

But there were also incredible acts of generosity and guts. Lynette

Clemetson, director of the Knight-Wallace journalism fellowship at University of Michigan, reached out to see if we needed help and admitted two journalists, months before others. “Is it likely they would get the proper authorization?” she asked about their status. I told her we had been assured but didn’t have it in hand yet.

Lynette made room for the two journalists and their families. She got support from university and community partners to aid with admissions, housing, and health care to get the families settled. “We were determined to get everyone to yes, and people were generous,” said Lynette, herself a former *Times* journalist.

I was proud that my alma mater was one of the first to admit Afghans into its graduate programs. Others followed. Geeta Anand, my former colleague from the *Journal* who’d become dean of UC Berkeley’s graduate journalism school, admitted Najim, a journalist for the *Times* in Afghanistan and Marwa and Mursal’s brother. She believed so strongly in helping Afghans that she convinced the university to reopen the admission process long after the window had closed to consider letting him and others in. Najim and one young Afghan woman were accepted. Kathleen Kiely, who held a prominent professorship at Missouri School of Journalism, went all out to admit another one of our reporters, Ghazi Zabi, to a fellowship at the school.

But we had no idea how we would get the rest of the young people into college or cover the cost of their tuition. We had a promising development when our resettlement consultant Aaron Tate asked Ian Bickford, president of American University in Afghanistan, for ideas. Ian had been deeply involved in the evacuation of students to colleges around the world, including Bard.

The American University of Afghanistan was created in 2005 during a historic trip by former First Lady Laura Bush, who had long been a passionate advocate for the education of Afghan women. In November 2001, Ms. Bush delivered a presidential radio address to highlight the plight of Afghan women under the Taliban. It marked the first time a first lady had delivered such an address and helped ignite the momentum to establish the university. She later reflected on her historic radio address, saying when she put on the headphones and leaned over the microphone, “I thought about the millions of Afghan women who had been hidden away from the world,

and had the world hidden from them.” Those words would once again come to hold so much power. “I wanted Americans to know the circumstances of the lives of Afghan women. And I hoped that Americans would help,” said Ms. Bush.

Years later, Ian Bickford made it clear that the commitment remained. “The human mind is still there,” says Ian. “You can turn off the Internet, but you can’t turn off human potential once it has been sparked. People find all sorts of ways to exercise it.”

To help our people, Ian suggested a Syracuse-based philanthropist of medical education named Sam Nappi, who had ties to the Afghan university. Sam was immediately enthusiastic and asked for a Zoom meeting with a group of the young students. He pledged during the call to support them. The young people were floored, as were we. In the end, Sam came through with an offer of significant support to several students pursuing medical careers. His enthusiastic reaction and commitment propelled us: we all had the sense we could get the funding if we could just get them into school.

“Frankly, none of their education translates here. They deserve help because they are climbing up a hill,” said Mantosh Dewan, the president of Upstate Medical University, who has helped coordinate Sam Nappi’s contributions to the students over the past four years. “I will follow them for fifteen years if it takes that.”

Mursal's Essay

JUNE 2022

Mursal

“A little left, a little left, yes—now hover the cursor over the green arrow,” Victoria Dryfoos said. Mursal’s face on-screen was encircled by a neatly wrapped patterned scarf, which set off her high cheekbones and well-shaped eyebrows. “Now click. OK, now select ‘share screen.’” Victoria was on Zoom with Mursal.

This was Victoria’s painstaking level of involvement with the students as they began to navigate the American higher education system. She wasn’t just explaining the difference between small private schools and big state universities or how to craft a personal statement that would make an admissions officer sit up and pay attention. She was walking the students step-by-step through the most elementary processes, like sharing a laptop screen so that they could work together. Over the next several weeks, Victoria’s outsized patience never faltered as she talked Mursal and other students around every school website, every application portal, every box on every form.

When Victoria first inquired about Mursal’s interests, Mursal was intent on returning to law. Her hope was to get a master of laws (LLM), a one-year degree that would not qualify her to practice law in America but would set her up for international and policy work. Mursal had inherited from her mother a fierce desire to advocate on behalf of women. She planned to remedy situations like that of her high school classmate who, at seventeen, had been married to a man who beat her. She had told the young woman, “One day I will become a lawyer and help you divorce,” which she intended to follow through on.

Victoria proposed a two-step plan: Mursal would apply to intensive English programs, predominantly at schools where she could then transition

into the LLM or an alternative program. Victoria believed this was a reasonable goal, which was a relief to the rest of the *Times* team working on the college effort. She had professional chops in applying for higher education, unlike the rest, who were operating by the seat of their pants.

Victoria had told Mursal as she started her essay to brainstorm the pivotal experiences of her life and get them down in rough form on paper. Mursal pecked out a few sentences on her Chromebook. She'd never used a computer except to watch an occasional TV show or video. It was surely demoralizing for a young woman holding a law degree, who had been a top performer with a healthy, hard-earned ego, to be in this helpless position.

Not surprisingly for a girl born in 1996, the year of the first Taliban takeover and the immediate shuttering of schools for girls past sixth grade, Mursal's mind went directly to her first day of school. In her search for a rich moment that had been deeply formative, there was no competition.

Mursal had been deterred when she'd first attempted to start school as a young girl. Her older sister Sosan had just begun classes herself as an eleven-year-old due to the shuttering during the Taliban regime, and Mursal had tried tagging along, though she was still too young. In Sosan's classroom, the sisters fibbed to the teacher, saying that Mursal was seven. But that didn't fly. "They saw that my teeth had not yet fallen out," Mursal said. Luckily, a former student of their father taught there and put in a good word, which produced a spot.

On Mursal's real first day, her dad proudly walked her in. But the next day, she was so impatient to get there that she took off down the road without telling anyone. Her mom searched the house in a panic before realizing that Mursal had already reached school.

Now a world away from that moment, in Houston, Mursal typed the start of that story to show Victoria: "The Taliban because American forces after fighting left Afghanistan, so in that time the country was free and people started a new beginning with thousands of hope with light in the darkness and me, a girl with 5 years old. Start the school with a lot of hope. Even me at this moment feel that now I'm free and it is the start of a new beginning. We had the days that we were not able to attend the class because the Taliban was attacking on our city." She continued in that vein.

Then, over Zoom, working on a shared document, Victoria plied her with questions about her narrative. Victoria teased out the deeper themes

from Mursal's musings. When Mursal really got rolling, they'd switch to "speech to type" mode. Mursal riffed while Victoria furiously typed word for word and then forwarded her transcription to Mursal.

It was clear that Mursal's written English was far below the level of an American law school graduate. She had taken less than one year of English in Afghanistan. But Victoria was confident that intensive language programs were designed for exactly this purpose, and these young women were quick studies. In Mursal's case, her verbal skills were also exceptional.

Mursal's personal statement, after heavy editing, was an ode to education. She described her first classroom, with "no chairs, no blackboards, no books." Some of her classmates were married, and one or two were already mothers. The school was in ruins from the war. The girls sat on tiny benches, three on each. Their little school bags and notebooks were all marked UNICEF.

Her essay also referenced two different times during her school years that the Taliban retook her home city and her family fled to Kabul. "I still remember this feeling: Maybe today will be the last day I will be allowed to attend school," Mursal wrote. But each time, the Taliban were driven back out. She poignantly declared what school meant to a young girl: "Even as a child, I felt that I was now free."

Her teacher, she also remembered in her personal statement, told the girls, "You will build this country."

A Convergence in Pittsburgh

JUNE 9, 2022

Rebecca

Pittsburgh emerged as a ray of hope. It wasn't really a coincidence. My husband, Alan, is from Pittsburgh; our son, Jacob, had recently graduated from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU); and we had many longtime friends there, including Danny Rosen, a widely respected professor of social work at the University of Pittsburgh.

During one visit when I spoke about our frustration finding schools that would take our Afghan students, Danny gave me one word of advice: "Farnam." He meant president of Carnegie Mellon Farnam Jahanian, whom I had met years earlier at a reception for new CMU students, bonding over our common University of Michigan ties. With Farnam's help, we were quickly on a Zoom call with representatives of three Pittsburgh schools, including tiny Chatham University. We hadn't seen schools come together like this before. They were supportive but also made it clear that they needed to ensure that the English levels of the students were strong enough for them to succeed. It felt like a promising start.

In the meantime, Fahim, one of the former *Times* reporters in Kabul and a true leader of our cohort, got a job at the *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*. The editor had read about our group and was moved to help. Fahim, his wife, Mina, and their son, Aasad, settled into an apartment complex in a distant suburb, where they were pleasantly surprised at how kind the neighbors were. Mina found a position in the kitchen of the only Afghan restaurant in the area; Fahim felt so strongly about supporting her desire to work that he would drive her an hour each way and sometimes wait in the parking lot throughout her shift.

Danny and his wife, Shani, have three girls, and I was asked to speak at the graduation of their youngest, Talia, at the Ellis School in early June. I

had never given a commencement speech before. But since it was an all-girls school, I decided to talk about our work with the Afghan refugees. Fahim and his family came, and I introduced him. “Fahim was from a conservative religious family in Afghanistan and is easily one of the most progressive men I have ever met,” I told the crowd.

I then spoke about the Afghans: “Sadly, the most dire predictions of how the Taliban would rule have come to pass. They have closed the universities and are not allowing girls to attend any kind of school. And recently, they passed a law requiring women to wear full-length burqas, which is not the tradition in Afghanistan. They also cannot go outside without a man. ‘Do you know what it is like to wear a burqa?’ one of them asked me recently. ‘You can’t even walk.’

“Many in our group are in agony as they call home to loved ones, not sure how to help them. The experience has galvanized them to seek out education and study English here, knowing how fortunate they are to have that freedom.”

As I ended the speech, I told the graduates to be kind to others, especially refugees. I thought about Maryam, who had told me that she really had not made any friends at school and that she relied on her high school guidance counselor if she needed anything.

“There are going to be a lot of refugees starting over in our country,” I said. “Many Ukrainians are coming behind them. If you see them in a store or out and about, say hello or offer to help.”

A few days earlier, as I’d been rehearsing the talk, I’d had an idea. What would Maryam say to these girls? What advice would she give after all she had experienced in her short life? I reached out to her, and within minutes, she wrote back with words that blew me away and that I used to end my speech.

“If a simple immigrant teenager like me has confidence in having a better life, they should always have the confidence to achieve what they want to,” she said. “I think they should just know that if a girl in a new country with limited resources and a lot of problems to face can hope to achieve her dream, they can hundred percent make their dreams come true.”

I was moved the next day to receive an email from the Ellis headmaster that somehow showed the full arc of it all. He was forwarding a note from an audience member named Dave Whitmer, a veteran whose daughter was a

member of the graduating class. He had served in Iraq and Afghanistan and wanted to thank me for talking about what the US occupation had achieved.

“As someone that has spent seven deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, how much I truly appreciated her bringing attention to the oppression of Afghan women,” he wrote.

In a later conversation, Whitmer explained that he believed the US had had a clear mission in Afghanistan and had been making progress before the disastrous end. “Gosh, I spent a lot of time. A lot of people lost limbs. Did we actually accomplish anything?” he asked. While he is grateful some made it out, he thinks of those left behind: “I don’t know if it’s worse that we gave these girls hope.”

“Push, Baby, Push”

LATE JUNE 2022

Samira

At what was to be her final OB appointment, the doctor warned Samira that she likely had two or three weeks to wait. Her baby was small for the gestational age. Samira scheduled an induction. She was dispositionally anxious and liked the idea of a set delivery date. She'd watched several birth films and was terrified. She tried to distract herself by cooking pots of healthy stews and stocking the freezer for when they returned home with the baby.

She and Wais had the basic necessities for a newborn, which they'd received at a baby shower given by Catholic Charities. Samira had had no clue what a “baby shower” was all about, but she'd been thrilled to return home afterward with diapers, a stack of onesies, a bassinet, and even a poufy skirt and hair bow intended for picture-perfect baby portraits. *The New York Times* gifted her with a crib.

On June 20, Samira walked into the hospital with Wais carrying her small overnight bag. “R-U-S-T-A-M-I,” Samira spelled out for the woman at the registration window. The look that came back was odd. “We sent you an email that we had to cancel your induction today,” the woman said. The ward was at capacity. Samira and Wais needed to go home and wait for a call.

The next morning, Samira felt terribly crampy, so they hurried back to the hospital. A different desk person looked annoyed to see them. Samira insisted that a nurse check her, but the nurse concluded the baby might be another week.

They returned to the hospital a third time that afternoon. “Why are you back?” an administrator asked curtly. Samira again insisted on being seen. Finally, a doctor examined her—and discovered that her cervix was at eight

centimeters. She barely had time to get an epidural.

When it came time to push, Samira struggled. Because of the pain block, she couldn't feel her abdomen or legs.

"Push, baby, push," Wais said, squeezing her hand, trying to cheerlead.

The baby started showing signs of distress, and a nurse explained that the delivery team would use a vacuum. Samira refused, "because this vacuum is going to damage the brain," she said. But when Samira saw nurses prepping an area across the room and deduced they were readying for a C-section, she got a surge of adrenaline.

"She said, 'I will push that baby,'" Wais recounted spiritedly.

Wais cried the moment the baby's head crowned. He cut the umbilical cord. If they'd been in Afghanistan, he wouldn't have even been in the room.

Wais got upset that evening when a nurse brought Samira a tray of cold food. In Afghanistan, new mothers eat warm, nourishing food like the lamb and vegetables Samira had stored at home. Wais decided to go get her that food. He would warm it up at home and bring her a proper meal.

Arriving at their apartment, he couldn't recall how he'd gotten there. "I drove that car, but I didn't. I was flying," he said. "I felt like a spaceship." It was as if he manifested how much they felt like outsiders.

When the doctor later asked Samira her plans for birth control, she said she wanted some. The doctor suggested that they later insert an IUD, and Samira agreed.

Samira had heard the name Doreen on a Turkish television series. That girl was powerful and strong. Their daughter would be Durrin.

Wais reiterated his elation at having a daughter. "Boys are going to their mom and girls to their fathers," he said, grinning.

Finding Her Register

SUMMER 2022

Marwa

For Marwa, being hired at the Gap was a major milestone. She found the job herself after Aaron taught her how to fill out online applications. He patiently explained how to find a specific website and where to click and scroll down to “careers” to see job listings. “I still remember every time I do it how he was the one who taught me,” she said, now a veteran job seeker.

This was a public-facing position that she as a woman never could have held in Afghanistan.

“We don’t have sales associate women in Afghanistan. It’s wrong in our society,” she told her best friend, Karishma.

““What, you are shopkeeper?””

Marwa giggled at her friend’s reaction. “It’s different,” she explained.

The store was on the second floor of Houston’s Memorial Mall, just down from Forever 21 and Aerie. On her first day, Marwa stood stiffly beside her manager as he trained her on returns, gift cards, and credit-card transactions. Standing at the register with him was the most time by far she’d spent in close proximity to a male who wasn’t a relative. Equally strange for Marwa was how she and he looked directly into one another’s eyes. In Afghanistan, she would have averted her gaze. Here, the polite thing was to maintain eye contact.

The best part of the job was chatting with customers. She had always been social. One afternoon, a female customer asked about her accent. Marwa told her that she was a refugee from Afghanistan. The woman exclaimed that she, too, was a refugee, from Ukraine. Both women immediately started crying.

“I really feel sorry about Ukraine,” Marwa said.

“I really feel sorry for Afghanistan,” Marwa’s new friend replied.

Before the woman left the store, she got Marwa’s Instagram handle. For some time, the two kept tabs on one another there.

Marwa could easily get flustered when she had to give change to a customer. Sometimes she’d say the total for two pairs of jeans and a top was \$2,000 instead of \$200. But her coworkers were understanding. She was even named Employee of the Month.

Earning a paycheck was a thrill. She made \$10.50 an hour and was soon contributing \$300 toward her family’s monthly rent. All three sisters now had paid jobs and donated to the family kitty.

The day Marwa got her first paycheck, she took herself shopping. Her first stop was at a mall kiosk selling trendy jewelry. She fingered the long rows of colorful beaded bracelets before buying two. At a different store, she bought her mom a silver ring.

In early August, Meridith, the *New York Times* photographer who’d taken the family portraits with the flag, came to photograph Marwa at the Gap. The pictures were to accompany a feature article Rebecca was writing to mark the first anniversary of the group’s arrival. When it came out, an executive at Gap headquarters read the story and sent Marwa an admiring letter. Anytime she wanted a job at any Gap retail location, the executive wrote, she need only present this document. She did eventually interview to work at another Gap store, in Pittsburgh, but she didn’t mention the letter. After she was hired, she showed it to her manager. “Well!” he exclaimed. “You sure didn’t need that. You sold yourself.”

The day the article ran, Marwa posted her first picture on Instagram without her headscarf. She hadn’t been wearing it since early on in Houston, but she’d avoided showing herself publicly. “I saw my picture on the *New York Times* Instagram, and then I thought, ‘Why not?’”

Unassuming Victoria

AUGUST 3, 2022

Mursal

“One sec,” Mursal whispered into the phone as she darted into an empty classroom.

She pulled the door shut so she wouldn’t disturb anyone. She was on a brief break at her job as a teacher’s aide at the Bilingual Education Institute.

Mursal listened intently for thirty seconds, then shrieked.

Victoria and Rebecca had delivered the thrilling news that the Pittsburgh schools had come through in a big way. Mursal, Marwa, Samira, and Wais had been admitted into a preundergraduate yearlong program at Chatham University, which would begin with a semester of intensive English. They would then transition into Pittsburgh Pathways, a program where they could add regular undergraduate courses to their schedule. The proposed plan was strikingly simple but innovative. The staged approach, starting with English and transitioning into traditional studies, was a new model for accommodating immigrant students who needed to firm up their language skills before they could succeed in college. Other institutions had found success with similar phased systems. A genius element of Pathways was that students got credit for undergraduate courses, but their grades didn’t yet count toward their official GPA, giving ESL students a grace period to adjust to so much newness.

The students had secured the admission in the nick of time. They would travel to Pittsburgh in two weeks, move into the dorms, and start classes ten days later. (Another member of the *Times* group, Omar, was also accepted by Chatham the following week.)

Mursal switched her phone to speaker and listened while she tapped open Instagram and searched “Chatham University.” Up popped a stream of images of a quaint suburban campus of redbrick buildings and walkways

crisscrossing a central green dotted with small groups of students. There was a pond with a fountain. Mursal was bursting.

Chatham, a small school most people have never even heard of, had offered an impressive \$8,204 scholarship per student for one semester of intensive English. The *Times* team would cover the \$4,226 gap per student, likely with a GoFundMe campaign. Victoria's cousin came through with a sizable donation directly to Chatham. Rebecca, after losing a beloved former colleague, Cathy Panagoulas, suggested that friends and colleagues make a donation to the fund in her honor. Cathy had been a legendary editor at *The Wall Street Journal*, known for her sharp eye for scoops and deep commitment to finding and developing international journalists. In the subsequent semesters, Chatham awarded the students even more, eventually covering \$34,944 per student for four years.

The Chatham opportunity came about as so many breaks did for these Afghans—by individuals taking an interest, being willing to call in favors, roping in others with their enthusiasm, and sometimes (kindly) twisting arms. The assists for these young people came in small personal acts, someone shooting a colleague or friend a text, not in some grandly laid plan. The Pittsburgh schools had a unique level of cooperation and had formed a consortium that had already been discussing how to serve refugees. Chatham recognized that its offering was ideal for this group of students. “We tried to do everything we could at Chatham to accommodate them. We thought Chatham could be a good fit,” said David Finegold, who was then Chatham University's president and made a point of checking up on them on campus. “I realized how extraordinary they were.”

The unassuming Victoria quickly became the person all the young people in the cohort with college aims were almost entirely reliant on. Marwa and Mursal gushingly called her “an angel.” Within twenty-one months, Victoria would assist seventeen in the group via 260 hours on Zoom and 12,000 WhatsApp chats, emails, and texts. Her tasks continuously expanded. She helped them to register for English proficiency exams, test prep, and college tours; completed FAFSA, medical, and housing forms; booked travel and tutors; compared financial packages; wrote recommendations; assisted with the course add/drop process; and located summer programs and internships. She had patience beyond compare. She soon recruited her friend Sharilyn Geistfeld to help with

student essays. Along with Aaron and *The New York Times* group, they were a mighty team.

And those were just Victoria's academic-related assists. She took Marwa, Mursal, and Omar for their first taco and a ride on the historic funicular up Pittsburgh's Duquesne Incline; replaced Marwa's broken electric kettle; located counselors; treated Mursal at Ithaca's famous Moosewood Restaurant; researched day cares for Durrin and sent her the twirliest possible second-birthday party dress; and so much more.

Victoria promised Mursal she would follow up soon with more detail.

The minute Mursal hung up, she googled "Pittsburgh." She clicked on a map and grinned. Apparently she was moving to a state called Pennsylvania.

Kabul Is Burning

AUGUST 15, 2022

The Women in the English Class

The English class A. G. set in motion had now been running five days a week for about six months. Ten or so women would gather around the table in an apartment in the Woodchase complex. Some of the women had never been taught to read or write in their own language, so they were becoming literate for the first time, starting with learning the alphabet.

The *Times* was thoughtful about how to best set the women up to succeed in this endeavor. They rented an apartment explicitly for this purpose, and for those who lived elsewhere, Uber rides were covered. Women brought their children, and babysitting was handled in a back bedroom by a rotation of the participants paid for the duty. (One day, several of the women came to physical blows over the right to the job, showing how understandably desperate they were to earn money.)

This particular morning, the class elicited some especially powerful feelings. The date itself spurred the outpouring. It was August 15, one year since the Taliban had captured Kabul.

The women adored their teacher, Monique Toh, and had grown close to one another. Monique brought the students out of their shells by making them food, taking them on outings, and prompting them to share their experiences. She introduced them to American-style snacks like pinto beans (very Texan) and date coconut balls (very healthy) and took them to a Pakistani buffet (“The buffet concept was lost on them!”). They visited the Children’s Museum Houston, where some of the women even tried the ropes course. The women in turn cooked bolani, flatbread stuffed with leeks or potatoes, to share with Monique and their classmates. Monique quickly recognized that these were matriarchs of middle- and upper-class families, torn from their lives.

Along with straightforward drilling in verb tenses and vocabulary, sessions expanded to focus on empowerment and bonding. In this safe space, the women quickly developed mutual trust and began to share their frustrations as they waded into unknown lives.

On August 15, the floodgates opened.

An outspoken woman named Khadija shared her dream. She was half of a funny and memorable couple, the wife of a cleaner at the *Times* bureau in Kabul and the first woman in the cohort to learn to drive. She described being on a road, driving her car from Herat to Kabul, but as she approached, she saw Kabul engulfed in flames.

A pained expression came over several of the women's faces as Khadija painted the scary scene. They all knew why Khadija had conjured this vision. Kabul was destroyed.

Monique described how monumental this date felt to her students. Reflecting back their feelings, "August 15th is heavy. Your whole life is ripped apart," Monique said. "They remembered. They know. They have social media. Whether we want to remember or not. They are seeing a million different scenes of Afghanistan falling to the Taliban around the anniversary, just like we have our own 9/11."

It was a day for sorrow.

YEAR TWO

Refugees Again

AUGUST 19, 2022

Marwa and Mursal

Marwa and Mursal held hands throughout the flight to Pittsburgh. Marwa cried the entire way, burying her face under her hoodie. Mursal started crying, too, as if the pair were playing a game of hot potato with their feelings.

The two sisters were heading to college. They would be living together in dorms and studying at Chatham University.

Hours earlier, Marwa had nestled into her mother's chest, saying goodbye. Her parents were her life raft, and she was reluctant to navigate the currents of an unknown sea without them. "We are already refugees from our country, and now you are sending us to Pittsburgh to be refugees again," she told her mom.

She was playfully needling—sort of. Though a year had passed since they'd arrived, she still felt frequently off-kilter. As much as both sisters were impatient to return to academic high gear, they understood that a preundergraduate year was a necessary first step. They needed stronger English before they could succeed academically. They felt blessed. The chance to study again was everything, and they knew that refugees their age rarely got the opportunity. Here they were back on a career track. They were safe. They had each other.

Chatham rolled out the welcome mat for the sisters. They were picked up at the airport and taken directly on a campus tour. After a winding route to the dining hall, Marwa whispered to Mursal that they would surely starve because certainly they would never find their way back there. The leafy campus, serving about two thousand students, and until 2015 only women, sat atop a steep hill. This provided expansive views of the Shadyside neighborhood, with its stately trees and historic mansions built by old-line

Pittsburgh families, like the Mellons, and the city skyline beyond.

But the top-of-the-world locale also meant lots of stairs. So many stairs. In the clammy air of late August, Mursal and Marwa, nodding politely at their guide's pointings and identifications, sweat through their clothes. They had to pause to catch their breath several times on the meandering wooden staircase up to the main campus.

Their guide finally returned them to Pelletreau, building 2, apartment 1B. They were relieved to step inside their spare, gray-carpeted apartment and kick off their shoes. They dropped their purses on the small round dining table and curled up on the sofa.

The apartment had been thoughtfully stocked with dishes, cookware, Target gift cards, and other necessities. After she cooled off, Mursal ventured over and peered inside a cardboard box that had been left in the corner. She grimaced at the pile of lightly used bedding. While she was appreciative, she had no intention of sleeping in secondhand sheets. Mursal was particular. She was the type who always carried hand sanitizer in her purse, spritzing her palm twice periodically throughout the day. Even in her circumstances, owning almost nothing, she was prideful and held to her high standards.

She went to her suitcase and dug out the one sheet she'd brought from Houston. She and Marwa would go to Target the next day with their gift card to buy another. They ultimately used the blankets provided, but only with their own sheet covering them first.

They did find their way back to the dining hall, quickly discovering that they liked the pizza, mashed potatoes, and french fries best. They always shared their food.

The initial "orientation" took a few days and mystified Mursal. She had simply expected classes to begin and didn't understand the extensive activities. One day, she and Marwa were put in separate groups intended to introduce students across the school to one another. "They told us that we were supposed to share a fun fact about us. I didn't know what a fun fact was," said Mursal. She didn't say anything when her turn came around, though she did share that she had recently arrived from Afghanistan. Her tour mates had a warm reaction and continued to greet Mursal around campus many months later.

Little by little, they found their bearings. They huffed a bit less climbing

the stairs to the main quad. They saw their first deer. They slept on opposite sides of their bedroom, Mursal's side all set up and decorated with postcards and pictures and Marwa's area looser and more free-form, like her. Their window didn't shut all the way, and when it turned cold, they stuffed blankets into the crack.

Still, many things seemed odd. They were supposed to call their English professor by her first name (they did not). She recommended that they watch an old Brad Pitt movie. Adjusting to the computer was a whole caper unto itself. The sisters shared one laptop at home. They often accidentally saved documents and turned in assignments with the other's portal ID, causing their professor great confusion.

Early in the semester, Rebecca visited and took Mursal, Marwa, and Omar on a tour around the city beyond campus. Chatham is located near Carnegie Mellon and the University of Pittsburgh. This was the first time they'd learned that the area was swarming with young people, which was exciting. It felt like a giant step for them to be students at an American university just a year after the fall of Kabul. They later walked across Carnegie Mellon's campus and paused on Schenley Bridge. Marwa palmed the painted metal siding, the pattern of openings littered with locks. As happens all over the world, couples attach "love locks" and toss the keys over the side. Each lock held a promise of an unbreakable bond.

Behind them, the soaring Cathedral of Learning, built in 1937, lorded over the University of Pittsburgh campus. The locks and the imposing tower felt solid, hopeful, enduring. One life had ended, but they were on a bridge to an encouraging new adventure. Rebecca shot a photo of the three of them, looking proud to be there, amid the throngs of students starting another year of college. They seemed to fit right in.

A Dream Deferred

LATE AUGUST 2022

Samira

Back in Houston, Samira was finding that caring for a baby all day was stoking her worst anxieties. She knew that once she got her studies underway, she'd feel less panicked. At present, her life was on hold as she cared for Durrin.

Samira was afraid even to bathe her daughter. At two months old, Durrin was so small, and she got slippery. *What if I drop her?* she thought. She worried about using soaps and lotions on the baby's skin. *Couldn't the chemicals seep in and damage her brain?*

Her mother-in-law in Afghanistan kept pressing her to brush powder from a gray stone she'd given Samira under Durrin's eyes where eyeliner gets applied. This powder supposedly warded off evil in a practice known as nazar. But in researching the Afghan tradition, Samira unearthed medical papers that cited toxic levels of iron in the type of stone and connected its use to developmental problems. There was no way in hell she was getting this anywhere near Durrin.

She put Durrin down for her nap. Samira checked her swaddle, smoothed the soft hairs on her daughter's head, and closed the door.

Moments later, Samira was back beside the crib. She held her hand to Durrin's mouth to feel for rhythmic breaths. Satisfied, she stepped out. Almost immediately, she felt pulled back to confirm that Durrin's little chest kept rising and falling. *What if Durrin had come unfurled and pulled the fabric over her face?* Samira was trapped in a loop—leave, worry, check; leave, worry, check.

Many days, as Samira rocked her daughter, tears came. She convinced herself that feeling trapped and hopeless must be normal after giving birth since life had changed so dramatically. It was unnerving to be responsible

for such a needy being, unsure how to care for her and quick to project something terrible happening. She had never observed what attentive, caring parenting looked like, so naturally she felt insecure.

She'd also run the gauntlet, between the fraught wedding, cutting of family ties, traumatic departure, and difficult pregnancy. Reading online, she'd come across something called postpartum depression. Many of the descriptive words resonated: *empty, irritable, numb*. She'd never heard of the condition but thought, *I wonder if I have this?* She never mentioned the worry to her doctor.

The sticky weather was an added insult. Ever since experiencing the heat in India, she'd felt almost allergic to the sun, so she rarely took the baby outside. She occasionally strolled with Durrin around the small lake behind the complex, but the oven-like temperatures sent her quickly back inside.

Did I remember to lock the front door? she wondered. She was sure she'd turned the bolt after Wais had left, but she unlocked and relocked it.

She needed a shower. She pulled off her spandex shorts and T-shirt. But then she panicked: *Running water; I might not hear the baby.*

Her days were devoid of typical new-mom activities like park visits, kiddie-pool dips, and support circles. She didn't relate to the other women in the *Times* group with newborns, so she kept her distance.

Wais left early for the cell-phone store and was gone for ten hours or more. When Wais came back, Samira's tensed shoulders released. Her husband was calm with Durrin and steady with Samira. Everything felt better when he was around.

Samira heard Durrin stirring. She gave Durrin her best crooked little smile, but she didn't feel smiley. She sang a bit of the two lullabies she knew in English, "Twinkle, Twinkle" and "You Are My Sunshine." She didn't know any Afghan lullabies and didn't feel like singing anyway. She nursed Durrin, staring off blankly.

She wondered if she should cook a stew. She needed to have food prepared for Wais when he came home. She arranged Durrin on a blanket in the living room and went to take meat and vegetables from the fridge. After peeling one carrot, she looked in on Durrin. After another, she checked her again. This time she picked up Durrin and her blanket and toys and set her up in the corner of the kitchen.

Durrin didn't look comfortable perched on the hard floor, but Samira felt better having her in view.

Much Ado About a Hijab

OCTOBER 2022

Mursal and Marwa

Mursal's headscarf seemed to be having the exact wrong effect. She hoped to present as modest and deflect the male gaze. Instead, her appearance seemed to be inviting constant attention and commentary.

Uber drivers in particular seemed to be triggered by her hijab. The sisters were using Uber, since they still didn't know which parts of Pittsburgh were safe for walking.

It was Saturday afternoon, and they were headed downtown to shop and explore. Marwa had developed a Starbucks habit. "Everyone knows caramel ribbon crunch frappuccino is my favorite drink," she said proudly.

A car pulled up, and Mursal checked that the plates matched what was indicated on her app. They did, so she got in and scooted over to make room for Marwa.

Checking in the front mirror, Mursal adjusted her burgundy headscarf. She fished a lipstick out of her maroon patent purse. She changed her purse frequently to match her outfit.

Marwa reflexively opened her hand, her way of asking for the lipstick without words. The two had an unspoken language, honed through hundreds of recent hours together. While the sisters had always been close, in Afghanistan, they hadn't lived geographically close for many years, with Marwa studying medicine in Mazar and Mursal in law school in Kunduz. Now their bond had become ironclad. They were each other's lifeline.

Yet Marwa and Mursal were quite different. Marwa was a dreamer, a romantic who swooned over *La La Land* ("Why did the movie end like that? They were supposed to be together. I hope it's not a real story.") and *Pride and Prejudice*, which she'd watched dozens of times. She had "quiet dignity," one of her professors said, and a soulful and authentic demeanor.

Mursal was rational and directive, a born leader with rare confidence and charisma. Where Mursal was poised and controlled, Marwa was the affectionate, emotive puppy dog. “I kiss my mom’s feet. I even kiss my dad’s feet,” Marwa said with a laugh.

Marwa stroked on a bit of plum color, blotted her lips, and returned the lipstick.

“I have a question, if it’s not too personal,” the driver started in. “Why are you wearing that scarf and she is not?” he asked, eyeing Mursal in the mirror.

Mursal could have predicted his question. She and Marwa got it over and over, on campus, in stores. But this time, the tone was more judgmental than inquisitive, more nasty than curious.

Mursal started to explain that her scarf was connected to her Muslim beliefs. She quickly became impassioned. “I love the way I look. I love that when someone sees me in my scarf, they think, ‘Oh, she is Muslim, so she is covering.’ I love the feeling that it gives me, that you are protected. I feel like my scarf will keep me close to my faith. To my God,” she told him. “I —” she continued, but he cut her off.

“Don’t you want to get rid of that feeling you had in Afghanistan?” the Uber driver said, more intensely now. “Don’t you recognize the freedom you have in this country? You should take that thing off and embrace your new freedom.” He was shaking. “I will pray for you. I will pray for you to feel that feeling of freedom and get rid of your scarf.”

“Don’t you dare pray for me! Don’t pray for me!” Mursal shot back. She leaned forward and raised her voice. “I have my freedom, and that is the freedom to not take it off. Don’t pray for me for freedom. I have my freedom. I wear my scarf out of freedom!”

Nothing annoyed Mursal more than the stereotyping of Muslim women. She was quick to attack the misperception that the Muslim religion stipulates that women are subservient to men. She argued that the reality was very different, that the Quran calls for all Muslim women to become educated. “Our prophet’s wife was the most popular businesswoman at that time. He was even her worker,” Mursal said. She referenced Mohammed’s first wife, Khadijah, who managed a large trading enterprise and was known for her wealth and intelligence. She added that Khadijah had even proposed to Mohammed when she was forty and he was twenty-five.

Another time, Mursal's Uber driver asked, how did she sleep in that thing? How did she shower? *How could he be so stupid?* she thought.

Peers at Chatham also often inquired why Mursal covered her head while Marwa did not. The confusion made sense: they were sisters, close in age, attached at the hip, so why the difference? They told their classmates there wasn't some grand reason at work; they were just different people, making different choices. The answer never quite seemed to satisfy the Americans.

Once during a class break, Mursal was scrolling through photos on her phone, showing some of her classmates pictures. In one, Mursal was in their dorm room, and her dark mane was uncovered, draped halfway down her back. She did not wear her scarves inside her home.

"You have hair! You have nice hair!" one young woman squealed. "I thought there must be something wrong with your hair!"

Marwa had rebelled against modest dress from childhood, always seeing how much she could get away with. From age five, when most girls start wearing headscarves, through middle school, she had stayed out of trouble as long as her scarf hung anywhere on her head or neck. But she often went further, hiking up her dress to mini length and rolling her sleeves above her shoulders on the walk to or from the mosque. When the mufti, their religious leader, caught her, he'd whack her with his rubber stick, but she didn't care.

During high school, when the expectation to cover up increased, Marwa worried most about someone complaining to her parents. She feared that they would feel disrespected, and she was right to worry. When Marwa was out of the house, street workers catcalled, "even if just my hand was showing," she said.

Marwa never wore a burqa. Her mother, Gulalai, wore one routinely in Kunduz, beginning with the Taliban's takeover in 1996. (When the family traveled to Kabul, which was less conservative, Gulalai would pull it off and shove it in the back seat as soon as they reached the city outskirts.) Marwa recalled scary moments in childhood when they lost their mother in the outdoor marketplace. If she and Mursal let go of Gulalai, almost immediately they'd be adrift in a sea of stiff royal blue fabric, unable to distinguish one tented woman from the next. They quickly learned to recognize their mother's feet.

There was just one time when Marwa ventured out in a burqa. She was having her period and desperately needed pads. Her mother was at work, and she was too mortified to ask one of her brothers to go buy some. She pulled on one of her mother's burqas. The train of heavy fabric dragged, so she grabbed a pair of Sosa's heels and clacked to the pharmacy. She was thankful that the clerk, a neighbor, couldn't recognize her behind her cover-up. "It's always a man selling these things. They give you the side-eyes," she said.

Marwa stopped wearing her scarf in the first week in Houston. Each leg of the trip, she had let her scarf slip further back on her head until it was barely covering any hair at this point.

Mursal's conservative instincts had been reinforced at her all-female law school, which was quite religious—unsurprisingly, as it was in Kunduz. Kunduz was known to be traditional, likely due to having come in and out of Taliban hands throughout her childhood. Wearing her hijab taut around her face and neck always felt right, even when she was a preteen. She took care choosing her scarves, finding shimmery silks or floral patterns and matching them to her outfits. Since getting to the States, she'd acquired dozens of new scarves, clearly making up for her abandoned closet of clothes back home.

Mursal quickly sought out a mosque in Pittsburgh and went many Friday evenings, often with a redheaded friend who'd converted to Islam. "We say, 'He is closer to us than the vein in our neck,'" Mursal said about her connection to God. Her belief brought her great comfort. "Your mom loves you three hundred times, your dad loves you two hundred times, and God loves you infinitely."

A Seminal Houston Gathering

NOVEMBER 14, 2022

Rebecca

As more of the young people entered college, it became clear that we needed a sustained effort to support them.

We also increasingly saw a need to do something independent from the *Times*. The news organization had done so much—we didn't know how much exactly, but the amount of financial assistance was surely in the millions of dollars. A. G. recalled both Meredith Kopit Levien, the *Times*' chief executive officer, and Roland Caputo, the *Times*' longtime chief financial officer, saying they would finance whatever it took to get the group back on their feet here in America.

But to do more—the goal we often discussed, whether it was college for the young people or a certification program to become a sonographer or English classes for the women—we needed to find outside support as our group weaned itself from the *Times*.

Afghan journalists, and those who supported them, were not the only ones paying a price for their reporting in countries around the world. The term *exiled journalists* was becoming more commonplace, referring to journalists from Ukraine, Russia, China, Mexico, and other places who'd had to flee from threats against their lives and reprisals because of their work. Those who made it to the US were the fortunate ones. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, the number of journalists killed around the world soared to new heights each year.

We discussed how to make our initial burst of fundraising more sustainable. But we all had busy day jobs and lives. One weekend, as I worried about how we would be able to keep this going, I spoke to T. M., who had stayed close to the Afghan journalists. I told him that I didn't know quite why I and the others had been unable to shake the Afghans and

move on. “I haven’t even been to Afghanistan,” I told T. M.

He laughed and told me there is a saying for those who work with Afghans—the Hotel California. “You can go, but you can’t leave,” T. M. told me. Apparently, I wasn’t alone.

It struck me that David hadn’t been to Houston to see our group and that T. M. hadn’t seen them since they’d arrived. I had a sense they would be heartened to see the refugees’ progress. They had been so instrumental in the evacuation, and I knew both were viewed as heroes by our people. David had been spending a tremendous amount of time heading up an extraordinary legal effort to help our group win their legal claims for citizenship, to be granted first asylum and then a green card. Incredibly, he had never met the people he’d helped usher into the country.

In the back of my mind, I also had another nagging concern. There was a chance I might leave the *Times* for another opportunity, and I wanted to be sure our efforts continued.

David, T. M., and I flew down to Houston in mid-November and headed straight to one of the English classes for the women at Woodchase, which were now firmly established. Children were being watched in another room as the women sat around a square table, working on tenses.

We visited the Rahim family, where David and T. M. were served plates heaped with Afghan rice, chicken, pan-fried potato bolani, and salad. Marwa and Mursal were in Pittsburgh, but Najim, his youngest brother, and their parents were a through line in our group. I wanted David to meet the matriarch, Gulalai, who had been a pioneer in women’s education.

For David, the trip was a revelation. “As a lawyer, I usually find a little distance from the people I am working with to be helpful—a way to get perspective and make more objective decisions. But Rebecca convinced me to go, and it was a transformative trip,” he recalled, “to see firsthand how much our people believed in America and were so eager to build new and better lives here.”

He saw the progress up close when we visited one of our families as their young children came home from school. “The kids greeted me in perfect English and then sat down on the floor and began doing their homework on laptops. I knew I was seeing something about the future.”

That night, we gathered the entire group remaining in Houston, about fifty people, as many had moved away for work opportunities, at a Middle Eastern restaurant. We took a few tables and David and T. M. got a chance to talk to the families and meet their children. Aaron knew everyone and introduced them, while I spent time mostly with the women.

I also made an effort to talk to the kids. I found exactly what educators said—that the English of the younger kids had developed much more quickly than that of the older kids. Two young sisters in our group told me that their father would bring home new library books for them to read every week. One of the teenagers told me that they received no additional help with English in their high school classes, which both puzzled and infuriated me.

But all seemed happy to be settling in. I turned my phone voice recorder on and asked a range of kids what they wanted to do when they grew up. Almost all of them told me they wanted to be a doctor. One young woman, a teenager who wore a beautiful blue hijab, didn't hesitate when I asked her. "An artist," she told me.

At the end of the dinner, we took a group photo. The look of pride on the faces of David and T. M. was unmistakable.

The next day, David, Aaron, and I paid a visit to Samira and Durrin, who was still just weeks old. Samira wanted to introduce her daughter and insisted that she would not slow down in her studies. Moving to Pittsburgh to attend Chatham was like winning a lottery ticket, she told us. Walking away from Samira's apartment, David told me that he understood why we had stayed close to the group and why we needed to help them take their next steps.

In that moment, the groundwork was laid to firmly launch our nonprofit. We eventually decided to call it the Journalism Refugees Education Fund (JREF). Led by David and Lauren, we began to raise money to provide financial assistance to students who applied for scholarships. We formed a board that included most of the core group who had been involved in the resettlement. Andrew Steer, the newsroom finance chief, spent countless hours organizing our finances. Everyone did the work on top of their intense day jobs.

Before I left Houston the next day, Aaron took me to the Afghan Village, the place where they bake real Afghan bread and where our people

could get coveted ingredients for their dishes. Aaron and I had grown quite close. He had made it clear that he was preparing to move on, as our group was largely settled and in good shape, especially compared to other immigrants with no resources. He was considering a move to Central America, where the need was even more intense. I also had a feeling that it might be my last time to visit Houston, and I had no idea how I would explain that to the people in our group. I was filled with a combination of pride and sadness at the thought of moving on—and leaving them on their own.

We talked for a few minutes outside the strip mall where the store was located, in the middle of busy highways and mile after mile of endless strip malls. We both seemed to sense that it would be our last time together, and we spoke about how generous many people in Houston had been to our group and many others.

“It may not look like it, but there’s a lot of beauty here,” Aaron told me. I nodded, blinking back tears, realizing something extraordinary had happened amid this city of highways.

Cornell Visions

NOVEMBER 11, 2022

Mursal

As Mursal, Marwa, and Omar were settling into their intensive English classes at Chatham, a new possibility emerged for where they might continue their studies after their first year.

Cornell University had distinguished itself with notable support for Afghan students. Already the school was proudly hosting nine female Afghan undergraduates, all of whom had been at Asian University for Women (AUW) in Bangladesh but had been forced back to Afghanistan due to the pandemic. A Cornell professor who served on the AUW board pitched the university on taking a cohort of them, and “the yes from the administration was immediate,” said Nishi Dhupa, Cornell’s associate vice provost for international affairs. The young women were accepted provisionally, and Nishi pulled together computers and training on how to use them, language instruction, health-care support, and tutors for starters to prepare them to become viable candidates through the traditional application process. All nine matriculated in fall 2022 with full scholarships.

Victoria believed our young students had a shot at joining them. She also understood that schools of this caliber have endowments that allow them to provide full funding for students without resources. It could be a remarkable opportunity.

Victoria brought Mursal and Marwa to campus along with Omar and Fatima, the sole female Afghan journalist in the *Times* group. Rebecca’s assistant, Anna, joined them.

Cornell felt majestic to Mursal the moment she stepped onto campus, with its handsome stone buildings, plunging gorges, distant blue-green lakes, and dense forests. The two-day visit included roundtables with

professors, visits to programs, and interviews with an admissions officer. They met some of the Afghan undergraduates. Mursal had never heard of the Ivy League, but now she intended to get herself there.

She had stressed to Victoria in their early college meetings her commitment to returning to law, and even her willingness to do the three years required at a US law school. But Victoria had counseled that perhaps law school wasn't ideal given the level of English necessary to perform well on the LSAT, which Mursal would need to take immediately. They had settled on Mursal pursuing the one-year LLM. Victoria also encouraged Mursal to consider Cornell's new school of public policy. A master's in public administration took two years and covered women's rights, human rights, and immigrants' rights, all areas of great interest to Mursal.

Not surprisingly, Mursal chose to visit the law school first. She met the head of the asylum law clinic, which was the work Mursal was determined to do. An encouraging administrator told Mursal that if she came, she'd be the first Afghan woman ever to receive her LLM at Cornell. Those words stirred Mursal's heart.

She wasn't immediately drawn to the Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy, but she ran into Omar heading there, and since Marwa was visiting a premed class, Mursal joined him. As the MPA students described their real-world consulting projects, government internships, and concentrations in human rights and economic development, Mursal was taken. A degree from the Brooks School could land her at dream agencies like the UN and USAID.

When the presentation ended, she mingled with the professors and students. One administrator said he recognized her from the question she'd asked during the talk. She was certainly memorable. She decided to apply.

To do so, Mursal and Omar had to travel to Virginia to take an English proficiency exam. Mursal was certain before even sitting for the test that she wouldn't meet Cornell's threshold. A Cornell professor she'd met on campus had admitted that he'd just squeaked by after studying English for seven years. A curious *Times* editor took the Duolingo practice ESL test, which is similar, later as an experiment and couldn't even complete it because he got so many answers wrong. Mursal had been speaking English for less than two years. Her score fell just below the requirement, but she turned in her application anyhow.

On March 15, the much-awaited email from admissions arrived. The curt form letter said that due to her language score, her application could not be considered.

Mursal broke down. She was deflated but also now panicked. Her burning issue was not that she would never soar in a legal career; rather, her concern was on the home front. She was convinced she'd be forced to get married—and immediately. “What am I going to do?” she wailed. A young Afghan woman could delay marriage only for her studies. Already her mother had been pushing that it was time for marriage and at one time had a mate in mind. Mursal's mother was a feminist but wanted all her children to have relationships and families.

“I'm not going back home,” Mursal said to nobody in particular.

Mursal had never lacked suitors. There had been many in Afghanistan. At her language institute job, where there were many Afghans learning English, “I had so many proposals. So many,” she said. “Their moms came to me. ‘I really love you.’ ‘I have a son.’ ‘My husband's brother is looking for a bride.’”

Arranged marriage is common in Afghanistan, and wedding a cousin is not uncommon. In the five years before Kabul's fall, love marriages were becoming increasingly routine, though the families still had to grace the pairing. That marriages between relatives produce children with higher rates of birth defects does not seem to be a deterrent. “They don't think about genetics. If he is rich, they will get you married to that guy,” Maryam once noted dryly. “They think it's not a 100 percent problem, so they don't worry.”

Mursal steered clear of all overtures from men. “I am not giving any chance to anyone. My friends are like ‘Mursal, if you want to marry, you have to give a chance to someone to know him. It won't be like magic.’” But even engaging casually felt dangerous. “Because of our religion and our culture, you are not allowed to touch a boy before marriage. No one would get married to you. You are used,” she said. Mursal thought waiting until marriage to be serious and intimate was best. “Every relationship gives you damage,” she said. She knew the final say on a potential husband would be her choice. Arranged marriage, yes; forced, no.

Thankfully, Mursal ultimately didn't have to worry about any of this. Two weeks after the mid-March form letter, she received a second email from Cornell's Brooks School. The communication explained that the previous rejection had been an administrative error, an automated response. Based on her strong oral skills on her language exam, the admissions team had determined that her speaking capability and oral comprehension were on par with those of many accepted students. She was accepted after all, as was Omar, two of one hundred admissions out of some two thousand applicants.

She scanned the message, then thrust her phone at Marwa. "Am I reading correctly?" She screenshotted the email and texted it to Anna for more reassurance.

There was another critical layer to her good fortune, which Mursal was unaware of at the time. Early on, Anna had told a generous friend about the Afghan students' college dreams, casually wondering if he had any connections with universities.

He came back to Anna a few days later and under his breath said, "They should be good to go." Without telling her, he'd donated to Cornell, earmarking it for Afghan refugees, enough to cover tuition for those Anna brought to tour there who were admitted. He gave before anyone was accepted, and Cornell clarified that it could make no promises they would be. The students would have to get in through the standard process and then could access the funds. He wanted to remain anonymous to the students.

Only Mursal and Omar among the group of four Anna brought to tour were accepted. Marwa, who had applied to Cornell's undergraduate premed program, was turned down. She would need to stay at Chatham, which had its own advantages, being small and thus more manageable, and much closer to the Washington, DC, area, where their parents were hoping to move.

Mursal tried to cheer Marwa up. She focused on the language in the admissions letter Cornell had sent Marwa, which encouraged her to apply again. Mursal also reminded her sister that Chatham was a great option for the time being. "You will be the only Afghan doing premed at Chatham," she told Marwa. "Everyone will know you."

Tears over a Mattress

JANUARY 2, 2023

Samira

Samira finally got her chance to study. She and Wais had pushed their Chatham start date one semester, since Durrin was just months old, and the wait had felt interminable. Samira was thrilled to be getting underway and would pursue nursing. The one unanticipated challenge: the young family arrived in Pittsburgh in the dead of winter without any of their belongings.

Rebecca got word that Samira, Wais, and Durrin were struggling, so she called her sister-in-law Laura Kessler and asked her to check on them. Laura had already become a bit of a lifeline for the Afghans in Pittsburgh. She had previously connected with Marwa, Mursal, and Omar when they relocated. Laura and her husband's sleek modern house is a ten-minute walk from Chatham.

Wais went downstairs into the side parking lot and waved exaggeratedly to Laura. She had just texted that she was lost, which wasn't surprising because the Rustamis' cinder-block apartment building was hidden behind a large, stately former mansion. Laura followed Wais up the outdoor stairwell and into their living room, which was bare except for a stiff sofa, coffee table, and kitchen table.

Laura had a wide smile and radiated positivity. Wais motioned for her to follow him to the bedroom. Samira was on the bed with six-month-old Durrin between her legs. The young mom looked waiflike in her thin gray cotton leggings and pale blue oxford, clothes more appropriate for spring than January in the mid-Atlantic. She doesn't have a good record of dressing correctly for the weather. The bed looked oddly low. Laura made a silly face at Durrin, and the tiny girl with long lashes over dark eyes and petite gold earrings beamed a smile.

Laura now noticed that Samira and Durrin were sitting on the wooden bed frame, which was two twin frames pushed together with just a thin white blanket over the top. Samira and Wais had stored the mattresses because they were hurting their backs.

Laura stared at this wide-eyed young woman with such an earnest face. Laura then glanced into the crib and saw that it didn't have any mattress or bedding. Then she started to cry.

"You shouldn't be crying!" Samira told her, forcing a half smile. "Don't cry. We are fine."

The young family arrived midyear, so unfortunately, the many thoughtful touches that Chatham had provided the Afghans who'd arrived in August—like stocking kitchen and bedding basics and leaving gift cards to Target—had been overlooked. Laura was having trouble wrapping her brain around the unsettled state of this exceedingly vulnerable-seeming couple with the precious baby girl shooting her irrepressible smiles. Her own first months of motherhood couldn't have looked more different.

"We have more belongings. They just haven't arrived," Samira said, still trying to sound upbeat. Rather than risk a twenty-hour drive in the old Toyota Camry Aaron Tate had sold them for \$500, they'd shipped the car with their belongings inside from Houston and flown.

Within the hour, Laura was driving to Target. She returned with a standard crib mattress and a crib sheet.

On the morning their car arrived, Samira and Laura switched off holding Durrin and carrying loads up to the apartment with Wais. Samira begged Laura to just sit down and have some fruit and tea.

"In my country, people of Laura's age aren't working. They should be served by the children," she said.

Laura, who was fifty-nine, insisted. She was just over five feet tall with Lucy-from-Peanuts energy: confident, brash, gung-ho, in charge.

Next Laura borrowed a truck and remedied the problem of Samira and Wais's bed. She scored a king mattress on sale from Mattress Firm. Laura also outfitted a crib for Durrin at her house so she could easily babysit. She thrifted a vintage 1950s mobile in the theme of the cow jumping over the moon and pulled out a hand-stitched quilt, a rare treasure she'd found and set aside for her future grandchildren. Laura prided herself on her deal finding, the upshot of her compulsive popping into Goodwill and musty

secondhand shops. She'd made a second career of selling antiques and managing estate sales around town. There's a reason she named that business Leave It to Laura.

For childcare, Samira and Wais were relying on a free emergency day care called Jeremiah's Place. Laura was wary of the crisis nursery, which took all comers, including sick kids with runny noses, and where babies had to basically be handed over in the front office. There was no opportunity for inspection of the inner workings of the center. Samira, understandably, struggled with leaving Durrin there. While this setup was likely due to limited staffing, Samira was a worrier in a new city and country.

Wais was the king of keeping it together, but raw, gray skies and the heft of family responsibilities shook him. "When I first arrived, I didn't see any sun for one week. In my heart, everything is tight. I want to go somewhere and yell," he said. But he bounced back quickly.

Samira breezed through her first semester. Chatham's Pathways program offered just one level of English instruction, and Samira was nearly fluent already, having studied in English in India. "We started back with 'Hello, how are you?'" she said, rolling her eyes. She planned to start Chatham's one-year prenursing curriculum in September and then apply to UPMC Shadyside School of Nursing. This was a rigorous two-year clinical program, after which she'd do one more year at Chatham and graduate with her BA and BSN. Samira had settled on nursing when she and Victoria had weighed the pros and cons of nursing versus medical school, including the length of study and costs involved.

Laura immediately became a fixture in their lives and soon the scaffolding their lives hang on. She researched and applied to day cares and finagled a 30 percent discount at the one they chose. The balance of that expense was covered by the newly established nonprofit JREF, which provided funds to support education. Victoria lobbied hard for Durrin's day care to be covered as an educational expense. Her reasoning was sound: without childcare, Samira and Wais would never be able to succeed in college and nursing school.

Laura often transported Durrin to and from childcare and took her to the

park or to her house to play. When Durrin got so picky about food that she was barely eating, Laura drove her to Aiello's Pizza, a Pittsburgh institution. "There's not a kid in the world that doesn't like pizza," she promised Samira. Sure enough, Durrin sat in Laura's lap and polished off a big slice. Laura bought the family used clothes, updated their phones and added them to her AT&T plan, paid for their internet, and found Wais a dentist. Laura had the family of three over for Sunday dinner. Soon, they were at every Sunday dinner, which soon often included Laura's parents, Suzi and Dick Paul, ages eighty-eight and ninety, who have lived Pittsburgh for the last sixty years. When Durrin started talking, she called Laura Nana.

Laura took Wais to renew his driver's license and bought him four new car tires when she feared his old ones were too bald. She took him to the auto body shop to collect his car after one of several fender benders. Wais had specified particular headlights to the mechanic for the replacement, and the ones that had been installed weren't right. Wais started to insist they be changed, which would have required another trip, and Laura shooed Wais outside. "Look, you use this car to drive to preschool. The headlights work. They're fine. You want to be like my kid, I'm going to treat you like I would my kid," she lectured him.

She momentarily worried she'd overstepped. "I said to you exactly what I would have said to my son Ben," she said, driving home. She decided that was exactly the right litmus test, and she'd use it often.

Samira texted Laura throughout the day. Actually, "Sam" did. Around this time, she started using Sam. It was easier to pronounce, but an instinct, conscious or not, to shed her old identity certainly made sense.

Sam was a perpetual catastrophizer. "The baby has a cough. Could she have pertussis?" "She is smelling things all the time. I read that can be a sign of autism," she'd text Laura, or "She's sick, I'm taking her to the ER." She didn't allow Durrin to play in their front yard, fearing she'd get into dog poop, because "babies can get some virus from that," she said. Laura talked her off many ledges. Laura soon started noting Durrin's pediatrician checkups in her calendar and always went along.

Sometimes Sam stared at Laura across the table and tried to imagine what life would have been like if she'd had a mother who loved and supported her this way. Sam would be an entirely different person. But she also recognized that she felt a kind of appreciation and sense of fortune and

destiny for finding Laura that a person who hadn't been deprived of love could never feel. She told Wais, "I deserve this family. I deserve this family. I needed them forever."

Water Is Crazy

FEBRUARY 2023

Mursal

Mursal wanted to conquer swimming. When a Muslim women's group organized a pool outing, she finally got her chance.

In January, Mursal joined the young women's group at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, the city's largest mosque. The group was for thirteen- to nineteen-year-olds, but women over twenty were welcome as mentors. There were frequent social outings like ice skating, sleepovers, berry-picking, themed dinners, and the swim session.

Her Pittsburgh mosque experience was profound in a way Mursal had never expected. With these young Muslim women, Mursal came to see her religion anew. "It changed my mind completely about how different Muslims are here. How free you are to be happy in the mosque, to laugh, to not just sit and stay quiet," she said. They gathered in the mosque basement on Friday evenings for games and silly runway shows wearing traditional dresses from their home countries. In Afghanistan, mosque visits were always serious, even harsh. "The people who teach you are hard," she said. "It's more based on fear. They will tell you to have a fear of God. Why should I have a fear of God when he is the most merciful? They will not teach you to love your religion."

For the first time in America, she felt a real connection to other young people. Her attempts to bond with her Chatham classmates had fallen flat. They were nineteen or twenty, and she was twenty-five. But the issue wasn't simply maturity, because many of these women at the mosque were younger, too. It was that her life experience was vastly different from that of her Chatham peers. "I grew up in the middle of war. We were inside the house. We heard the shots. They don't have any idea how unfair the world is."

For the swim outing, they couldn't just show up at a general session at a YMCA pool. That would never work. The youth group needed to rent out the entire facility and ensure that everyone working at the time was a woman, from the check-in staff to lifeguards to custodians. The manager was happy to accommodate them.

Mursal had never been swimming, unless she counted riding on her dad's shoulders into a lake during childhood. But she relished novel experiences. In preparation, she perused swimsuits online. She liked several burkinis, full-body Lycra numbers that covered all but the hands, feet, and face, intended to respect Islamic traditions of modesty, but determined that her black workout tights would suffice, with a tunic she already owned. Unfortunately, she forgot about a head covering, but since they were all girls, she felt fine leaving her hair uncovered.

Once she'd changed into her neck-to-ankle spandex, she approached the pool's edge. She gingerly dipped in one foot. Not too cold. The smell of chlorine was strong, an entirely new scent for Mursal.

Her nerves kicked up a bit. Even though she was adventurous and in the coming months would try weight lifting and belly dancing and yearn to go skiing and skydiving, water freaked her out. But that made her all the more determined to get in.

"Mursal, I'm going to stay right beside you!" one of her group friends assured her. The others there knew how to swim.

Mursal sat down and dangled her legs in the water. After a moment, she started sliding in. Slowly. She gripped the wall, utterly out of her element. Her goal was to simply dunk her head. Even that was a huge deal. Her friend joined her on the wall.

Mursal started mustering her guts. She inched away from the side, then started counting, "One... two... three..." She didn't move. "One..." she said more forcefully, "two... three." But she remained upright, standing stiffly.

"You are going to be fine. Just dunk quickly and come right up," her friend said.

"One..." Mursal blurted and then, with no drama, submerged.

In a nervous reaction, she sucked in. That fast breath pulled pool water into her throat and lungs. She'd gotten splayed out and couldn't get her feet under her. Her friend grabbed her, and Mursal emerged sputtering pool

water.

The young woman thumped Mursal's back until she finally stopped choking. She pushed Mursal to try again, telling her if she plugged her nose and sealed her lips, no water could get in.

"I've done my last swimming," Mursal said emphatically, climbing up the ladder.

Her friend begged her to go under once more.

"Water is crazy!" Mursal said forcefully.

She wasn't really abandoning swimming. She would be moving on from Chatham to Cornell for the next school year, and she'd heard that the university made all students pass a swimming test in order to graduate. Before long, she was back online, perusing burkinis. She wanted one with a head covering. Because she wanted her whole suit to match, she'd likely get something new. She eyed one in fern green.

I'll swim, she thought. Just watch.

Punting on PE

MARCH 2023

Maryam

Maryam and her family left Houston for Northern Virginia in June 2022, as soon as the school year ended. The Alokozays moved to be closer to family, as immigrants often do. Maryam's aunt and uncle lived in Falls Church, and her family moved just down the road and eventually into the same building.

For the second time in the US, Maryam had to start a new high school, this year as a junior. During her second semester at Alexandria City High School, gym class had become Maryam's albatross.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, just before 1 p.m., Maryam fell into a foul mood. She didn't like changing into sweatpants and a hoodie. She hated standing in the bathroom stall, wrestling on her sports bra. She had no clue how to work a combination lock so left hers hanging unhooked on her locker.

Her physical education teacher was quite old and strict. The department put no trust in the students; once they'd changed into athletic clothes, the assistant gym teacher swept in behind them and locked the locker rooms so nobody could sneak in and get back into their clothes early or take classmates' things.

"Go ahead, you steal the laptop the school gave me," Maryam said mockingly. "Like prisoners they would take you to the gym."

No matter what the activity, whether tennis, volleyball, or basketball, Maryam hadn't played before. She had never done anything athletic "except walking," she said.

She did participate on the first day. She did the warm-up, fifteen minutes of walking on the track. But the mandatory push-ups that followed did her in.

“The other kids were up, down, up, down, for one hundred push-ups. I was on the floor, like how do I get myself up?”

She missed the next two gym classes for doctor’s appointments. When she returned and handed her teacher a doctor’s note excusing her from participation due to migraines, he was unsympathetic. “If you don’t play, I can’t give you a grade. That means you fail,” he said flatly. His demeanor pissed her off. She wasn’t fabricating the pounding inside her skull.

Her headaches had started in Houston. Her doctor there suspected stress, which was right. He also diagnosed anemia. Myram’s assessment of 2022 was “the most messed-up year of my whole life.” Nothing felt good. “School was boring... I had no social life. I had no one the same age as me. I didn’t have my driver’s license. I didn’t have a credit card. I was just stuck in a place that I couldn’t move myself from it. I thought, *What would happen if I had to feel like this for the whole, like, sixteen years?*”

Since coming to Virginia, light had started streaming back into her world. She felt that literally in their new, sunnier apartment, but more generally, too. But even as her outlook improved, her headaches persisted.

Then she passed out in the kitchen one night at 1 a.m. Her mother saw her go down, noticing that her hands were balled up. They had a family history of epilepsy, and she wondered if her daughter’s blackout was a seizure. Maryam wondered if she’d OD’d on Advil. They went immediately to the ER, but tests were inconclusive. Her EKG was slightly abnormal. Her blood counts were fine. The doctor wrote orders to see a neurologist.

Maryam had a string of appointments, each requiring follow-ups. She saw a cardiologist and a neurologist; she had an MRI, X-rays, a stress test, and a CAT scan.

Weirdly, Maryam wasn’t scared. She loved the glimpse inside so many medical specialties. She liked any disruption to her humdrum routine. “To be honest, it was exciting. Something was happening in my life. I need ups and downs,” she said.

With her PE teacher unmoved, she decided she’d have to take matters into her own hands. At the start of the next class, she scanned the large gymnasium. As soon as one of the four doors was out of her teacher’s view, she slipped out. She hardly acted like a delinquent—she just sat outside and read.

Soon she was doing this routinely. She changed and then found her exit.

The next time her teacher saw her, he said he was going to have to fail her. “Fine,” Maryam said. “I’m not going to participate, and you are not going to excuse me, so I am going to fail.” They were both quite matter-of-fact.

“We had this agreement that he’s not going to pass me, but I’m not going to participate,” she said.

She used these minor rebellions to let off steam, since so much of the time she was puffed up in frustration at wasting time and feeling in perpetual pause when she had a serious pursuit she was burning to get underway. When she spoke about such incidents, or the fact that she wore her AirPods and blasted music in her ears through many class lectures, which she could get away with because of her scarf, she sounded proud. She regarded her nerviness as a badge of honor.

Petites Are Online Only

WINTER 2023

Mursal

During her first year in Pittsburgh, Mursal followed her sister into retail. She decided to get a part-time job during the school year to make money to help cover her expenses and to contribute to her family.

She applied to be a “stylist,” which was really a glorified salesperson, at the Banana Republic in Shadyside, a neighborhood next to Chatham. She sailed through her initial interview and was invited back for round two.

At this stage, she had to jump through some sartorial hoops, particularly tricky ones for a Muslim woman who takes her modesty seriously. Luckily, Mursal was becoming deft at winging it, whether it was on the panel at the *Times* or navigating her unfamiliar computer.

Mursal was to “shop” the store and curate three outfits she’d recommend. After picking out the clothing and accessories, she was to model her choices, selling the merchandise as she would to customers.

This was the rub: there were outfits she’d curate for shoppers and clothes she’d wear, but these would almost never overlap. Mursal’s form of style included complete coverage: arms to the wrist, legs to the floor, and head in public at all times. The idea of parading in front of any male was strictly against her religion, and even covered up, she’d show herself off only to a woman.

Ultimately, she struck a compromise with her hopeful employers. Mursal would show off her choices, but her outfits would be modest and modeled before a female manager only.

Mursal was hired. On her first shift, her manager warmly extended his hand in welcome. “I don’t shake,” Mursal said, pulling her hand away. She was often confronted with this awkward scenario. But she preferred to be embarrassed, even rude, than to compromise her values, as when she’d

declined the hands of several male attendees when she'd visited the *Times* office for the panel.

The Banana Republic job turned out to be more challenging than she'd expected. Being able to laugh at herself was critical.

Around school, her vocabulary was quickly expanding with language immersion as she was assigned books like *Wonder* and *The Giver* and made personal picks like Colleen Hoover novels. What tripped her up at Banana Republic were the very specific clothing terms she needed to know. Style came completely naturally to her, but descriptors like *hems*, *peg legs*, *cuffs*, and *silk shells* were all mysteries. She tried to sound knowledgeable, though she couldn't distinguish slingbacks from seersucker if her life depended on it.

Her trips to the stockroom were the makings of an *I Love Lucy* episode. The stylists wore earpieces so dressing-room attendants could direct them via walkie-talkie to bring up specific items. She could rarely make out the words through the static. Mursal told her manager she must have a hearing problem because the sound was so crackly. The manager assured Mursal that she just had to get used to their audio system. She'd usually bring up every possible pair of black pants in the specified size rather than risk leaving the right one behind.

When she could grab a moment of privacy, she'd quickly google an unfamiliar term, which occasionally saved her.

One time, she overheard her coworker tell a customer who'd asked for "petites" that the item was online only. Mursal assumed that petites must be lingerie or underwear. "I thought that petite was something that you wear under your dress," she said.

The next day, a customer tapped her shoulder. "Do you have any camisoles?"

"Those are online only," Mursal immediately told the woman, who looked confused.

"Those are online only" became her go-to response for questions that stumped her.

Sister SOS

APRIL 2023

Sam

In midspring, Sam awoke to a photo in her WhatsApp message stream that immediately became an emergency.

The sight of her twenty-one-year-old sister Nasima's lower leg and ankle nearly caused Sam to pass out. Nasima had sent her a picture of her badly burned flesh. The skin was blotchy, dark areas interspersed with pus-filled blisters in amoeba shapes.

Their mother was abusing Nasima worse than ever. After Sam's wedding, their mother had forbidden the two sisters to speak, but they had kept up a secretive text exchange. Sam knew that their mother had tried to force Nasima into a marriage with a much older man and, when Nasima refused, began to starve her at home. Nasima had dropped from 143 pounds to 88. Now, their mother had thrown a pot of boiling water at Nasima's leg, scalding her.

Sam had to save Nasima. She was panicked that her mother might try to outright kill her sister. Nasima had texted Sam that she'd overheard their mother speaking with their uncle, and he was proposing that "they should get rid of her and kill her and bury her somewhere."

Sam called Rebecca, her voice shaking. She'd heard that private individuals and organizations sometimes sponsored refugees and wondered if that was a possible avenue to bring her sister to the US.

Rebecca had a different idea. Back in 2021, the *Times* podcast *The Daily* had featured an eighteen-year-old Afghan woman who was referred to as "N." The young woman, hiding in her Kabul basement to avoid discovery, had shared her arresting story of having been beaten and burned by her father and brothers for refusing to marry a Talib. The family was being targeted by the Taliban, and they insisted that she marry the man in sacrifice

for the family. After hearing N's plight, Rebecca had contacted her Qatari friend, Minister Al-Khater, to ask if she could help N to escape. Minister Al-Khater came through after weeks of covert preparations, and the young woman got out of Afghanistan.

Rebecca believed some of the same contacts might help Nasima. She wrote to an American woman who'd opened several women's shelters in Afghanistan and got information about a safe house in Kabul.

But even after Nasima went there, Sam feared her sister still wasn't safe. Sam had heard rumors that women taking refuge were farmed out to live with families, and "they make her like a slave," Sam said. "Those families, they have sons and husbands. I was scared, because rape is very normal." Sam worked herself into hysteria.

After several months, Sam convinced her sister to flee Afghanistan. After one attempt failed because of a temporarily closed border, Sam asked a friend to help. He accompanied Nasima to the border and paid a smuggler so that she could get in their car. In the chaos of so many Afghans leaving their country, she managed to avoid any questioning and official paperwork. Her family had no idea where Nasima was living, so she was safe for the time being. In Pittsburgh, Sam sighed in relief.

Invisibility Cloaks and Other Conversation Starters

MAY 2023

Mursal and Marwa

After their first year at Chatham, Marwa and Mursal felt a sense of freedom setting in. They were in Houston for the summer. Mursal had her driver's license, and they were exploring the city; Marwa had made several friends working at the Gap.

After her shift one evening, Marwa sat outside on a bistro patio with Mursal at the CityCentre mall, waiting for their sister Sosan to get off work at the language school where she did data entry. Mursal rifled through a deck of conversation starters on the table.

"Would you rather be invisible or be able to fly?" Mursal read from the card.

"Invisible. Definitely invisible," Marwa said.

That Marwa would opt for invisibility made perfect sense. To be able to move about freely, unseen and undisturbed, was everything. In Afghanistan, women were subject to constant, stressful monitoring and harassment. Sanity requires drawing no attention to oneself.

"In Kunduz, if only my eyes were showing, then a guy would say something about my eyes. They are really sick," Marwa said.

Even before the Taliban's return, daily life in Afghanistan was overwhelmingly segregated by gender. Schools were separate starting in sixth grade. Mursal's law school was all female. Men dined in the vibrant front rooms of restaurants, while women were confined to "essentially a closet," Marwa said. Men and women visited city parks on separate days unless the area was designated a family zone. The sisters had fond memories of enjoying the park with their mom on the prescribed day, but

then the security situation in Kunduz worsened, and women's days ended.

In contrast, Marwa noticed how going about daily life in America felt frictionless. "Because I know nobody is watching me," she said. "Before you had that free feeling only inside the house. Now you have it outside."

Marwa was better able to navigate male attention. That afternoon at the Gap, a male customer had asked for her help buying a gift from the baby registry. The computer system was down, so Marwa wrote his purchase information on a slip of paper. "He said, 'Why did you write my name down? Are you trying to make me more nervous around you?'" Marwa said. "Then he asked, 'Can I take you out?' I was like, 'I am an Afghan girl, and I don't interact with men. I should be the one who is nervous!'"

"You should have said, 'I don't go out because I am an indoor girl!'" Mursal said. She picked up another conversation card. This one said, "Do you believe there is life on another planet?" She considered it.

"It's impossible to think we are alone in this world, in this galaxy," Mursal said. "I think someone will contact us. I saw on the news that maybe Earth is going to send signals to other planets."

Sosan arrived and slipped in beside Mursal. She looked professional in cream silk pants and a leopard-print blouse. The conversation ricocheted in all directions. Marwa was considering getting a second job and had had an interview at Whataburger that morning. The manager had assumed she was Latina and spoken to her in Spanish. The sisters mused about their dream cars. Mursal coveted a black Jeep, and Marwa liked BMWs, though she wasn't planning on learning to drive in Houston.

"When I get nervous, I feel I will push the gas instead of the brake," she said.

Next Mursal cooed about memorable outfits from the Met Gala. "I love her, Dua Lipa," she said. ChatGPT came up next. "They are even using it for asylum applications," Mursal marveled.

Marwa realized how exceptionally lucky they were to have the quality of counsel that they did. Each member of the Rahim family had two or three high-quality lawyers assigned to them. The attorneys, from many of the nation's most prominent firms and working pro bono, exhaustively gathered and assembled testimony and backup materials into giant binders, each one nearly knee-high. The towers of documents contained granular detail about instances of threats against family members.

Najim, who had begun his journalism career as a photographer in his province and worked his way to contributing to several Pulitzer Prize-winning packages, had been threatened directly by the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. An official had been angered by his refusal to create propaganda for the group. “He messaged me on Facebook, ‘I will kill you,’” Najim said. The man followed Najim’s stories and continued the threats, even after Najim evacuated. “When I got to Mexico, I got a threat. He said, ‘I will kill you,’” Najim said. Najim reported the threat when he was interviewed by DHS officials.

The expansive legal assistance the *Times* group enjoyed was due to David, the *Times*’ deputy general counsel. With the same intensity as Rebecca’s, Victoria’s, and Anna’s scramble to secure college placements, David led an unprecedented legal mobilization to help the Afghans gain lawful immigration status. The scope of the project required the same thoughtful operationalizing as the resettlement effort. He wooed a veteran immigration attorney as organizer-in-chief, who reeled in eleven firms, including Simpson Thacher, Gibson Dunn, and Cleary Gottlieb.

Each asylum case, which numbered more than fifty since anyone over eighteen needed to file individually, required a dedicated legal team. Marwa’s three lawyers worked with her over thirty-some video sessions, including extensive mock-interview sessions in preparation for her hearing with a judge. Because of the wide difference in how judges and asylum officers interpret claims, every application had to be airtight.

The results are a source of tremendous pride for David and all involved: Every one of the 124 people in the group who sought asylum in 2022 got it. The work to obtain green cards and permanent status was underway and ongoing.

The evening sky above CityCentre threatened rain. Marwa stayed fixated on the scene before her. The mall’s central plaza ringed by brightly lit stores was covered with yoga mats, and a minimally clad participant stood on each one.

“Even the instructor is a woman!” Marwa said. On a riser, microphone jutting out from a headset, the teacher talked the yogis through a series of

poses. There were over one hundred bodies pretzeling into warrior, triangle, and crow. Marwa was stunned.

She loved to exercise. A Chatham classmate had taught her a twenty-minute cardio warm-up followed by a weight and stretching routine. She'd long contemplated starting a YouTube channel to teach movement to Afghan women. But the voice in her head that worried about public approval remained loud.

"One moment, I think, *OK, I should do it*, and then I wonder, *What will people think of me?*" Marwa said.

American Culture and a Slice of Cheesecake

JUNE 2023

Maryam

Maryam was intent on getting a job as soon as she finished her junior year. A job would get her out into the world. A job was money but also, most urgently, independence.

Her mother fought her on this. She didn't like the idea of Maryam working in a service position. But Maryam got her way. She never doubted that she would.

On one of her first shifts, the Cheesecake Factory door had been swinging open with the regularity of a metronome for two hours. Maryam, behind the podium in black pants and a loose black tunic, forced a smile.

"Welcome in," she said to the latest entrants, feigning bubblyness. An introvert with a gravelly voice, Maryam lacked the "blooming" personality—her word—that was ideal for the position. Her manager had emphasized that the host is the first impression of a restaurant. Maryam knew she was in the wrong job. "Honestly, I'm not the first person you would want to meet in a restaurant," she said wryly. She was there because the position was easy to get because her brother Abu worked there. He had advanced from part-time busboy to management trainee.

Maryam had no such aspirations but also had other summer plans. She was enrolled in a weeklong STEM overnight program at Hollins University in Virginia. Victoria had suggested the idea, but Maryam had initially resisted. She'd never spent a night away from home alone except at her grandparents' house. But she'd gathered her nerve and registered. She was also planning to do a certified clinical medical assistant (CCMA) course at Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). She reasoned that any high

schooler could get a high GPA, but the STEM camp and CCMA class would be differentiators on college applications.

Being June, it was Pride Month. She'd seen an impressive variety of rainbow-themed outfits, some adding tutus. She'd seated groups of raucous men in jeans cutoffs, the tips of their spiked hair bleached various bright tints. She loved all the flamboyant self-expression.

Among her most striking observations since arriving in Virginia was the easy acceptance of a vast array of people. The week before, Black families and friends celebrating Juneteenth had crowded the restaurant, and she'd found herself embracing it all. She'd been trained that it was of the utmost importance "to treat customers equally, no matter what I think of them," she said. That came naturally to her. "What sexuality people have, or what desire they have or religion—I would treat them the same as any person."

At peak lunch rush, a group of Muslim women in headscarves came in and crowded around Maryam. Two had babies in strollers.

"Can I show you to a table?" Maryam said brightly. The women began to push the strollers into the dining room, and Maryam made a move to block them, explaining that the carriers would have to be stored. One woman bristled and said her baby was sleeping.

Maryam stood firm. As soon as the women were situated in a booth, one beckoned Maryam over. They hassled her about the wait for bread. They clearly expected special treatment from their Muslim hostess. Maryam calmly explained that the bread was baked to order.

There could be no favors because they wore scarves. She appreciated this American concept of egalitarianism.

The diversity of race, religion, sexuality, and more that defines American culture does not exist in Afghanistan. It is a Muslim country. "We were never used to having foreigners as part of the community," Maryam said. "They didn't have any immigration in Afghanistan. It was the other way around, people leaving to other places."

But aspects of the same culture had forged some of her most powerful attributes. She was toughened by the hard edges of daily life in Afghanistan. And her motivation and urgency were forged by living in an underdeveloped country where nothing came easily. "In America, it's not between bad and worse. It's between good and better."

Maryam had fierce ambition. She had been chasing her aunt forever. Her

mother's oldest sister was an obstetrician at a government hospital in Kabul serving the country's top brass. She was connected at Kabul University and had always imagined she'd guide Maryam's journey there. She'd taken Maryam along on night shifts, and Maryam would press her face against the operating-room window and watch babies being born. Then she could go to the nursery and see them up close.

Since the return of the Taliban, her aunt had had to work for them if she wanted to have any job (practicing female doctors were among the rare women allowed to continue working). Maryam has stayed in close touch with her.

Her aunt's career resembled what was typical for a man. "She would go to her hospital at 6 a.m.; she had a car, she would wear new clothes, she would wear brands," Maryam said. She was describing a high-powered professional, directing her life with all the trappings of success and status. But most important to Maryam was that every day, her aunt's actions at work were life-or-death critical.

An important part of her aunt's story was that she'd never married. Maryam pictured this for herself as well.

Maryam imagined possessing the power doctors wielded. "In surgery, my aunt would be like 'I cut a skin tissue. Cutting like this should be a crime, but you are not killing, you are saving,'" she said with emotion. "The person that's under the knife have a life, have a heart, somebody out in the world waiting for them. There is a mom, there is a dad, there might be a wife, there might be a kid. You feel a heart beating under your hand."

YEAR THREE

Deep Gorges and UN Dreams

AUGUST 15, 2023

Mursal

Mursal searched the Delta website for the cheapest route to Ithaca. Orientation for her Cornell master's program in public administration was to begin on August 18; she had a housing meeting on the Wednesday before, so she was targeting Tuesday to fly.

"Houston to Syracuse," she mouthed, typing HOU to SYR into the boxes online, Syracuse being the closest major airport.

She consulted the calendar to figure out Tuesday's date, then froze. Tuesday was August 15th. Seeing the significant date sent her reeling. "I saw everything like a movie. Airport, people rushing, plane. It's so fresh," she said.

But it was too late to shift her departure. Victoria had told her to plan to land in Syracuse at the same time as Omar so they could be transported to campus together.

This August 15, two years exactly from the fall of Kabul, turned out to be even worse than Mursal could have imagined.

On the Friday before her departure, a delicate vase slipped from her mother's hands as she soaped the inside. The glass shattered upward in the sink, and the resulting gash on Gulalai's left wrist was so deep that her bone was visible. (The Rahims were so traumatized that they've since forgone buying fresh flowers for their home.) At the ER, the physician told Gulalai that she might have severed some nerves and should see a hand specialist.

The weekend only devolved further. On Sunday night, Mursal's typically stoic dad was doubled over with stomach pains. At 2 a.m., Mursal

called 911, but the dispatcher said the ambulance would take twenty minutes to arrive, so they drove him to the hospital. Tests revealed an infection in his gallbladder. He needed to stay in the hospital to have it removed. The surgery was scheduled for August 15.

Mursal cried for much of the twelve-hour trip to Cornell, which began at 2 a.m. and routed her through Detroit. “I am going to start a journey that will change my life, and I don’t know anything. I was excited, I was sad, I was scared. I was overwhelmed.” She paused. “And I was proud.”

She was already missing Marwa and mused about the prior year. “Even when I went to the dining hall, I was calling Marwa, ‘Where are you?’” she said.

Throughout the journey, Mursal questioned why she’d been chosen as lucky. Her law-school classmates in Afghanistan were stuck at home. Women were no longer employed in the judiciary or law enforcement; women judges had gone into hiding. There were zero women in national or local decision-making bodies.

In a Facebook group with nearly eighty thousand Afghan women, Mursal followed the stream of disturbing posts. Women were getting married out of fear that a Talib might otherwise demand them as a wife, a realistic worry. Imams and clerics had been ordered by the Taliban to bring lists of unmarried women aged twelve to forty-five for their fighters to marry. A sixteen-year-old who’d been forced to marry a member of the Taliban in Ghor Province had committed suicide, according to news reports. A child bride’s court-granted divorce had been overturned, as had thousands of divorce cases decided during the Afghan republic. One week before, one hundred female Afghan students with scholarships to Dubai University had been turned back at the airport. Mursal was certain that if she was still in Afghanistan, she’d be “married and a housewife.”

“I feel so guilty. One of my friends posted that it has been 650 days since they had been to school. But I am going to one of the best universities,” she said ruefully.

“Now I’m too warm,” Mursal said, removing her leather blazer and tugging at her orange top with flared cuffs. She stared into her wicker dresser. She

had been at school for two weeks now.

Mursal's pale green bedroom was on the third floor of a Cape Cod-style shingled house that one of the deans, Nishi Dhupa, had found for her. After the initial group of nine Afghan undergraduates had come in 2021, Nishi had helped two dozen more Afghan scholars matriculate at Cornell.

The grad student renting the next-door bedroom had a boyfriend at MIT who visited some weekends. Initially, Mursal said she couldn't live in such close quarters to another woman's boyfriend, but eventually, she relented. Victoria had encouraged her to pick her battles. The two women shared a kitchen, and Mursal asked that the other student not use Mursal's dishes to cook or eat pork. Mursal appreciated that her housemate considerably switched off FaceTime when she was talking with her boyfriend so Mursal wouldn't be seen with her hair uncovered.

Mursal pulled out two tops, then ducked into the tiny closet on the back wall and pulled the door shut behind her. There was no light inside, and there couldn't have been much air, either. She emerged in a ruffled magenta shirt. "No," she said to her reflection. She then disappeared back into the closet and reappeared in a silk blouse in bold reds and pinks. "OK, yes," she said.

Mursal glanced at her buzzing phone. "She's coming," she said. A classmate, a former rower at Boston College, was picking her up for dinner. Mursal grabbed the hot-pink sneakers from her shoe lineup. "I need comfort. My feet hurt all day," she said, gesturing to the black patent loafers with a rhinestone accent she'd worn to class.

Her five-person study group was getting together for their first purely social evening. Mursal had picked an Asian fusion restaurant on Yelp. The group had come together kind of randomly, but soon they were all connected on a WhatsApp chat. The waiter approached the table, and Mursal's friend sitting on her left looked up from her menu. "Is the chicken halal?" she asked, tucking her coarse hair behind her ears.

"No," the waiter replied without missing a beat, "but I recommend Thai Sun-Dried Beef with Sticky Rice."

"Impressive pivot," one of the classmates said.

Mursal called the brunette on her left her first friend at Cornell. They'd met in the lunch line during orientation. "We're neighbors," Mursal had told her after she'd learned that her friend's parents were from Pakistan, though

she'd been raised in America.

Already Mursal recognized this klatch as her anchor. "I call them 'study buddies,'" she said. "In Afghanistan, you study alone." She'd already made more friends at Cornell than in her entire year at Chatham, surely because she didn't have Marwa.

Having male friends was novel. "In Afghanistan, you have a friend who is a boy and their attention is changed," Mursal said. She'd always experienced those interactions shifting course quickly on the guys' parts toward interest in marriage. But here, "their attention is for friendship."

Mursal started telling her Pakistani friend about her sister Sosan's recent marriage, which led to the subject of the mahr. The two explained to the rest of the table that in Muslim marriages, the mahr was an amount of money or property set by the bride that her fiancé must pay in exchange for her accepting his marriage proposal. "Marriage is arranged," Mursal explained to her new friends, "but the mahr, only the woman decides. She can ask for anything, and he must agree, or she does not have to marry. The family cannot say anything. This is for the girl only." The payment was established to give the woman some insurance should the marriage end and provide a check on the husband's unhampered right of divorce.

Both young Muslim women expected their marriages to be arranged. Mursal and her Pakistani friend started voicing what they would set for their own mahr.

"I'd ask for my graduate school loans to be paid off," Mursal's friend told her, then added, "My mom asked for \$2. Her thinking was that asking for a lot would send a message that you don't trust the marriage."

"I don't want any gold," Mursal said, noting that many women receive a lot of gold jewelry, the value of which is then subtracted from their mahr amount. "I will ask for a big diamond ring," Mursal said, smiling. "But, money, no. I'm not marrying someone to receive financial support. I will have my own money."

Barbie's World?

OCTOBER 1, 2023

Maryam

“There is no ‘Barbie World’ in reality,” Maryam said as she stood at the intersection waiting to cross. She found the recently released film entertaining and appreciated it as social commentary, but the conceit of a world ruled by women seemed implausible. “The pink world, it’s just not something that would ever come true.”

It was Sunday morning, and the traffic was heavy on Seminary Road, which ran alongside her family’s twenty-four-story apartment complex. Maryam often joked that her building was “little Kabul” because so many Afghans lived there. The area of Northern Virginia where her family had relocated in 2022 was home to the second-largest Afghan diaspora community in the US, after Fremont, California.

Reaching an Ethiopian café at the far end of a strip of stores, Maryam stepped inside, still reflecting on the Barbie movie.

She saw Ken’s predicament as reminiscent of the plight of Afghan women. “He’s known only by Barbie,” she said. “Barbie and Ken. He doesn’t have an identity for himself. I think most Afghan women feel the same.”

It wasn’t surprising that Maryam perceived women as being viewed as accessories to men. In much of Afghanistan, norms reinforce female subservience to males. A woman’s name could be left off her own marriage invitation. If a woman wishes to divorce, her husband’s consent is usually required. Though not common, men may lawfully marry up to four wives. A child’s official documents may record only the father’s name. When a woman dies, she is remembered chiefly in relation to her husband, son, or brother; her own name is rarely written or spoken.

Violence against women remains widespread in Afghanistan. The

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan reported in 2021 that nine out of ten Afghan women experience at least one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.

Maryam frequently insisted she'd never marry. She couldn't see a way to maintain her identity in the only relationship model she knew. "Once I get married, it'll be like 'Oh, you know her? She's that person's wife.'"

But as certain as she often sounded, and she frequently repeated herself in a staccato cadence for emphasis, her thinking could be inconsistent. She'd blast men as "monsters" and "bad creatures" and in the next breath concede that she might want to marry one after all. She'd paint a fantasy scenario in which she met a fellow Harvard Medical School student who could understand her worldview and make a suitable husband.

Most days, though, she dismissed the benefit of marriage. "I even sometimes feel so lucky that I am a Muslim and I cannot do relationships, because I have seen people who have seen the worst from a guy. And I don't want to be that person."

Maryam's parents' marriage had been arranged, and they'd assumed conventional gender roles. Khalid, Maryam's father, had worked as a stringer for *Al Jazeera* and *The New York Times* and was the primary breadwinner. Her mother, Shinkae, while traditional, was highly capable, with a willingness to speak her mind. But while she worked as a teacher, her focus was the home.

Maryam voiced what she imagined saying to an overbearing husband: "I don't want you thinking you are so high and you see me as your slave. I want to be your partner, but I'm not going to be your submissive."

Often, Maryam's commentary was cynical, uninterruptible riffs. She readily admitted that some of her knee-jerk negativity was pure jealousy of men's superior status. "The fact that they had all the things I wanted in my life and couldn't have, you know?" Fear of men also colored her worldview. When she was around age fourteen, her body had started developing. "Beauty is a huge concept in my country," she said. "They like fair skin. I had that naturally. I was a tall girl. I had a good figure. Somebody who is beautiful, she cannot pass the age of sixteen without getting married."

The attention was nice, but she heard stress in her mother's urgings for her to cover up. "She was like 'Cover your face, because you are gorgeous. I don't want someone knocking on my door and saying I want to take her.'"

The thought still disturbed Maryam. “I think nothing on this earth can ruin me like a man,” she said. “He can ruin me to my core.”

She constantly used the word *ruined* when talking about men. So did Marwa and Mursal.

“It all depends on a woman for her family,” Maryam said, “so the women are under pressure that they have to keep the shame of the family. If a woman is with a man but does not end up marrying him, the woman and her family will become outcasts. Even her sisters won’t be marriageable. It would not be unusual for a woman in this circumstance to be killed.” This ethic runs so deep that Maryam teases that even her mother might not come to her defense. “Sometimes I tell my mom, ‘If I were in trouble, I’m quite sure you’re not gonna take my side.’”

By her mom’s logic, twenty-eight was the right age for Maryam to marry. Maryam knew that was impossible; she’d be starting residency. Maryam had long figured out that humor was her best defense against her mother’s traditionalism. She told her mom sarcastically the three possibilities if she married at twenty-eight: “I’ll be in court because I killed him. He’ll be in court because he killed me. Third is we are both in court because we are getting divorced.”

Maryam admitted instincts in herself that many women just buried. “I don’t like the responsibility,” she said about the endless demands of motherhood. Her own desires filled all of her capacity, and she didn’t think she could tamp down her ambition for children. “If I have to choose between my kids and a shift in the hospital, I would choose the shift, because it’s something I worked for more than, and long before, I had kids.”

In Afghanistan, she could have balanced being a doctor—though there were no female neurosurgeons—a wife, and a mother. A female physician in her culture still had to return home to cook dinner. No amount of ambition lightened family responsibilities. Women’s careers existed within that constraint.

But in America, “I have a bigger mindset,” she said. She was willing to work the eighty or more hours a week required of top neurosurgeons. She pictured herself staying at the hospital much of the night and then returning first thing in the morning.

Some of Maryam’s conviction was survival instinct, born from growing up in a family that had endured difficulty. When she was a young teen, her

dad was laid off from the *Times*. Eventually, he opened a small clothing shop. But she understood that life could be precarious.

Maryam found it troubling how much both of her parents had to sacrifice for their family. Her mother taught in a primary school but had intense family responsibilities at the same time, so she never got to take a break. When her father was twenty-four, he had to move three hours away to Jalalabad in Nangarhar Province for his job in journalism. For a decade, he saw the family only one week each month.

In America, her father bought his own refrigerated eighteen-wheeler, which he drove several times monthly from Virginia to California and back. “He’s on the road and he might be having some fast food while I’m at home having the full-course meal. His hair is white, and he’s just forty-three.” Maryam sighed. “Truck drivers, they cannot sleep more than four hours.”

Definition of a “Long Journey”

NOVEMBER 15, 2023

Marwa

Marwa prepared herself a waffle in the countertop iron, spritzing the griddle with nonstick spray and then pumping the batter. It was 3 p.m., and as usual, she had come to the dining hall at an off-hour.

Sitting alone in the blond wood banquette, Marwa mindlessly scrolled through Instagram. One image caused her to suddenly recoil. Gazing up at her was the group of Afghan boys she'd started medical school alongside. They were lined up in white doctor's coats, chests puffed out. Marwa quickly realized that nearly seven years had passed since her cohort had begun the seven-year path through medical school, and the boys were about to graduate.

“The girls, they are just sitting and watching,” Marwa hissed. She scrutinized the photo, finally reading the caption: “It has been a long journey.” She smirked at their definition of a long journey.

Seeing the photo reminded her of the most important person she'd left behind, her medical school sidekick and very best friend, Karishma.

The two had met on the first day of medical school in 2018. Marwa had walked into a nearly full lecture hall and spotted a seat amid a bunch of attractive young women. She was self-conscious as she clacked across the floor in high heels, shoes she now marvels that she actually chose for class. “I love your shoes,” Karishma gushed the moment Marwa sat down. After class, the pair walked out together, along with another classmate. By the following day, they were an inseparable threesome. “We were famous at school,” Marwa said.

The trio was constantly dressing in matching outfits. In one photo Marwa had on her phone, all three were in cherry-red blazers with big buttons and dark jeans, clinging to one another as girls do. All three were

pretty, and Afghans are some of the most stunning people on the planet, but Marwa glowed the most, with her bright white teeth and dimples. She said she looks classically Pashtun (the majority ethnicity in Afghanistan), referring to her fuller face and prominent eyebrows, though she is actually a mix, as her father is Tajik.

Out for hamburgers, fries, and Cokes one day near school, the three girlfriends agreed that deeply religious guys were not for them. Karishma teased that those boys would kill Marwa for

her too-short dresses, loose hair, and lipstick. “You would be dead in like a week,” Karishma said. Marwa lent Karishma her phone, which she put her own SIM card in so she could call her crush without her parents finding out. Marwa’s breathy reminiscences sounded like those of many American college girls, dominated by boundless friendships and gossip, though the stakes were surely higher for the Afghan women.

At Chatham, Marwa could have used a best friend. The day before, she’d met with her adviser to discuss dropping Chemistry I. Ten weeks into the semester, her grade was poor, and she was only slipping further behind. Premed students at Chatham needed at least a C– in classes in their major to advance to the next course in the sequence, and she’d surely need to redo chemistry. She figured why stay and suffer? Her adviser agreed.

Marwa had already taken Chemistry I in Afghanistan and received a B–. She’d decided to retake the class at Chatham instead of transferring the credit, certain she’d improve her grade. She had underestimated how tough STEM classes are at American universities and not realized that her preparation in her country was likely insufficient. She was aiming for B’s or better, understanding that grades are everything when applying to medical school in the US.

In lab sessions, where she measured aspirin concentrations or characterized solutions turning from white to pink and back again, she got high marks. What tripped her up were exams, getting through the forty-plus questions, largely because comprehending scientific terminology in English remained very tough.

She was faring better in biology and psychology, using some hacks. She watched YouTube videos on cell regulation and mitosis in Farsi. She learned to use Google to quickly define words, once looking up *cursing* when her professor said it. “When I was in Afghanistan, I thought Google

was illegal!” Marwa said. She used Grammarly to edit her writing after checking with her professor that using AI this way was allowed.

She asked because of a serious faux pas she’d made earlier, using research materials for a psychology paper. She’d cut and pasted several paragraphs explaining the science directly into her work. Her professor returned Marwa’s paper and asked her to come to her office. She issued a curt reprimand about plagiarism and showed Marwa the computer program she uses to identify text lifted word for word from sources. She told Marwa she either needed to quote the material or paraphrase it in her own words. When Marwa explained that she was new to this type of writing and research, the professor softened and allowed her to revise the paper. She would never have imagined that in another year’s time, Marwa would be a whiz at citations, know that MLA and AP were different style guides, and be using multiple research databases.

Forking the last bite of waffle, Marwa began singing to herself. “Oh, I’m just a kid, I never use my brain. I only use my heart and my imagination,” she crooned. She loved the band Current Joy and said she had been listening to their song “Kids” nonstop.

She kept singing: “I’m afraid of the dark, but I’m obsessed with ideas.” By the song’s final stanza, the “kid” had grown up, and “everything had changed.”

It made sense that Marwa was stuck on this song. At twenty-four, she found herself straddling childhood and adulthood, thrust into coping with her life like a grown-up yet often feeling like an unsure kid. “I know my mom will not fix my problems, but still I want her,” she said. She thought of herself as eighteen years old, max. In faded jeans, a mint-green crew-neck sweater, and white Converse high-tops, Marwa looked very much like an American teen.

She stared off, considering why she was feeling so kid-like. “Maybe because my school were my really good years. I was really famous. I had like one hundred friends.”

Nowadays, when she called Karishma in Mazar-i-Sharif, Marwa increasingly avoided anything but small talk. Karishma was not sure if she’d even feel motivated to go if the school opened again, Marwa said, then sighed. Marwa chose not to talk to Karishma about her scholarship or campus life.

Marwa was struggling to feel even slightly normal around her Chatham peers. Sharing a bedroom with her assigned roommate “was weird from the first night.” She changed in the bathroom after risking undressing in the room a few times, thinking her roommate was gone, only to have her come in while Marwa was half naked. Marwa lasted barely two weeks before requesting a room change and luckily was assigned a single in a shared suite.

She made her new room her own. Marwa worshipped Harry Potter, which she’d seen in Afghanistan, so tacked up a burgundy-and-yellow school scarf with the Gryffindor insignia. She covered one wall with cards bearing affirmations: “I Am Successful” and “You Can Do It!” She slapped a “Her Vibe Is Pretty” sticker on her door and posted a periodic table and a yellow Post-It note with a funny character she’d drawn and labeled “It’s You, LOL.”

Her new suitemates were friendly but rarely home. A blond woman pursuing nursing studied in the library for eight-hour stints. Marwa found concentrating for one hour monumental. Both her roommates socialized constantly. “I tell my counselor I’m not going out, and still I’m really behind. I study for days, and it’s like I don’t even study.” She sighed. “I will stay and study all of Thanksgiving break.”

She rarely related to even the few girls she’d befriended. She’d instantly taken a liking to a Greek girl in her yoga and psychology classes. They’d had fun getting boba together, but brunch the next weekend had been less successful. “It was so crowded, and there weren’t students, just older people, and I felt like I didn’t belong,” Marwa said.

Another new friend, from Japan, wanted a raucous bar night before leaving and begged Marwa to join her. “Because I don’t drink, there is no point in going to see others doing it,” she said, and apologized that her final answer was no. “Before doing everything, I have to think about outcomes and risks.” She always tried to get back to her apartment by 8:30 p.m., “because I know if it’s 10 p.m., something would happen to me.”

She occasionally got together with a Saudi Arabian friend she’d met in her first year. The friend had gifted Marwa with a star necklace to match her own, which Marwa still wore. But this year, the pair wasn’t as close, and Marwa wasn’t sure why.

With the shortening of November’s days, Marwa felt herself slipping.

She was falling into a downward spiral, which only seemed to accelerate. She lacked motivation; she was having dark thoughts and nightmares. She'd come home one day around 2 p.m. and lain down for fifteen minutes, only to find herself waking up after 8 p.m., having missed two classes. She was swirling about facing the MCAT, living far from her parents, the daunting road to becoming a doctor.

One night, Marwa's mom had comforted her on the phone, telling Marwa she'd prayed for her and to stay positive. Marwa couldn't help but compare herself to Mursal, who seemed to have everything together. Mursal was developing friendships and managing not to overstress even though she was floundering at Cornell in statistics and economics. In truth, Marwa overestimated Mursal's ease, largely because Mursal kept up appearances better than she did.

Marwa knew how fortunate she was, especially when compared to young women still in Afghanistan. Reports from there made her own problems pale. A woman found without a required male chaperone was arrested, shocked with a Taser, called a prostitute and a bitch, and told by a Talib with a gun, "I will kill you, and no one will be able to find your body." The mother of a thirteen-year-old forced to marry a thirty-year-old said she was relieved because now her daughter wouldn't be hungry.

But there was no sense in comparing anguish. And none of that made her longing for the familiarity of her own culture, and for her simpler former life, any easier to handle. Instead, Marwa worked hard to steady herself, to find moments of peace. Returning from class, she often stopped to sit on a bench overlooking Shadyside and the vast city beyond. "Mursal and I, we love this bench," she said as she stared out. In the distance was a sea of little lights—cars, homes, street lamps. "Last year, we sat here all the time. The lights everywhere, the view; it reminds us of Kabul."

Lost in Translation

LATE NOVEMBER 2023

Marwa

So much was lost in translation.

The counselor sitting across from Marwa had sympathetic eyes but a look of deep confusion. Marwa's words came with greater and greater velocity.

She spit out half sentences between her tears: *make her parents' sacrifices worthwhile... missing her past life... lazy about prayers and short sleeves and... Matin kidnapped... boys graduating... women lacking care because no female doctors back home.* The words spilled out like the expelling of bad humors.

Between every few phrases, Marwa apologized: "I'm sorry I cry so much. I'm sorry to talk about myself too much."

Marwa told the counselor that she missed her friend Karishma and that she worried about her.

At some point, Marwa's counselor started to cry. She was meeting with a peer counselor. When Marwa had finally gotten up the guts to inquire about talking to someone about her struggles, this was the only available option for months, so she'd agreed.

At the start of their session, the counselor asked Marwa if she'd like to explain why she had come. She did her best to articulate a witch's brew of painful feelings. "I felt I can't breathe.... I wanted just to scream.... When I walk, when I talk, I feel so heavy, in my shoulders, in my head, even though I do no heavy work," Marwa said softly.

Sessions were meant to last thirty minutes, but Marwa stayed for two hours. She described growing up in a war zone, the constant American military presence, days when the streets weren't safe. The bombing that hit her family home, penetrating a metal front door and blowing a hole in the

closet wall. The time she arrived at school and found clumps of girls doubled over and vomiting because the water system had been poisoned.

She had a whole lifetime to process.

When Marwa got back to her dorm, she felt like a wrung-out wet rag. She fell asleep, inert until 3 a.m., missing her class. She woke up filled with regret. She'd revealed so much that her counselor had gotten emotional. She resolved to never again describe her feelings in such a raw way.

The following Thursday, though, Marwa met her peer counselor for another session. The young woman had spent the week reading up on Afghanistan and Muslim culture. Her obvious effort helped Marwa decide to give the counseling process a fair shot.

Marwa would stick with weekly sessions through the end of the year. She would tell this young woman much more than she had ever imagined.

She wished the sessions didn't have to end. Sadly, her counselor was graduating. Marwa couldn't imagine starting over, telling her whole story, processing her trauma again.

"I would never forget her," Marwa said. "She was the person who just took me out from the dark."

Houston Hangout

NEW YEAR'S DAY 2024

The Rahim Family

It was early evening on January 1, and the three Rahim sisters were curled up on the living room sofas. They were mesmerized, watching their cat Leo swat at the flat-screen whenever the rat reemerged. This was cat TV, created to entertain, well, cats. As many times as Leo watched the rat skitter across the floor and into the wall, he couldn't figure out that the creature was an animation, pixels on the TV. "He loves cat TV," Sosan said, "but he doesn't understand."

They'd just returned from a holiday outing with Sosan's coworker. Mursal, in black faux-leather pants, rubbed her burgundy-painted toenails into the soft oriental rug. Marwa, cross-legged in baggy drawstring pants, was teasing Mursal about her footwear choices for winter in upstate New York.

"I don't and I will never, ever wear snow boots," Mursal said. "I would rather fall."

The sisters had spent the afternoon at the upscale shopping area, River Oaks. "There were so many fancy cars, fancy restaurants, fancy stores," Mursal said effusively. After nursing cappuccinos at a faux-French café, they'd strolled the spotless wide sidewalks, gawking at the festive holiday windows at Dolce and Gabbana, YSL, Dior.

Their mom, unobtrusive and clearly adored by her daughters, her no-nonsense short hair uncovered, had just disappeared into the kitchen to tend her flatbread. Marwa went to see if she needed help and returned with two cups of salty tea, which she explained was beloved in Afghanistan.

Mursal resumed tugging an elasticized sofa cover over the arm of the couch. The fabric gave the couch the look of wearing nylons, a temporary fix for the many snags Leo had made with his claws.

“I am going to buy us new sofas,” Mursal said proudly.

“You are going to regret that offer,” Marwa shot back.

Mursal hated the pilled sofas but was waiting to replace them until her family was in a permanent home. The Rahims hoped to move to Northern Virginia by summer. The delay was because the whole family, save for Mursal, who’d been granted asylum in 2023, was still waiting for approval. Their lawyers had urged them not to move from Texas, where their paperwork had been filed, until they were cleared.

The night before, New Year’s Eve, the Rahims had hosted some Iranian friends. They met the family in their first housing complex. The woman, a manager at McDonald’s, had regularly taken them grocery shopping before they had a car to save them from walking or Ubering. “Even when she didn’t need anything, she was taking us,” Mursal said. The Rahims considered this family the only real friends they’d made in Houston.

After sharing a large platter of Qabuli pilau, the hallmark Afghan rice-and-meat staple with caramelized carrots and raisins, and a platter of baked pumpkin with yogurt and mint, their guests left around 11 p.m. Marwa took her parents across the street to watch the fireworks. The sisters then stayed up until 4 a.m., gabbing and watching *Divergent*.

To celebrate the family being together, the Rahims had arranged to have a lamb sacrificed and the meat delivered. This was traditional on Eid, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, and on other special occasions. It represented the Prophet Ibrahim’s willingness to sacrifice his son as proof of his devotion to Allah, which allowed Allah to spare Ibrahim’s son’s life and kill a lamb instead. In Afghanistan, they would have killed the animal themselves. With some googling, one of the Rahim brothers had found several halal farms near Houston happy to “hand-slaughter each animal with care according to zabiha rules.”

Both worked as security guards (one had once worked a Taylor Swift concert) and had busy holiday schedules, so there was just one day when a full family outing would be possible. Najim suggested a nearby spot that looked ideal. On the way, they picked up Iranian food for a picnic. They took blankets and lots of bottled water. Even in the house, they all drank single-serve plastic bottles of water. A huge pallet of bottled water sat in the kitchen corner, half of it still in shrink-wrap. They claimed the water in the complex tasted bad.

Marwa was skeptical of a late-December picnic, but they'd arrived at an unexpectedly bucolic park. Najim and his dad scouted an area high on the hillside, overlooking a lake. There were birds and many varieties of trees. Picnics are a national pastime in Afghanistan, and the day reminded them of home. They all marveled that such a pristine place existed fifteen minutes from their apartment.

At moments like this, all the upheaval faded away, and they felt deeply grateful for their good fortune, health, and close family. So much could be endured with the comfort of family.

Najim came down the stairs into the living room. He was wearing jeans, a navy T-shirt, and, like everyone else there, plastic slippers.

"Ughh," he said. He'd been online making eye-doctor appointments for his parents. Interacting with the American health-care system stressed Najim out. "About the bills, about the payments, about Medicaid," he rattled off. There were some medical bills the family still hadn't paid, and creditors had been hounding him.

Najim was a family caretaker, and not only because his work at the *Times* was the reason the family had had to leave Afghanistan. Though he was attending UC Berkeley's graduate journalism program, he was also writing occasional stories for the *Times* and driving for Uber. This was how he was able to cover some family expenses. He gave Marwa money for textbooks and for her plane ticket to come home for winter break, much as he had done in Afghanistan, helping to pay for her medical school in Mazar. The whole family actually operated this way. If one had money, they gave to others in need, even if they had very little or were spending their scholarship funds.

Najim was independent-minded, was a feminist, and had long studied world religions and philosophy. In Afghanistan, he had encouraged both Mursal and Sosan to study abroad.

Marwa felt thankful but also guilty about having his help. "He feels all the responsibility," she said.

Mursal reflected on her semester, which had been overwhelming, even dizzying initially, but she had finished with A's and B's and a growing

comfort with her academics. Her best trick, she told Marwa, was developing connections with her professors. “You can go to your professor and openly say, ‘I am struggling. It is completely different from Afghanistan.’” She made sure they knew her backstory. “I say, ‘Don’t compare me with American students, even Pakistani student, because their education system was completely different. For us, we go to school, and then there is bomb, and we can’t go to school for one week, or one month.’”

She harnessed the power of old-fashioned human-to-human interaction. A professor who’d worked for the UN generously agreed to advise her about the organization over Zoom. “I’m like, ‘No. I want to meet in person,’” she said. Another professor’s patient support enabled her to turn a failing grade into an 87.

But in the social realm, she didn’t have connection all figured out. She had a lot of acquaintances but no real friends. Her “study buddy” group had dissolved before the semester’s end, as early cliques often do. Classmates had tried to befriend her, but she’d kept up a wall. “They’re like ‘Let’s have coffee, or dinner.’ I’m like, no. I don’t feel I’m like them.”

Najim joined his sisters on the sofa. Their conversation was relatable. His classmates at Berkeley operated quite differently than friends back home. “In here, just you are hanging with each other, talking with each other, and that’s it. If there is something you need, you don’t call or knock their door,” he said. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe their intentions were good. “They are respectful, they hang out with me, but their friendship is not, for me, like, meaningful friendship.” In Afghanistan, “we are thinking about each other’s needs. If they need a car, we will give them ours for one week or two. If they need money, we will give them money. If they don’t feel good, we spend time with them.”

All three of his sisters nodded knowingly when Najim remarked about his friends’ fascination with their dogs, particularly disconcerting since dogs are not even pet-worthy in Afghanistan. Najim said, “They go back home. I ask about their parents, and they say, ‘I saw my dog!’ And then they explain their feelings about their dogs.”

Their observations moved to Americans frequently living far from family. “Here, people live alone, children, they don’t live with their parents or even with their sister or brother,” Najim said. “In Afghanistan, during breakfast, lunch, and dinner, members of the family must be present on the

table. My father would get angry if we weren't. The system is built like that."

Najim recognized that people were shaped by their environment. "In here, people are rational. They spend their time for their achievements, for their goals. But in Afghanistan, they have enough time. That is why Afghanistan is not US," he said, letting out one of his characteristic belly laughs, a dig at how economically distressed Afghanistan remained.

The Rahim kids weren't confused about their priority hierarchy. "We live for our parents," Najim said. Seeing them struggling had been painful. "They are trying not to show," he added. "In here, my parents are like prisoners." Their isolated suburban Houston setup was not at all what they'd expected. "We thought we will live somewhere in a downtown, on the sixth floor, and everything would be perfect, like the movies," Mursal said.

Najim felt he was unlikely to adapt to the American lifestyle. "My children and their children will have a great life, but I don't think I will." He also feared the kids he hoped to have someday would adopt American ideals. "I'm pretty sure that my children won't think about me." He looked sad. "When my father gets sick, he calls me. When American adults get sick, when they need to go to hospital, they call 911."

Dancing Like Billie Eilish

MARCH 26, 2024

Sam

“She is dancing like Billie Eilish,” Wais said, pointing his toe exaggeratedly and leaping toward the coffee table. Then, pushing up the sleeves of his gray Chatham baseball shirt, he added a little hip shimmy.

Wais loved teasing Sam about her hip-hop class. He was home entertaining Durrin while Sam cooked dinner. In her frayed jeans from Goodwill, oversized hoodie, and orange Vans, Sam had an air of casual cool. She stared sternly through her glasses, unimpressed by Wais’s dance maneuvers. This was classic Sam and Wais. He was the goofball; she was the grown-up.

“Her final exam,” Wais said, “is to give a performance in front of the class.”

“Onstage,” Sam corrected him. “I wish it was just in front of the class.”

Wais sashayed toward the kitchen, flapping his arms. Because Sam was so stoic, he relished provoking her. He rose up onto tiptoes and twirled. “I know a little bit of dance,” he said, then, tauntingly, “and I’m coming to your final exam.”

All the heckling about dance led the couple to recall their wedding. That was the first time Sam had ever really danced.

Wais’s face lit up. He loved this story. He motioned exaggeratedly with his hand, showing how he had tried (and failed) to lead Sam in a spin.

At Afghan weddings, the men and women gather in separate halls, and Sam and Wais did their wedding dance in the “women’s area.” Wais wore a tuxedo, his hair gelled up high, with a streak of blue. Sam’s white gown was lacy and more Western than the ornate dresses she wore at other times during the extended celebration. She’d worn enough makeup to render her almost unrecognizable.

Sam, who'd disappeared into the kitchen, popped back out to chime in. The water was boiling for dumplings. She'd made the dough, rolled it flat, and crafted little pouches of leeks and potatoes.

"Are you hungry?" Sam asked Durrin in a chirpy voice, picking her up, spinning her around, and smoothing her flyaway brown hair. Sam was always primping Durrin—neatening her hair, wiping her face. The conversation turned to Sam's family.

"We always had this money stress. My mother kept telling us that we were not going to have enough food," she said. Sam's words came faster and faster; she always seemed to circle back to her family trauma. When she was sixteen, she asked her mother if her cruelty would ever stop. She said no. Sam collected all the pills she could find, swallowed them, and awoke hours later in a rash. A doctor deduced what she'd done. "I want to be dead, so why are you trying to make me better?" she shouted angrily.

Her mother found out about the attempt and repeatedly mocked her daughter about it.

Sam's father had once sustained a near-catastrophic injury. When he was in his midtwenties, a commander in the Afghan army fighting the Russians, his tank was bombed. He spent six months in a coma. Sam sometimes wondered if that explained why he was so passive.

She found her father's silence about her mother's cruelty unforgivable. "I was so vulnerable. How can you stand in front of your daughter and do nothing?"

Sam could've been referring to any number of instances, but two memories were particularly haunting. As a young teen, she'd been assaulted by two different men, one a close relative. Twice, she'd managed to escape. Twice, her mother had turned a blind eye.

In Wais, though, she'd found her safety. He loved her exactly as she was. When Sam felt insecure about her hair—her mom had always meanly compared it to a cat's—he would remind her that her mom was always lying, so why pay her words any mind?

They were stepping into the new culture side by side. She wanted to know what a wine buzz felt like, so he bought some. ("I don't feel anything," she told Wais. "Maybe you bought the wrong one.")

Sam had Wais and Durrin and now Laura. She had the kind of steady understanding and support that humans need to thrive. She still had many

moments of darkness and paranoia, of feeling like a victim, of being overwhelmed by obsessive urges and bitter family rejection. But time had begun to heal her. Wais was the antidote to so much.

Humanity's Temporal Range

MARCH 2024

Marwa

Marwa's professor opened class by explaining the term "Humanity's Temporal Range"—the title of the piece they'd read from John Green's *The Anthropocene Reviewed*. The essay wrestled with how to find meaning while knowing our species' existence is temporary. Humans have been around for a blink in the multibillion-year timeline of Earth's existence. Essentially, why does anything matter if we're bound for extinction?

"It's no wonder that we worry about the end of the world. Worlds end all the time," Marwa's professor read from the essay. Green lamented how easy it was to be overcome by nihilistic feelings. If we are just one more species that appeared and then disappears, what even matters? But Green rejected such notions of futility. Humans singularly, he wrote, have the capacity to make meaning.

Marwa was nodding along.

Her professor continued reading, detailing why humans are "wondrous": "Through photography and art, each of us has seen things we'll never observe—Mars, bioluminescent fish of the deep ocean, a seventeenth-century girl with a pearl earring. We're the only part of the known universe that knows it's in a universe, that knows it has a temporal range."

Marwa spoke up in class in a way she hadn't before. She shared that she, too, ricocheted between a sense of despair and resolve to find meaning.

"When I moved here, I felt so hopeless that my life would not be what I wanted in my own country. Everything feels pointless sometimes. I struggle a lot adjusting myself to this new culture and this opportunity that I have," she told her classmates. She took a breath. "So when I read this essay, I understand how this writer expresses the meaning of life. Like it's so rare."

Her professor encouraged her to continue.

“How beautiful it is to be human.” She paused. “Now, when I’m trying my best to be motivated, I can hold on to that.”

Days later, back in her dorm, Green’s ideas were still churning inside her. Perched on her sofa, a bohemian tapestry behind her, the windowsill lined with rotund stuffies—a Woodstock, a stuffed plum—she tried to puzzle out why the essay had moved her so. She often felt as if she must be dreaming. How could her entire nation have been upended by zealots spouting fabricated religious ideology to control people? “One day, in fifteen minutes, and I am no longer in Afghanistan. Taliban fighting against its own people. How pointless this life is.”

But, like Green, she could boomerang back to hope. When she considered her good fortune to be at Chatham pursuing the ultimate humanitarian career, she felt buoyed. “Going back and helping, transferring this knowledge that I have for other people in Afghanistan. It is not pointless.”



March would be the month of “yes.”

The idea was not Marwa’s but a challenge from her peer counselor: accept every invitation; agree to every opportunity.

“For a small period, just say yes and just see how it goes,” Marwa said, parroting her counselor’s words.

The counselor had been pushing Marwa to view herself as legitimate, deserving, and capable. This was after Marwa had shared instances where she was having a perfectly nice time with friends and then felt an irresistible need to flee. “I’m trying to say to myself, ‘I’m worthy’ and ‘I deserve,’” Marwa said.

Marwa had also been eagerly consuming conspiracy theories about aliens and the universe. Maybe these dark dramas appealed in the way that scary children’s books do. By visualizing our deepest fears, such as being orphaned, abandoned in a boxcar, passed to cruel aunties, we deny them their power.

This “yes” proposition was how Marwa found herself in a banquet hall at Carnegie Mellon with three hundred others to celebrate Nowruz, the Persian new year. Not long before, Marwa had been walking across campus

when a dog had charged at her. She'd yelled, "Bismillah"—a fear exclamation invoking God's blessing and guidance. The dog's owner, a University of Pittsburgh professor of ophthalmology named Andrew Eller, who'd done three years of medical school in Iran, had heard her and recognized the Persian phrase. He'd later invited Marwa to the Nowruz celebration.

The evening turned out to be more fun than she'd expected. Marwa connected with three young women, one from Iran, one from Turkey, and an American who'd lived in Tajikistan and spoke Farsi. They assumed that Marwa was Andrew's daughter and guessed she was sixteen. She corrected them that she was a freshman at Chatham. "They were like, OK, nineteen! I'm like, no, I'm going to be twenty-five!"

She hadn't planned on dancing, but then she did. Initially, Marwa felt quite self-conscious, but she decided to channel Mursal. "Just enjoy the moment; no one is watching you," she imagined Mursal saying. Though she never stopped feeling embarrassed, she danced for hours and relished the experience. "This is the year I want to be confident."

Marwa had continued to think about the John Green reading, almost like it was a signpost reminding her that there was another side to her difficulty and challenges. She was alive, sentient, lucky to get to have the whole human experience, full of meaning and feeling.

Marwa had also been working on the idea of accepting what *is*. She felt more in control when she acknowledged there were many things she couldn't change.

One of these was her appearance. She noticed that young women around campus "are confident with what they are, so it makes me the same," Marwa said. She channeled those classmates, noting that she worried less about her looks now than she had back in Afghanistan.

Marwa had happened upon a podcast that spoke to this theme of acceptance. A young Arab woman had shared her story of being raped. The woman described her first phase of grief and denial. "There was a lot of 'I wish.' 'I wish I didn't go out that night.' 'I wish I didn't walk alone,'" Marwa said. But eventually, the woman came to see that wishing would change nothing.

Marwa knew the trap. She wished Afghanistan was free from the Taliban. "But this is the reality," she said. She was struck by how the

woman on the podcast used the violation to fuel her own power, advocating for women against violence. “Out of that bad experience, she made something positive,” Marwa said, seemingly coaching herself to do the same.

After spring break, she mostly kept saying yes. During Ramadan, she agreed to go to the Islamic Center with a girl she knew for prayer and a communal meal. Marwa was immediately swept up in the good energy.

New York, New York

APRIL 4, 2024

Mursal

“The subway, it was so easy!” cried Mursal, stepping into a tiny Manhattan apartment and pulling off her baseball hat and hood. Then, catching her reflection in the mirror, she laughed. “I don’t look like a hijabi,” she said.

Mursal had taken a bus to New York City and then the A train to get there—her second trip to Manhattan in a month. She’d come in March with several Cornell students after a professor had tapped her for a competition of policy graduate students around the issue of forced migration. Now she was visiting for part of her spring vacation, a break from sleepy Ithaca to feed her cosmopolitan soul.

The topic for the policy competition had been sparked by the refugee crisis raging in New York and around the globe. Since 2001, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had increased 194 percent, according to UNHCR. Mixed university teams were tasked with developing a set of policy proposals to address the dire and politically prickly humanitarian crisis. Students were assigned roles like prime minister or minister of health and given a fictional country to represent. Mursal was paired with students with lofty credentials, but she found their thinking naive.

Mursal was the only student in her group who could speak about refugee resettlement from personal experience. In mid-2024, nearly one in six of the world’s 36.8 million refugees originated from Afghanistan, according to UNHCR data. But her teammates were still largely dismissive.

“We are accepting refugees, but we don’t have money to give them housing,” she said, imitating one teammate. ““We shouldn’t spend our budget on providing them language classes. They have to start working,”” she continued, growing more animated. ““We will not provide them cash

assistance. We will not give them health insurance.’ I was mad, sad, disappointed. When you are refugee, they don’t think you are human.”

The simulation left her even more compelled toward refugee work. In Ithaca, she was mentoring an Afghan family who’d just arrived after months on a military base. Their story was chilling. Fifteen days after reaching Ithaca, the father was killed in a car accident, leaving an unemployed, devastated mother and four children.

Mursal’s plan for the afternoon was to walk along the High Line. Before she navigated to the bus, she changed into jeans, an ivory turtleneck, and lug-soled ivory boots. “Do I have time to do makeup?” she asked, and disappeared into the bathroom with her cosmetic kit.

For eye shadow alone, she’d brought a deluxe palette with thirty shades of brown. “I don’t have a travel size,” she said. “Is there a steamer?” she wondered aloud. She was hoping to press one of her headscarves. Unsuccessful, she shrugged, then pulled her hair into a bun to tuck beneath her scarf. She pulled on a khaki trench coat, cinching the belt. This was one of three long coats she’d packed for her weekend.

Mursal regularly stressed about “hair fall,” the hair loss she believed was plaguing her. She noticed her hair in sinks, showers, her hands. “My hair used to be thick like Marwa’s. Even thicker,” she said. Thick hair is highly prized among Afghan women. She’d tried every internet treatment unearthed by prolific scrolling. She could no longer bear even one leaf of rosemary passing her lips because the supposed elixir she’d been rubbing into her scalp was useless—and nauseating.

At West Thirtieth Street and Eleventh Avenue, she ascended a staircase onto the raised train tracks where a freight line had once delivered agricultural goods to the industrial West Side. In the late 2000s, the tracks had been repurposed as a public park. Mursal marveled at it. “I hope to bring my parents.” They were planning to visit for a week later in the summer.

Thinking of them, she shared the photo her mom had sent of her dad at the front of the English class they took together, holding up a prize. He’d won top student. “My mom said she’s mad because she tried to look at his paper during the test, and he covered it!” The last photo showed her dad with the gift, a fancy electric massager. “A massager—can you believe it?”

Mursal took the subway downtown toward the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. Exiting the station, she glanced at her phone and yelped. “I have an interview!” Looking closer, “Is this spam?” she asked. “No,” she assured herself.

She’d just received an email from the United Nations about a summer position with the Dispute Tribunal.

Mursal had been dogged in her internship quest, querying professors and asking anyone even remotely connected to the UN. But while these contacts enthusiastically met with her, all that had resulted were links to portals to submit applications with the masses.

“Maybe this is not an interview,” Mursal said, reading more closely. “The email said conversation.” More worrisome was that she couldn’t tell which specific job the message pertained to. She’d applied to dozens of UN internships. In the submission portal, the positions were typically marked with an ID number rather than a department or position title, which made it impossible to keep the jobs straight.

Mursal had been gunning for a UN job since the moment she’d arrived in America. But recently, studying the organization in her human rights course, she’d developed a more nuanced view of its inner workings. She recognized that there were situations in which the UN could exercise power and others in which it could not. Still, she absolutely wanted to work there. In Afghanistan, the UN had made so much possible.

Inching through the rope maze at the 9/11 museum entrance, she wondered why the line moved so slowly. She was surprised to see airport-level screening of people and bags. It had never occurred to her that the site would be an obvious target for terrorism.

She came to the exhibit with the perspective of someone raised amid a great deal of violence. Long cycles of occupation and civil war had defined Afghanistan for centuries. Throughout her childhood, bombings were routine. Suicide bombers regularly blew up mosques. She did not equate those routine losses with the mass casualties and tragedy of September 11. But the memorial was like nothing she’d ever seen in her culture, where people moved quickly past atrocities to protect themselves from grief that would be paralyzing. Her mother had lost two brothers to war.

Examining a map showing the flight path of the four hijacked planes, Mursal looked confused. She hadn't realized that a plane had crashed into the Pentagon. She hadn't known that terrorists had piloted the aircraft. "In Afghanistan, we never learned about 9/11," she said.

Screens throughout the museum were running news footage from the morning of 9/11 on loop. Mursal examined the display of "Lost and Missing" signs that had papered New York in the days after and saw a melted fire engine and the "last pillar." For most of the visit, she didn't utter a word.

“I Will Work So Hard”

MAY 22, 2024

Mursal

Mursal loves a challenge, so when professors and others around the Brooks School continuously warned her that applications for UN internships were impossibly competitive, she didn't despair. Instead, she doubled down. *After all I've been through, what more can I lose?* she thought. She scoured the UN job portal and applied to some thirty summer positions. Each one required a lengthy essay, which she tailored to each department, using ChatGPT to edit them.

Now she had snagged an internship at the UN department that adjudicated internal employee disputes around issues of corruption, harassment, and discrimination. Once she had the job, all else around it seemed to fall into place.

At first, summer housing had seemed like an insurmountable obstacle; Cornell provided a \$1,500 stipend, but the funding didn't cover even dorm housing in New York. But Victoria had a cousin whose Brooklyn home would be vacant for the summer, and she arranged for Mursal to house-sit. Mursal was pinching herself that the art-filled, three-story brownstone was hers for the duration.

Her first trip to the UN was just to get her badge. The historic landmark spanned eighteen acres overlooking the East River, fittingly imposing. She met her supervisor, who told her she had made quite an impression during her video interview. Mursal had shared about growing up with UNICEF, a UN organization, and how the trademark sky-blue logo of a mother and child and the name in block letters were everywhere around her school. “The backpack, the pencils, the books, the tent, almost everything,” she had told him. “That image, that color, stuck with me.” To Mursal, the UN's work was tangible. She had lived its impact.

She was unprepared for the electricity that pulsed through her when she first held her official badge and saw her picture next to the UN logo. “I’m actually working here,” she said aloud. When her supervisor asked what she was feeling, Mursal blurted out, “I am living my dream!”

Getting ready for work the following morning, Mursal wished for one of the mini–handheld fans she saw commuters holding up to their faces on the subway platform. The humidity was making her feel like her makeup might just melt off as she applied it.

Standing on the Manhattan-bound F train platform just after 8 a.m., she suddenly filled with anxiety. Her chest tightened. *How could this flood of commuters possibly fit in the narrow station? Wouldn’t so many breathing people suck up all the underground air?*

Two trains jammed with people whizzed past without stopping, as happens during rush hour. Bodies closed in on Mursal, and she started to feel woozy. When a train finally stopped, she pushed inside.

It wasn’t that she’d never encountered dense crowds. In Kabul, during Eid, the streets and shops were choked with shoppers and revelers. But something about this sea of humanity was undoing her. Maybe the presence of strange men with bare arms right up against her? She was so alone in such a massive city.

She rode a few stops, feeling increasingly clammy. When the doors opened, even though it wasn’t her stop, she lurched off and started running. When she reached the sidewalk, she immediately vomited. She texted her supervisor that she’d gotten lost and would be late.

She was feeling better when she finally arrived at the door of 2 UN Plaza.

Riding the elevator to the twenty-second floor, she arranged her scarf and reapplied lipstick. She noticed accents on the signage in the same light blue color that had adorned her first backpack at age five.

“I will work so hard,” she told herself as she entered the nondescript door of the United Nations Dispute Tribunal office.



She had more train trauma on the next several mornings—more double vision, nausea, and barfing. But within a week, she’d overcome the morning

dizzies.

“New York will never change for me. You have to, like, adjust,” she said.

What impressed Mursal immediately was that her office was genuinely international. Her supervisor had lived in Nairobi and the Congo. Among her colleagues were a Cambodian, a German, and a Russian. The executive director was Jamaican. The UN gave the day off for Eid. Still, it was weeks before she met another Afghan.

Mursal was amazed that an office dedicated to ensuring fairness for employees existed. “In Afghanistan, they don’t even provide this for employees for criminal matters,” she said later.

At first, Mursal assisted in the intake and circulation of the reams of evidence that came in for cases. “They were so surprised because whenever she teaches me something the first time, I do it the second time in the exact way,” Mursal said about the work she was doing for one of the lawyers. Eventually, she was asked to summarize cases and research precedent decisions. One dispute involved a UN employee in an office in Africa making an encouraging comment on a Facebook post celebrating the killing of an Arab woman who’d cheated on her husband. When a complaint was filed, the employee claimed that his account had been hacked. Mursal searched for relevant cases involving social media and hacking but didn’t find any. “The area is very new,” she said.

The executive director took a special interest in Mursal, encouraging her to set her sights as high as possible. Mursal mentioned her interest in a master of laws degree, and the director suggested she apply to Harvard. “She said instead of having the thought, it’s better to apply,” Mursal said. “What will you lose—\$80?” She also dared Mursal to aim to take over her job. “She’s like ‘I will not be here in eight years, so you should be here.’ She told me, ‘It’s not even impossible for you to become the UN’s secretary general one day.’”

A few weeks into her UN summer, Mursal decided her hope in the immediate future was to work in a UN field office in a foreign country. “I want to work not behind a computer,” she said. “Anywhere!” she exclaimed about which office she’d choose.

Despite much affirmation, during her first two weeks, Mursal repeatedly ducked into the office bathroom and burst into tears. She would then stress

inordinately about her mascara streaks. She felt confused. *Why am I so sad if this is my dream job?* She was someone who held her emotions tight to the chest, pushed them down so deep that when they did rear up, as on the subway, it was with force. She was simply overwhelmed by it all.

Mursal's adjustment to New York happened in fits and starts. She figured out her commute, but her anxiety reared up in her sleep and eating patterns. At first, she crashed as soon as she got home from work, often before 8 p.m. On the weekends, she slept until 5 p.m. She forced herself to get up and eat something but went right back to sleep, feeling guilty about missing the whole day. She recognized that she was expending loads of energy just coping with newness of every kind.

She had formerly been unable to sleep alone, even with her mom or brother in the next room. "Now I'm living in a whole house by myself. Nobody is waiting for me. I'm the only one who is responsible." She seemed almost to not believe she was leading this life.

Mursal got wind that gossip was circulating in Afghanistan about her and Marwa. "People are talking because daughters are living by themselves in different states," she said. "'Who knows what they do,' and blah blah blah," she said, paraphrasing the critics. It was hard not to be offended. "I can conceive how worthy that I am, so how can you talk about me like that?"

Mursal came to expect New Yorkers' curt responses and expressionless faces. She rode the subway after dark. "Now I sit between two men," she said. She knew which train car to board to put her at the exit to give her a three- versus six-block walk home.

She'd made a handful of summer friends thanks to the owner of a tiny Afghan restaurant. He'd gushed to her about several young Afghan regulars she *must* meet. Mursal was dawdling one evening after finishing dinner there when the three young women coincidentally strode in.

Mursal recognized one. She'd been on the Afghan Girls Robotics Team, the group of STEM-savvy high schoolers who'd become world darlings in 2017 when they'd tried to enter the US for a competition and twice been denied visas. After widespread public outrage, they'd been granted entry.

When Mursal and the three started talking, they realized that they had all left Kabul on the very same military jet bound for Doha.

Mursal loved watching the brides, done up in gowns and veils, posing sweetly with their grooms on the Brooklyn Bridge promenade. A flower-laden trellis that read “Newlyweds” formed the portrait backdrop. People-watching was a novel pastime. In Afghanistan, gawking by women was verboten. She enjoyed being a voyeur but also felt a bit guilty, like she was exploiting strangers.

Seeing the newlyweds, Mursal admitted that she’d been worrying about finding a life partner. She wished she could reclaim a decade. “I wish I had this UN opportunity in my early twenties so I could do all the things I am planning, like working in other countries. But now I have two years to turn thirty, and the older you get, the harder it is to have kids.”

She viewed age thirty as a kind of hard line when it came to having babies. Ideally, she wanted three or four kids. Her age was also problematic for getting matched. She maintained that men would think a woman nearing thirty, unmarried, with a fancy degree, would be too independent-minded. Mursal believed most men wanted a compliant wife.

Still, she trusted that a husband was out there for her. “I do believe when you are born, God writes someone for you, and it doesn’t matter how long it will take to meet this person,” she said, sounding perkier. She raised her chin and stared out at the East River. She had come around to an important notion: “Now I believe everything has timing.”

Mursal was scrolling slowly and reading intently. She was relaxing in the brownstone living room before doing laundry and scrubbing her bathroom. What was drawing her to her phone was the Facebook group of some eighty thousand Afghan women she sometimes perused.

One woman had posted that she had caught her fiancé cheating. After she’d told him that she wanted out of the relationship, the fiancé had threatened to post pictures of her online. Mursal explained that these would

be pictures the man had taken of the woman indoors, not fully covered—powerful blackmail. “People in Afghanistan, they do suicide because of this,” she said.

Mursal pondered how she’d react in that situation. Could she forgive blatant betrayal? “It depends on how much I love him, maybe,” she said. Then, “No, I heard if a man cheats one time, he will cheat many times. This is my red line forever.”

Mursal burst out laughing at the next post. A woman had gone to check out a potential bride for her uncle, but when she tried to secretly snap a photo, the flash went off. She related because so many families had come through the Rahims’ Kunduz home to size up her and her sisters. “Even if you say no, they keep coming four, five, six times.”

When she tired of scanning through the Facebook group postings, she reverted to disparaging the upcoming UN meetings in Doha. The Taliban was set to meet with Qatari officials, UN officials, and envoys from around twenty-five countries, and women’s rights in Afghanistan was a top agenda item. “And no Afghan women are invited,” Mursal spat. She wondered aloud whom she could write to to complain. “The world doesn’t care about this.”

Tight Fists and Turning Two

JUNE 22, 2024

Sam

June 22 dawned with the kind of stifling heat that pops helium balloons. Happily, Sam had decided to forgo balloons for paper flowers and a H-A-P-P-Y B-I-R-T-H-D-A-Y banner. Durrin was celebrating one day after her actual second birthday because of course Laura had to be there, and on the 21st, she'd been busy with her parents' anniversary.

The plan was for a low-key party in nearby Wightman Park. There was a shady new picnic pavilion with plenty of tables. A few weeks before, Sam had dropped invitations at the day care to be put in kids' cubbies.

Growing up, Sam hadn't had any birthday celebrations. The first time she'd celebrated her own birthday was in India. Many Afghans don't know their date of birth. There are Instagram memes poking at the classic Afghan moms' recollection of their child's birth date: "on a full moon," "two weeks after your uncle visited." "It's no different than other days," Sam said.

This was changing before she left Afghanistan. Her younger sisters had had a birthday celebration or two. "Social media has started to make it normal. It's a Western thing."

For Durrin, there was no question there would be a birthday party. And Sam certainly knew the date. "I celebrated at one month, two months, all the birthdays," Sam said. "It's the most happiest day of my life. That day made me a mom."

She occasionally caught herself staring at Durrin and wondering how her mother could have been so detached and inattentive. Knowing Durrin's favorite dresses, books, stuffies, barrettes was as natural as breathing.

Sam wasn't one to shower her daughter with presents, though. "She has a lot of toys, and we don't have space," she said. But her instinct was about more than minimizing clutter. "If they have too much, they don't know the

value.” Sam planned to get Durrin some things closer to the fall that she’d need for her new day care.

Even though Laura had bought Durrin Elsa’s dress from her favorite movie, *Frozen*, for the party, Durrin refused to put it on. Victoria had sent her a flouncy tiered dress made for twirling, with a matching headband. But that dress seemed too much for the sweltering day. So Sam dressed Durrin in a simple sundress, a white cotton tank with a light blue skirt with white ticking stripes. She tied a matching light blue bow around Durrin’s head. The little girl looked like a present.

When Sam, Durrin, and Wais got to the park, a large birthday party had taken over all of the tables. Sam had never considered she’d need to reserve the space. But when Laura and her husband, Jon Kessler, arrived with a classic white sheet cake and other supplies, Laura saved the day. She recognized the mother having the party and asked if they’d mind giving up one of their tables. They were happy to. So Sam and Laura put up the banner and unpacked chips and juice boxes.

But 11 a.m. came and went, and 11:30, and 12, and the only guests who arrived were Laura’s neighbor with her one- and seven-year-old kids. Every parent’s nightmare was happening: a birthday party where no kids showed.

Sam had considered this possibility because she didn’t personally know the parents of Durrin’s day-care classmates and hadn’t received any RSVPs. She still hoped some might show. But when no one did, she just carried on. Durrin didn’t even notice.

At cake time, Laura positioned a petite crown atop Durrin’s sweaty head and pulled the thin pink elastic over her chin. After Durrin blew out the big blue number-two candle, she stabbed her finger in the icing and took a taste. She loved sweets.

For her main present, Laura had brought a tiny bookshelf that she’d stocked with used books. Durrin loved the Llama Llama series best.

Only on reflection did Sam admit, “Oh my God, that was tough. Maybe it was because of the heat.” She pledged never to give birth again in the summer. But talk of another baby was theoretical. Sam had no intention of having a second child anytime soon. “Maybe in five or six years. I need to study. I need to get a job. We need to buy a house.”

After the park party, Durrin napped for over three hours. When she woke up, the first thing she asked for was the *Frozen* dress from Laura. Durrin put

it right on.

Sam was staying home with Durrin this summer.

The previous summer, she'd handed out food samples part-time at Target and served in Chatham's dining hall. This year, her break felt short with her nursing program beginning in August. The financial benefit of working once she subtracted the cost of childcare also didn't pencil out.

Wais was working full-time, making \$25 an hour to listen in on phone calls. Laura's husband, Jon, an executive vice president at PNC Private Bank, had sent Wais's résumé to the bank's HR department. There was an opportunity for Wais at a contractor that handled fraud detection for the bank. Wais was trained to look for red flags when people called in about stolen debit cards or needing a new card.

But there was more behind Sam's reluctance to take a summer job. Durrin had been exhibiting strange behavior all spring. Her hands were constantly clutched in tight fists. She clung to the tiniest items—a pebble, a bean, a bit of paper. Her hands remained balled all day, even when she slept. If she dropped her item while napping, she'd look for it in a panic the moment she woke up.

The clenching started around the time Durrin moved from her first day-care room at her preschool into a room for older children. Unlike her cuddly and reassuring previous teacher, her new one had little tolerance for toy grabbing or block building after the cleanup bell chimed. "She's scared of that lady," Sam said. She was constantly bellowing *no* at the kids to enforce her rules.

Durrin started issuing commands around home and with Laura. "No, don't do this," she barked. "This is not allowed," she'd order. Sam was embarrassed, thinking people would assume Durrin was learning this behavior at home.

One day Wais picked Durrin up at day care and noticed bites on her hand. The teacher said she'd done it to herself.

Durrin's pediatrician said the behavior was likely due to anxiety and recommended seeing an early-intervention specialist. Sam didn't follow up because she sensed that Americans too quickly diagnose issues as disorders;

she didn't want something like that in Durrin's medical record. Her instinct was right, because once summer began, after several weeks of spending more time with Sam, Durrin's clenched fingers uncurled.

The slow rhythm of their days helped them both. Sam felt calmer, less prone to paranoia, because Durrin was thriving. When Sam was happy, Durrin picked up on her mood.

As much as Sam was wired toward purposeful days, she didn't feel bored or stir-crazy. She was content playing with dolls or coloring mermaids with Durrin for hours and laughed each time Durrin moved the petite furry white armchair that she carried around the apartment herself. Sam hadn't spent this kind of easygoing time with her daughter since they'd left Houston.

Durrin devoured books. She would sit for long periods listening to Sam read or paging through on her own. "She is not watching any screens," Sam said proudly. That had become an issue in the spring when she and Wais had had a lot of schoolwork, and at times they'd acquiesced and given Durrin the iPad.

Once again, Laura had made magic and gotten Durrin into the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh (JCC) day care for the fall. When Laura first inquired, a contact in the organization laughed; the program had a long waitlist. But then Laura happened to sit the same shiva as the day care's head of early childhood education. She told the woman all about Sam and Durrin and somehow emerged with a slot secured. There was a pool at the JCC, and Laura signed Durrin up for swim and ballet classes, paying the extra amount.

Sam felt guilty about sending Durrin to day care for such long days. But she knew this was the right thing. "If I was a stay-at-home mom, I wouldn't be this strong mom showing her to be independent," she said.

She and Wais also knew they needed to invest in themselves in order to invest in Durrin. "I'm so focused on the future now," Sam said.

Laura sat back in her chair. She and Jon had invited Sam, Wais, and Durrin over for Sunday dinner. They'd just finished off a dish of Jon's orzo, which Durrin had deemed a new favorite food.

“I’m looking at you and Wais and at Durrin,” Laura said. “I know your family, Sam, was terrible to you. How did you all come out this good?”

“When you have nobody to take care of you, and you don’t find your parents standing by your side, you don’t have any choice but to go ahead and do it yourself,” Sam replied. Before Laura, Sam had never had any help with anything. “Just do everything for myself,” she said a little abrasively.

Laura didn’t need to reassure Sam that this was all in the past. Sam knew.

Speeding Ahead

JULY 2024

Maryam

Since Maryam was a young girl, she'd craved speed. In high school in Kabul, she and her best friend had dreamed of driving black Lexuses with limo-tint windows to hide behind so they could escape to the mountains and blast music. She'd fantasized about commandeering a motorcycle and about F1 cars.

During her junior year in Virginia, Maryam finally got behind the wheel.

While teaching her, her dad talked at length about the intense responsibility that came with driving. But the moment Maryam hit the highway, his words vaporized. "He's like 'Keep your speed at 60; 60 is the limit!' And then I see it's 80, and then 100. He's like 'Slow down!'" Though she was probably overstating that she was driving 100, she couldn't resist flirting with more and more speed. "It gives me more adrenaline and charge. Your life is all on caffeine."

Driving fast felt like performing the high-stakes medical procedures her aunt took on, destiny finally under her charge. "Like a heart beating under your hand," Maryam said.

Even at ten, Maryam had been rebellious. "I was kind of this sweet person, but I was wanting to be the bad person," she said. She was intrigued by tattoos and boxing. She muscled her brother Abu to the ground. "He was the first XY chromosome I could find and fight." Once, walking on a Kabul street, she grabbed a rock and smashed the window of a passing car that came too close. When the driver came at her, she yelled, "I broke the window already, so what's the point of running after me?"

Since coming to Virginia, she'd gotten into fights at school. The most recent one had involved a girl pushing a door closed on her, Maryam cursing at her, the girl getting even nastier, and Maryam holding herself

back from hitting her.

She described herself as having a “split personality,” a mix of feminine and masculine traits. Sometimes she wanted to wear “colors like peach and have long nails, with your legs crossed, be all girly.” Other days, she walked around school in a hoodie.

After twice failing the learner’s permit written test, she decided common sense wasn’t enough and studied the booklet. She passed and then passed her driving exam. Now she could escape.

Soccer Shots

AUGUST 15, 2024

Durrin

At just two years old, Durrin had the hallmarks of a classic suburban American childhood. She was racing around a soccer field before she could add or subtract, in a bright orange team jersey, with her parents on the sidelines. She ran confidently, ponytail atop her head like a spurting fountain, her tiny legs pumping. Laura had registered her in the youngest Soccer Shots age group and, of course, was there watching.

What Durrin didn't understand was that Velcroing her sneakers and stepping onto the grass this August afternoon carried a significance far greater than the ball she was chasing. It was August 15, the anniversary of Kabul's fall, the anniversary of the day that had launched her family into the great American unknown.

What was remarkable, most notably on this particular day, was the normalcy of this scene for Durrin and her parents. She was, unremarkably, part of something joyful, ordinary, and safe. This was just life to Durrin. She only knew the simple innocence of play, of a childhood uninterrupted.

YEAR FOUR

3 a.m. Move In

AUGUST 19, 2024

Maryam

The start of college was finally here. Maryam had been charging toward this goal since she'd stepped onto American soil. All her life, really. She was locked in on becoming a US-trained neurosurgeon, and college was the first critical step.

"Is it OK to arrive at 3 a.m.?" Maryam asked, finally reaching a human on the phone. Maryam and her dad had gotten a late start driving to Pittsburgh and wouldn't arrive at her residence hall until the middle of the night. The administrator assured her the dorms stayed open twenty-four hours, and Maryam could move in anytime.

The Alokozay family had made a last-minute plan to tack a New York City trip to the front end of her college drop-off. They left Virginia in two cars on August 15.

The date marked three years in the US, and Maryam took the opportunity each year on this anniversary to evaluate her milestones. She was pleased with this year's crop. She'd graduated from high school with a 3.6 GPA—"3.7, really, if you rounded up," she said. She'd gotten her driver's license. She'd held two retail jobs, despite her mom's misgivings. She'd completed her clinical medical assistant course, which, once she'd passed her certification exam, had enabled her to work in a medical setting performing wound care, EKGs, injections, and more. And now she was starting college.

Her intention to attend one of America's most elite universities had hit a brick wall when admissions decisions had arrived. She'd entered the American school system midstream and hadn't been admitted into AP courses except computer science, or the highest-level math courses, despite repeatedly pushing for entry. This put her at a distinct disadvantage in the

applicant pool. Some of this was a practical matter of prerequisite policies, but she was also underestimated due to her background.

“That’s where our group found the most systemic bias,” Rebecca said, reflecting back. “The whole system is stacked against them.”

Despite rejections from Yale, Harvard, Brown, University of Virginia, Vassar, Johns Hopkins, Washington and Lee, and several others, Maryam quickly bounced back. She understood the University of Pittsburgh was a solid institution, particularly in STEM tracks. She believed she could be among the top of her class there.

The Alokozays arrived on the main campus—which Maryam was already calling Pitt—around 2 a.m., and Maryam navigated them to the Panther Center. The all-night administrator issued her an ID that doubled as the key. “Irvis Hall, room 109,” the woman said.

The road to upper campus was so steep that their car engine sputtered in protest. Soon Maryam would learn students called this “Cardiac Hill.”

“Is this really where you’re going to live?” her dad asked. “This hill is harsh.”

Maryam cracked her room door open. Her roommate was asleep. Maryam set her bags down and dug out a sheet from one suitcase. She walked her dad out and hugged him goodbye. They were both stoic, as they had been in Afghanistan. She always said she was most like her dad, more male in her disposition. She was also desperate for sleep.

When she awoke around 10 a.m., she was totally disoriented. For the next few days, she walked around campus feeling strange—and sweaty. “It was hot as hell,” she said. Her feet burned right up through the soles of her Nike Air Force sneakers when she trekked up and down from her dorm to main campus.

There were few scheduled activities before classes started. She wasn’t sure why the freshmen had been asked to arrive two weeks early when they’d already done an online orientation. Maryam stopped by a sports fair and the required Class of 2028 gathering. She mostly hung around her un-air-conditioned room waiting to have a purpose. Once classes got underway, she reasoned, “whether or not you want to, you interact with people.” She needed that built-in structure because otherwise she isolated herself.

Her roommate, from Mexico, was facing her own unique disorientation. She was new to the US so was transitioning to this culture, country, and

school without her family. But her roommate at least had been grouped with other international students for orientation activities. Maryam wasn't included since she'd already been in the US for several years.

Despite having attended three American high schools, Maryam felt like a foreigner. "I never have felt like this—I would not say dumb, because I am doing quite well—but being at university, I feel that I don't know anything about it," she said after a few weeks.

She was uncomfortable about all the stares she and her hijab got from fellow students. Everywhere people turned, held their gazes. *Have they never seen a woman in a hijab?* she wondered. "I was like, am I naked or something?"

Maryam imagined people were surprised that she was covering her head now that she had the freedom to be rid of her scarf. She was quick to defend her choice: "I don't wear it because of someone else. I love it. If people don't want to accept me the way I am, they can just leave, 'cause this is me."

She'd been wearing "full hijabi," her scarf completely covering her hair, like Mursal, since age ten. Her teacher that year had spent every morning artfully pinning the scarf of each of the fourteen girls in her classroom into different styles. Maryam loved the teacher, how that woman looked in her scarf, the care she took in helping each girl. Maryam now covered her head more completely than her mother. "If a wig can't take away your freedom from you, then a scarf can't, because basically either way, you are covering your hair," she said with attitude.

She appreciated the figurative boundary her headscarf set. "People know what they can and cannot do around me. If I don't wear it, they might try to be more open with me relationship-wise, and I'm not ready for that."

Two Mursals

AUGUST 19, 2024

Mursal

It was happy hour on a patio in midtown Manhattan, and the rain had just turned from drizzle to downpour. Unbothered, in fact delighted by the storm, Mursal fished out her phone and snapped a picture of the deluge. Her phone case read, “I’m Just a Good Girl with Bad Habits.”

Mursal was waiting for her friend, a rising junior at Dartmouth, also named Mursal. “She’s talking with McKinsey,” Mursal Rahim said, explaining the delay. The other Mursal planned to come as soon as she finished the problem-solving test required of all summer consulting applicants. “She wants to make a lot of money,” Mursal R. noted pointedly.

She likely flagged this to contrast with her own priorities. She knew she could make good money with an MPA from Cornell, but she was more motivated to have an impact on issues she cared about. But she also recognized the exorbitant cost of living in the cities she loved, like New York, San Francisco, and Washington. What spilled out of her mouth next was surprising: “I can marry someone who makes good money, and I can work at the UN, so that’s fine.”

Wait, wasn’t she the one who’d said she wouldn’t ask for a sizable mahr from her husband because she’d be making plenty of money? Wasn’t she the one dodging marriage to pursue her own ambitious career?

Suddenly she leaped up and crossed the patio to greet her friend. The two Afghans grabbed hands. “I like your trench,” Mursal R. teased the second Mursal as she wiggled out of her coat. The two had shopped together, and Mursal R. had convinced her friend to buy the same coat.

The friends’ backstories were strikingly similar. They had met when Mursal R. had overheard Mursal E. speaking Dari in the UN café. They were both from conservative Afghan provinces, their fathers were

university professors, and their mothers were relatively modern women. Both were studying in the Ivy League, interning at the UN, and drawn to the law. Each followed Muslim traditions closely.

Where their stories diverged was that Mursal E. was in America alone. She'd come to Dartmouth on a student visa in 2022, at age nineteen. She hadn't seen her parents since she'd left Balkh Province.

"My manager is so excited I accepted to do a project for the department during the school year," Mursal R. said animatedly while spreading guacamole onto her chip with a knife. Her boss had created a role to enable her to extend her summer internship. Mursal R. waxed eloquent about the beacon of hope she found the UN to be. Mursal E. nodded awkwardly but said nothing.

"Do you want to know why I don't want to work again for the UN?" Mursal E. asked as the pair of friends started walking toward a restaurant that they had determined was halal for dinner. She didn't believe the UN was serious about helping Afghan women. If these organizations were serious, they'd "make a deal with the Taliban, provide more opportunity for women to leave, and not just those that understand English. There's a lot that don't, but they are very smart," she said. "Countries could evacuate those women and teach them. Then they can enroll in colleges. They are the changemakers." She added, "The scholarships all require English. There are no education centers in Afghanistan, so how do they expect Afghan women to learn English and be able to leave?"

"But leaving is not the best recommendation," Mursal R. said.

"The first would be making a deal with the Taliban," Mursal E. said.

"How you can deal with the Taliban?" Mursal R. shot back.

"Believe me, Mursal, if Western governments want, there are ways to deal with Taliban," Mursal E. assured her.

"No. No." Mursal R. shook her head. "Even for the past twenty years, the Taliban has been saying we have changed, but they are not human."

"Mursal, it's a bad/worse situation. If they deal with the Taliban, it's a bad situation. But Afghan women have the worst situation."

"I don't want to argue more," Mursal R. told her friend.

Mursal E. wasn't done. "I lived under the Taliban. I'm not saying UN agencies like the UN Human Rights Council have no impact. But providing humanitarian aid is not enough." Suddenly she screeched and raised her

legs. “Mouse! I see a mouse!”

Mursal R. laughed. She wasn’t bothered. But when a plump gray rat reappeared, she suggested they move inside.

Mursal E. started recounting her arrival at Dartmouth. She’d been immediately whisked away on an orientation backpacking trip. “You don’t shower!” she yelped. “I was starving. Can someone please bring me bread? They want us to have an ‘experience,’ starvation being an experience. I had one small backpack on front, one on back. I was wearing a long dress. No shower. Sweating. Scared of animals attacking us.”

“I would love that experience,” Mursal R. said. “I would see if I could sign up as a grad student.”

“I didn’t bond with anyone,” Mursal E. warned.

Mursal R. was still intrigued. “I will bring peanut butter and protein bars.”

When Breath Becomes Air: An Epiphany

SEPTEMBER 2024

Maryam

Maryam often studied in the cavernous atrium of the Cathedral of Learning—an awe-inspiring Gothic-style stone expanse that stretched forty-two stories into the Pittsburgh sky, the tallest university building in the Western Hemisphere. There were hefty wooden tables, stained-glass windows, intricate carvings. Maryam had an hour until her medical humanities class, and she wanted to finish the assigned book: *When Breath Becomes Air*, a memoir by neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi.

Maryam stared up at the distant ceiling. She felt as if she'd been meant to read this particular book at this exact moment to save her from herself.

Kalanithi's book described his myopic pursuit of his career. For twenty years, he'd shortchanged every other part of his life to chase becoming a formidable neurosurgeon. He'd neglected his wife and put off becoming a father. He'd steadily morphed into “a callous arrogant doctor,” he wrote. Nearing the end of his residency, experiencing pain and weight loss, Kalanithi had a CT scan. It revealed lungs matted with tumors. He had stage IV lung cancer.

He turned to finding his true purpose—passing his experience with illness and awakening on to others—and produced the book Maryam was now devouring. She considered herself similarly self-absorbed and obsessive about medicine. She also dismissed the need for friends or a social life. She didn't want to have kids because she assumed they would derail her career.

She'd been steely about going out of state for college. She'd overlooked the impact on her mother, who didn't drive, struggled with spoken English,

and was largely single-parenting Maryam's three younger siblings. Maryam's father was off driving a truck, sometimes for several months consecutively. She had not thought much about how her family would be affected if she lived away from home for the sixteen years required to complete med school, residency, and surgical training.

Kalanithi's tale lit up her empathy circuitry in neon.

"Have you read *Macbeth*, where he wants to be the king? He loses his friend, the king, wife, and he just goes mad?" Maryam asked later over green tea in a café near campus. She was trying to articulate the impact of Kalanithi's book. "I don't want to be that person thinking when I get *this*, I will be happy."

It was a genuine epiphany.

"I realize that my life is not just my life," she said. "It's connected to a lot of people's lives."

She knew she needed a recalibration. She should prioritize her family. She loved creative writing and should find a way to pursue it in addition to STEM subjects. Adding Spanish to her repertoire would also be useful. "I want to have all of it. I'm greedy," she said, and let out a nervous laugh. "At first, I was like 'I don't want kids'—but I do want kids at some point," she said.

Suddenly, she was talking about transferring to George Washington University (GWU) for her sophomore year. She would live at home, save on room and board. GWU offered a combined five-year bachelor's in neuroscience and master's in biology, which sounded ideal. It was a complete one-eighty.

She felt that being close to home was the least she could do. She was profoundly grateful for all her parents had done for her family. "They left their own mom and dad, siblings, friends, to come to the US to give us kids a good life. It was a lot of sacrifice."

Treadmills and Turning Twenty

OCTOBER 1, 2024

Maryam stepped onto the treadmill. The console was dark. She wondered how to turn it on.

This was Maryam's first time stepping inside a gym, really a room with a few pieces of workout equipment in her dorm basement. She was avoiding the main upper-campus fitness facility, sure to be teeming with students in revealing Lycra, swinging kettlebells and doing pistol squats.

It was late on her twentieth birthday. She maintained that this had nothing to do with why she was finally in a gym, but she did acknowledge that her life would look vastly different if she were still in Afghanistan. She'd probably be married and having kids. She'd returned to her room after chemistry, around 8 p.m. She'd felt somehow both restless and lethargic. She'd tried the obvious remedies: DoorDashing McDonald's and scrolling Netflix to try to get interested in a show. But neither helped.

"I felt fat," she said. Eschewing curves was not an ideal she'd picked up in America's thin-obsessed culture; even in Afghanistan, she'd striven for a slimmer figure. She was a bit unique, because skinny was not an ideal as it was in America. In high school, she'd stressed out if she weighed even four pounds more than her friends, which may have been rooted in being a girl whose weight had always fluctuated, starting with being a chubby toddler. She and her mom sometimes did home fitness routines they found on YouTube. Since arriving in the United States, she'd gained weight, which she attributed to eating snacks and fast food. At first, she didn't think about it. "When I came to the US, how I looked was the least of my concerns," she said.

Since coming to Pitt, though, she'd dropped several pounds, which made her happy. She was surviving largely on Red Bull and coffee. She'd recently ordered a scale for her room to keep track. She'd also clued into

the body ideal of “toned legs and taut abs.” She liked that there was such emphasis on being strong.

In the gym, she pressed a few unlit buttons on her treadmill screen, but nothing happened. She checked the cord connections, but they seemed fine.

Just then, a curly-haired guy in joggers and a tight T-shirt came in. He stepped up onto the other treadmill. *What luck*, she thought. “Can you help me?” she asked him. “I’m not a runner.” She hoped she didn’t sound stupid.

Maryam looked on as he pressed the lower middle of her machine’s screen. The console lit up. He touched a green square, and the belt started moving. He tapped the up arrow, and the belt sped up slightly.

She stepped on. Then, her forehead wrinkled. “Is this too fast?”

He laughed. “Really? Any slower, you wouldn’t be moving!”

She started walking timidly and gripped the side rails.

Her dormmate returned to his treadmill. Within seconds, he was breathing heavily. Maryam figured out the controls, going faster, wanting to watch him but trying to stare straight ahead so as not to lose her balance. But she couldn’t help watching herself in the mirror. What an unfamiliar image. She was already thinking about when she would work out next.

“Could You Tell Me What Is Sparingly?”

OCTOBER 2024

Sam

Effortlessly acing exams had always been second nature for Sam. But she'd never worked as hard as she was now, and she was in serious danger of failing her Fundamentals of Nursing class.

At the moment, she was stumped on the second part of a question about the proper procedure for caring for a hospital patient with *C. diff*. Sam read the sentence again: “Should Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) be used sparingly in this scenario?”

She could tell from the way *sparingly* was used in the sentence that it was an adverb. But she wasn't sure whether *sparingly* “was something positive or negative.” It was intensely frustrating to understand the material on an exam but be thwarted by the language.

When Sam got her score, she'd done poorly. This was the third of six tests for the course, and she'd received a 64, about the same as on the previous two. Along with the *sparingly* question, she'd missed one that required understanding the word *impaired*.

Vocabulary wasn't the only issue tripping her up. She'd missed answering “wash your hands” in the first part of the *C. diff* question. The students were being tested on the proper sequence of preparation before entering an infected patient's room. Three of the four answers were elements of standard PPE wear—mask, face shield, gloves. She'd studied the PPE protocol, but it didn't mention washing hands. Apparently this step was just assumed. Washing hands is always first for anything, the professor stressed.

Shadyside School of Nursing offered academic coaches, so Sam signed

up. Her coach's observation was that lack of confidence was costing Sam more points than misunderstanding the material. She had a pattern of switching her test answers from right to wrong. Sam explained that this was because her instinctual choice often seemed too obvious. The counselor told her to trust her gut.

With her poor performance, the unrelenting anxiety she'd felt around her wedding was back, "like opening the wound at the same place." Along with heart palpitations, she was having terrifying visions. She'd pictured Durrin with her face half eaten by an awful creature. Sam kept imagining herself being rammed by another car as she got out the passenger door.

The stress was causing her OCD tendencies to flare up. She'd never been diagnosed with OCD, and the disorder wasn't recognized in Afghanistan. Sam had once sent Laura a humorous Instagram reel featuring a perfectionist who complained that he needed to clean his whole house before he could sit and study. "This is me," she'd texted Laura. When Sam took notes and created study guides, she drew meticulous lines between sections with her miniature ruler like an architect. She was checking on Durrin over and over in her bed again.

Her monthly periods were debilitating. Though there was less bleeding with her new IUD, she still felt possessed those days of the month. She picked on Wais. She was irritable. She walked around with a sour expression and then stressed about Durrin absorbing her mood. She couldn't see a doctor because her medical insurance had been canceled. Wais had made too much at his fraud-detection summer job for the couple to continue to qualify for Medicaid. They were working on getting their coverage reinstated now that Wais was back in school.

She hated feeling preoccupied and volatile. "I don't want Durrin to feel that she doesn't have any mom," she said sadly.

Durrin appeared unbothered, still finding ways to connect with Sam. She studied the children's anatomy book Sam had gotten her. Durrin could identify the clavicle and show Sam her ulna and radius.

By early November, Sam was increasingly worried that she wouldn't pass Fundamentals of Nursing. She wasn't doing much to help herself, either. Three times she made an appointment for a tutoring session, and each time she didn't show up. She did go see one of her advisers, who made her feel worse. The woman was quick to say maybe Sam wasn't cut out for

this program; her language barrier might be too extensive. Her adviser insisted that none of the American students were struggling, which Sam knew wasn't true. She pushed Sam to consider pursuing her BA in health science instead and to look into nursing programs after she graduated.

“People here are doing nursing in two years; I’m not going to do it in five,” Sam said curtly.

Election Postmortem

NOVEMBER 7, 2024

Mursal

Campus all that Wednesday had felt like early Sunday after the big homecoming football game. It was as if every student had burrowed back under the covers to sleep off a hangover. “I was shocked,” Mursal said, describing the deserted day after Election Day.

“Somehow I knew Trump would win,” she said. She’d started feeling that way right after the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania. She’d noticed how people rallied around him. She’d also spent time in Texas, where everyone seemed to be a Trump voter. She recognized that Ithaca was a blue bubble.

She also doubted that Americans would elect a woman. “I was thinking about the time Hillary Clinton ran.” She remembered that there had been a lot of discussion of the role of gender in that surprising loss.

Mursal hadn’t followed the Trump–Harris race closely. She didn’t understand the nuances of American politics and still felt like too much of an outsider to be motivated to learn. “The only thing I cared about is my parents, to be honest,” she admitted. As of five weeks before the election, Mursal’s parents and all of her siblings still hadn’t been granted asylum.

Luckily, the issue was resolved before Trump got in. Najim pressed *The New York Times* and his lawyers to inquire about the delay, as his family, save Mursal, were among very few in the cohort still awaiting a grant of asylum.

Najim’s nudge worked.

Late on election night, Mursal had called home. Her mom had been convinced that Kamala had lost because she was female. She’d told Mursal, “Even in America, people will not elect a woman president, which is so surprising for us because it’s a first world country.” Mursal had agreed with

her, saying, “Who said men and women are equal in the US?”

More than the election, Mursal was reeling from her workload. Her LLM program applications were due on November 15 and December 1, and her final project for her UN internship was due in between. The following week, she had three midterms.

“It blows my mind,” she said, brightening up about one shortcut she’d discovered to take some pressure off. She could adapt a class paper she’d written to use as her legal statement for the LLM applications. But that paper was twenty-five pages, and the essay limit was five hundred to one thousand words, so she still had plenty to do.

“Today I Met Two Bodies”

NOVEMBER 2024

Marwa

Marwa hadn't expected the fingernail polish. There was something about seeing the burgundy nails that turned this inert body into a woman with a life story, with a family somewhere missing her dearly.

She was in her anatomy lab, examining her first cadaver. The woman's hand was flopped casually across her belly as if she were on her sofa watching Netflix.

Before her class entered the cadaver lab, Marwa's professor asked her students to pause to appreciate that the bodies they would examine had been donated to science. She explained that they would see the whole body, including the genitals, and that she would remove the face coverings. Maryam was surprised to hear that the bodies would not have skin.

Marwa couldn't imagine forsaking her body to science. This wasn't even a concept in Afghanistan. “Like, honestly, people who really want to study the human anatomy, they will do the grave-robbing thing,” she said with a half laugh, then qualified that this was hearsay and she couldn't be certain.

In Islam, bodies are wrapped after death in a simple white shroud and buried quickly because the body is considered a trust from God that should be honored. The Quran teaches that human beings are created from soil and should be returned to it. There is a strong belief in an afterlife, so the body should remain intact. Marwa had been raised on this idea. She chose to keep her life simple by not questioning many norms, even those that bumped up against the science she was learning.

The night before, Marwa had lain on her bed trying to envision a cadaver. Her heart pounded. She'd seen a dead body up close just once. But that woman, her neighbor in Kunduz, had been dressed. *What if I just pass*

out? she worried.

Ten students, masked and gloved, stood around the first body, a woman in her seventies. “If we pull the extensor tendon, we’ll see her straighten her fingers,” the professor said. Marwa volunteered to try.

The professor then moved through the muscle groups in the arms, shoulders, neck, and chest. When she reached the stomach, she inserted a metal prong and found the gallbladder. Marwa touched the avocado-shaped organ by the liver. Once the others had a turn, Marwa cradled the gallbladder once again.

She couldn’t believe her hand was deep inside a human. She’d been imagining the look of organs, muscles, nerves, and bones for years. Finally, she had the equivalent of X-ray vision, the power to roam around inside a body. She felt electric.

Marwa handled the liver, the bladder, the heart. There were tools to manipulate the tissue, but Marwa preferred to use her hands.

They examined a male next. He still had his dark hair and bushy eyebrows. Her professor lifted up the posterior tibialis, which Marwa noticed was fibrous, with lines that moved in one direction. Next the professor pointed to a circular white mass. “That’s the patella,” Marwa blurted out.

After the session, Marwa went home and changed her clothes. She filled the kettle, and put a few cookies on a plate. She took her snack into the living room. She had her small diary in her hand. She stared out at the gray sky. Soon the rain began.

She felt as if she’d spent the day in a secret garden. The human body was a miracle. “Everything is so well put together,” she said. “Our bodies are wonders, creations of God, and when you see the body this way, you appreciate it even more.”

She opened the little notebook. “Today was a successful day. I met two bodies,” she wrote.

A Late-Fall Pause

NOVEMBER 25, 2024

Maryam

The joy of alone time was one of Maryam's biggest revelations since starting college.

It was Monday around noon, a few days into her Thanksgiving break, and she was hanging around in her dorm room. She was back in her matching pajamas set, gray with white piping, after going earlier to Dunkin' Donuts, where she'd ordered her first Mango-Pineapple Dunkin' Refresher. Her wish to prioritize fitness and eat healthier was still more concept than reality.

Long vines of faux ivy hung down above her bed. She'd also taped up a spray of foil butterflies, matching the butterflies on her pink-and-white bedspread, and a grid of postcards in brown, rose, and green. Most were line drawings of mushrooms, butterflies, and ginkgo leaves that looked lifted from a vintage biology textbook.

There were few people around, mainly just international students who couldn't go home for the short break and those who couldn't afford to travel. This was an issue that colleges overwhelmingly overlooked. But Maryam liked the deserted campus.

She experienced Pitt as frenetic, students rushing around at double speed. Sometimes she stood at the bus stop and marveled at all that happened around her in just a few minutes. Without the swarms of humanity, she took note of the changing leaves and the crisp air. "Everything is yellow, and it's beautiful," she said.

Maryam couldn't have cared less about having classmates around. She really paid them little attention. Some of this was due to being highly stubborn and confident. She didn't look to others for affirmation. "I don't take advice from people," she said. "I know I won't back down from my

own opinion.”

She believed she'd develop relationships when “it's supposed to happen.” She considered forcing connections to be a fruitless endeavor. “Anytime I pursue, it just kind of flies away.”

Maryam had several classmates whom she talked with before or after lectures or labs, but none of these relationships extended beyond the class period. She called them “friends,” but they were acquaintances. She had attended one meeting of a premed women's club but hadn't returned. Several weekends, she'd stayed in her room for the entire two days, bingeing K-dramas on Netflix and surviving on whatever she had in her fridge.

In late September, Maryam's roommate moved in with a friend down the hall. Maryam was elated, since sharing a room had been “so suffocating.”

Maryam's final hurdle before Thanksgiving break had been her biology exam. She thought the test had gone okay. She hoped her sense was right, because she was carrying a C in the class. Maryam was acting surprisingly casual about the middling grade, given her insistence on the do-or-die nature of getting a 4.0 for med-school applications. She acknowledged that at this point, her grade was probably cooked. Even with two tests remaining, she was unlikely to make up enough ground to boost her into B range. Her new tune was that one C was hardly going to ruin her. “Just three credits in 120 can't be that big of a deal,” she said. “If I want to be a doctor, perform on another human, I think I should be more stubborn than just giving up if I get a bad grade on one exam.”

She blamed her poor study skills and Afghanistan's vastly different academic approach. Her three American high schools had been easy, but the college premed track was a different beast. The heart of Afghan education is rote memorization, but her current biology professor wasn't looking for regurgitation. “It's really more applied biology,” she said.

In Afghanistan, she'd have been asked to draw the Krebs cycle, the process whereby cells generate energy. “Here, she doesn't ask you to draw the Krebs cycle. She gives you the Krebs cycle and asks if at certain temperatures, enzymes could still do their jobs.” Maryam maintained that she felt plenty smart. She just needed to adjust. Mostly, she felt relieved to finally feel challenged. Struggle kept her engaged. “When I feel ‘Oh, this is easy,’ then I don't do the work,” she said.

She was so certain she'd prevail, she pledged to grow her hair until she completed residency. "I get depressed and then I cut it short," she said. For such an utter rationalist, she was superstitious about hair. "Hair holds all our memories. I just want to have a timeline."

She pictured her long, flowing hair hanging halfway down her back at her graduation celebrations. She'd even envisioned when she would and wouldn't cover her hair. "For my graduation ceremony, for like the whole crowd, I would wear the scarf. But then, you know, after, for my whole at-home party, I don't have to wear it. I can do a photo shoot, and I want my hair to be long."

Twice a week, Maryam logged on to VictoryAfghanistan.org at 10:30 p.m. to teach English. An Instagram post recruiting tutors for free online language classes for women and girls in Afghanistan had caught her attention, and she'd signed up.

They called her "Teacher Jaan," as was convention for students to address educators, though she wished they'd just use Maryam. *Jaan* meant soul or essence in Persian. Having no teaching experience, she felt that she didn't deserve the title. Some of her students were in their midthirties, with professional degrees, and one was a former university professor. Sometimes students wanted Maryam to translate the lesson in English into Dari or Pashto, but this was difficult. The topics, like how to find credible research sources or write topic sentences followed by supporting evidence, were skills she'd learned in English, so she struggled to explain them in her native language. It was an embarrassment when her students clarified for their peers in the chat, providing words in Dari that she couldn't surface.

But she was a proud volunteer, thrilled to have a productive means of helping even a small number of her country's forsaken women and girls. Coming face-to-face with them provided a bridge back to her home. Of course, she also recognized she needed volunteer experiences for med-school applications, and this one was a no-brainer.

Turkey-Day Bounty

THANKSGIVING DAY 2024

Marwa

A year before, Marwa had marveled when Mursal had been asked to attend three different Thanksgiving gatherings. She'd received no invitations herself. This year, however, she had her own trio of offers.

One was from Marwa's Pakistani friend, whom Marwa had started calling a "best friend." The second was from Dr. Andrew Eller, the University of Pittsburgh professor whose dog had charged at her on campus and who had invited her to the Persian new year banquet in March. He was now Amu Andrew to her (Farsi for uncle), as she had been to his home for dinner, discussed life and career, and developed a true connection. The invitation she accepted, though, was from Dr. Abdulrab Aziz, a local cardiologist she'd met through Andrew.

On her first day of break, Marwa rode the bus for an hour and then walked twenty minutes across a highway and along the shoulder of a busy road to meet Dr. Aziz for the first time in his office at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center in Monroeville.

Andrew had connected them because he knew of Marwa's long interest in cardiology and, of course, because Dr. Aziz was also Afghan. He had emigrated in the early 1980s, soon after the Soviet invasion. He was in his twenties when he came, and alone, and he made his way through medical school at University of Pittsburgh, residency at nearby Shadyside Hospital, and specialty training. He was the first cardiologist Marwa had ever met.

"The path you are taking is the best path you can do," Dr. Aziz assured her. "Have patience. Have some belief in yourself. I did it. You can, too." He invited her to shadow him one afternoon a week during spring semester. As badly as she wanted the experience, she feared the commute was impossibly long given her class commitments. He then offered to inquire

about a placement in cardiology at Shadyside Hospital right by Chatham, though he could make no promises. She left the office buoyed that her dream of becoming a cardiac surgeon might really be possible.

On Thanksgiving, Dr. Aziz sent his adult daughter to pick up Marwa. Yasmine was a vascular neurologist visiting from Ohio. The two talked nonstop for the thirty-minute drive.

Once inside their home, Marwa had a wave of panic. She was the youngest adult there. *I don't belong here*, she thought. She was a mix of shy and extroverted and always had a hard time getting comfortable with strangers. She frequently wanted to bolt in the first ten minutes of a new experience. But her anxiety dissipated. This family was warm, and she was moved when some of them spoke to her in Farsi.

The family was equally moved to host Marwa. "It's still very ripe in their head what happened to them," Yasmine said months later, speaking about both her parents being immigrants and taking an interest in newcomers.

"I want to read one of your brother's articles," Yasmine said, sitting beside Marwa on the sofa. Marwa had shared some of her personal story, including that her brother Najim's work for *The New York Times* was responsible for her being in America. "You can also read mine. I have a *New York Times* article," Marwa told Yasmine proudly.

"I'm going to look right now!" she said. The article written by Rebecca headlined "'Day by Day I Realized I Have the Freedom Here'" popped right up on her phone. Yasmine couldn't access it because she wasn't a *Times* subscriber. She signed up on the spot.

Marwa couldn't wrap her brain around being in this house, with these generous Afghans showing such interest in her, almost all of whom were in the medical field. Dr. Aziz's son practices maternal fetal medicine, and Yasmine's twin works for Bristol Myers Squibb in the oncology area.

The meal "was just like the movies," Marwa said—turkey, stuffing, potatoes, cranberry sauce, pie—but there was also Qabuli for a relative who'd never conformed to American cuisine. When it was time to go, the family piled her with three days' worth of leftovers.

After returning from the Azizes', Marwa felt wired. The food. The houseful of doctors. It all felt like fate. She called her mom, her cousin in Germany, and finally Karishma in Afghanistan.

Excitement oozed from her best friend's every word. "We will have one more immigration interview, and then we will have our wedding ceremony!" Karishma said excitedly. She was speaking more and more quickly. "After we are married, once we have the papers, we will go to Doha and stay there for maybe one month. Then we will come to the United States." The couple was moving quickly with marriage, which would allow both of them to come to America. Karishma's fiancé had a visa due to a family member's work with the US military. Marwa grinned to the edges of her cheeks. If it hadn't been 2 a.m., she would have screamed.

Even more than her news, Marwa was taken by Karishma's affect. She seemed genuinely happy. Karishma's fiancé, who was her cousin, had returned to Afghanistan from Iran, and they were planning their wedding. "This is the first time we took each other's hand and walked in the street together," Karishma shared.

"Didn't you worry about the Taliban?" Marwa asked.

"We have the nikah paperwork, so we don't have to worry."

Karishma and her fiancé were planning to go to Seattle, where other family members had already settled. Suddenly, the lift went out of Karishma's tone. The move meant she'd have to leave her parents behind.

Marwa knew there was no hopeful spin to ease Karishma's pain about having to separate from her family. Instead, Marwa shifted to Karishma's future. She urged her to bring her medical school transcripts to the US. She'd need them to transfer her credits.

Karishma stayed silent. Then, in a whisper, "I'm no longer planning to become a doctor. It's going to take really long time."

Marwa knew pressuring her friend wouldn't help at this moment. She quickly reeled off a host of other options. "You can do RN, PA, nursing assistant, dental assistant. These things take maybe one year, or two," she told her.

The “Cheating Mechanism”

DECEMBER 2024

Sam

Sam likely couldn't pass Fundamentals of Nursing whatever her score on the final, but she'd studied hard and still wanted to prove to herself that she could perform. She now got an extra forty-five minutes on tests, an accommodation on account of English being her second language. She walked into the exam room and set her keys, wallet, and a small ruler on the edge of her desk. When she looked up, the proctor was standing directly over her. The woman snatched the ruler off the desk. It was foldable, and she opened it up. When she did, she found tiny writing all over the back. “You can't have this,” the proctor said icily, and closed it quickly in her palm.

When the exam started, Sam tried to focus on the questions and not on what had just happened. The moment she finished, the proctor told her to go immediately to the department chair's office. Sam was confused. *What have I done?* The chair told Sam she was suspected of cheating and that she had the confiscated cheating mechanism in her possession.

Sam had no idea what the chair meant. “I don't know what is the ‘cheating mechanism,’ but I was not cheating,” Sam told her. The chair instructed her to leave the building immediately. She couldn't sit for the day's lectures. The chair told Sam she'd be contacted by a member of the nursing school's board.

Sam reviewed the incident over and over in her head. The exam room was tiny, and there were only three students with a proctor. Why would anyone ever think they could cheat in this setup? She always wrote little notes all over everything. That was how she studied. She needed to write to learn. When she'd studied anatomy, she'd scribbled terms all over her hands. There were pages covered in her tiny writing taped up on her

apartment bathroom mirror, on walls, above the stove, so she could review definitions and labeled illustrations as she cooked or brushed her teeth. She'd even plastered her school ID with little stickies covered with verbiage to enable mini-study sessions during lags on her clinical days.

"The ruler wasn't even close to me. There was nothing on it that I could cheat. The ink was even all smudged," she said, recalling the day.

Still, she was panicked, and Laura joined her for a tense meeting with a handful of administrators. Sam showed a whole stack of her notes covered with ruled lines, explaining that she used the ruler constantly, which was why she'd brought it into the exam.

"Do you think she would go through all this, coming from Afghanistan, just to cheat?" Laura pleaded on Sam's behalf.

Ultimately, the cheating accusation was dropped. Since the "cheating mechanism" had been taken from Sam before the test, there was no evidence that cheating had occurred. She survived the fracas, but she still failed N102. She didn't score the required 76 percentage average.

Traveling Back

JANUARY 10, 2025

Maryam

Traveling back to school from Virginia after the holidays had transported Maryam far more than the 250-mile distance.

At her dorm-room door, Maryam waved her key card, turned the knob, and pulled her suitcase inside. She kicked off her shoes and dropped her book bag. She felt discombobulated from travel. She was stressed because she'd missed the first two days of second-semester classes. Maryam's flight had been scheduled for Monday, but she'd been waylaid by a big snowstorm in DC and hadn't been able to rebook until Wednesday.

The moment she was alone in her dorm room, she started feeling better, calmer. Being alone again was a relief.

With her family in Virginia, she'd had a distinct and unexpected sense of being a visitor. Her one semester at Pitt had felt three times that long—she had experienced so much. Her sense was that Pittsburgh felt more like her home than Falls Church.

In transit, she'd experienced feeling almost outside herself, like she was hovering above her body, observing every move. There she was, striding down the airport corridor, then at the luggage turnstile collecting her bags, "looking all classy and fancy." She was a college student, pulling her rolling bag, tapping on her phone for an Uber back to campus. These routine acts felt like a triumph.

Something to Prove

MID-JANUARY 2025

Sam

Sam had worked herself into a daily tizzy for weeks. She was struggling to decide whether to immediately retake the nursing class she'd just failed or to pause and shore up some of her skills first.

Many people who weighed in, including Laura, were pushing her to get some more Chatham classes under her belt before reenrolling in the Fundamentals of Nursing class. Sam insisted she'd already taken the highest-level English-language class Chatham offered, and no other available courses were likely to boost her ability to pass N102.

N102 wasn't offered in fall 2025, so if she delayed reenrolling, she'd have to wait a full year to try again. But if she steamrolled ahead and failed again, she'd be sunk since Shadyside allowed only one do-over. She explored transferring to a community college nursing program, but learned that that path was unrealistic. She had a scholarship to Chatham, and her and Wais's housing was tied to both being enrolled there, so she had to take Chatham courses in the spring semester.

She decided to forge ahead. She'd restart N102 in January.

She later insisted that she'd never really been confused about how to proceed, maintaining that she'd always believed her best bet was to redo N102 immediately. "I'm very black-and-white," she said.

Sam wouldn't let go of the belief that one of her academic advisers was dead wrong that the American students sailed through N102 trouble-free. When Sam entered the lecture room in January, she said she recognized ten faces from the previous semester. Others from her prior class were retaking the course as night students. While she is prone to exaggerate, she guessed that close to half the students had also failed.

Two tests into the second go-round, she was carrying an 82 average,

which pleased her to no end.

“Just want to show the adviser that she was wrong 😁,” she texted.

Feeling Small

LATE JANUARY 2025

Maryam

Maryam could no longer feel the tip of her nose. She lay on a concrete bench in the plaza outside her dorm, and stared up at the sky. It was just after 4 a.m., and she was totally alone. Each time she exhaled, little puffs of frosty air rose up in front of her face.

She sat back up and then stood up on the benchtop. Walking back and forth, she raised her arms in victory. This was a new habit, coming outside alone in the middle of the night. She was no longer afraid. She felt a deep sense of release.

Maryam lay back down, taking in the universe of stars. Adjusting to college was difficult, but she was slowly finding her footing. She asked God to help her stay patient with herself. Talking to God helped.

Sometimes on these night forays, she took a brisk walk or went for a little run partway down Cardiac Hill and back up. But usually she stayed in the plaza, stood on the wall, jumped onto the concrete benches, and then lay down, gazing up in wonderment. *If my mom knew I did these things, she'd kill me*, she usually thought. Her mom would never do this, could never do this. Maryam felt sorry that her mother had never had the opportunity to live independently.

Maryam had spent most of her year at Pitt in high gear, continually doing. She likened her brain to “a computer with a whole lot of open tabs.” If she let her guard down and went black like a computer in sleep mode, she worried that she wouldn’t wake back up. “If I take a break, I can’t get back on track for like a whole week. My body doesn’t accept breaks. So I like just keep going and going.”

Sometimes all those open tabs and her mind in overdrive led her to spew pseudoprofound thoughts: “Is a zebra white with black stripes or black with

white stripes? Is your life a sad life with happy memories, or is it a happy life with sad memories? I don't even know if I'm a good person or a bad person with some good habits." She seemed to be working out her identity as she confronted so much newness and change.

Behind her desk, she'd taped two charts she had filled in with a red pen. One was labeled "Mind Map," with boxes where she listed each discrete step necessary to get from freshman year to med school. In the box labeled "Clinical," she'd written "shadow, scribe, volunteer, research," the ways she planned to gain necessary clinical experience. In another box, "Certification," she'd put "EMT, CCMA, CCSA"—credentials she aimed to obtain prior to applying to med school. The second chart she'd put up she'd titled "GWU Transfer," with the steps to accomplish a transfer to George Washington University set out.

She'd arrived at Pitt with a healthy academic ego. In her senior year of high school in Virginia, she hadn't attended a single session of precalculus and still aced every test. Her first college semester was an immediate cold shower. "I was kind of like, *Damn, this is going to be hard*," she said. She finished the first semester with B+'s in medical humanities and communications, but she didn't fare well in biology and chemistry.

The moment she saw her grades, Maryam decided she'd retake both science courses in the second semester. If she improved, and she knew she would, the new grades would factor into her final GPA.

She never mentioned her poor grades to her parents, much as she'd never shared when she'd failed gym junior year in high school until her transcript had arrived at her home. "There is nothing they can even do, so why should I tell them? I do not lie to them; I just say it was fine," she said.

But on this particular night early in the second semester, she wasn't freezing the tip of her nose off in the dead of night because she'd whiffed on another chemistry or biology test. She was there because she currently had A's in both classes. The pressure to maintain the A's felt almost worse than failing.

Maryam was continually asking herself, "Am I doing enough?" If she determined no, "I will torture myself with an all-nighter to pay for my sins," she said. Then she'd start with the what-ifs. "What if I don't improve my chem and bio grades? What if I don't get into medical school? What if I disappoint my parents? What if I'm not an admirable role model for my

siblings?”

There was much pressure in her increasing realization that she had no backstop. Her parents would need her support as they grew old. She had three younger siblings who would need her. So she felt desperately competitive, with others and with herself. When she went to the library early in the mornings, she got instantly annoyed at others who'd been there all night by the looks of their drained coffee cups and snack detritus. She needed to stay a step ahead.

Her newest strategy was going nocturnal, studying all night, sleeping in spare blocks during the day. She'd figured out that the twenty-four hours of a college day were hers to divide as she chose. She loved the feeling of being productive at night while others slept, giving her a sense of leapfrogging ahead. She had no way of knowing if this was actually true, but the perception of outrunning her peers, even momentarily, satisfied her.

Sometimes when she stared into the night sky from her bench perch, she wondered, *Why do I want to be a brain surgeon so badly?* But then she'd remind herself of how connected she felt to the brain. *What a fascinating organ*, she'd think. "It's a very self-centered piece of the body, like me," she admitted. "He"—as she put it—"would do anything to stay alive. Even if it means he would kill every other organ in the body to be alive."

There was a simpler explanation, too. "If you want to know the honest truth, I searched up what is the hardest major that you can do before med school, and it's neuroscience." She'd always felt she had something to prove. Picking the hardest path was a form of rebellion. Since childhood, she hadn't let others tell her no.

What really made no sense to her was picking something easy. A senior in her Approach to Research class had shared that he planned to major in communications.

"What is your plan to do with that?" she asked him. "There aren't many jobs in communications."

He said he wanted to get a master's, or maybe a PhD.

"Then what?" she asked.

"I'll get a job to pay for all the loans I'll incur," he said sarcastically.

She was dumbfounded. "That doesn't make sense to me. What kind of cycle is this? God damn it, this is just pointless. Why would I spend all this time and just do a job that helps me pay the bills that I ran up during

university?” She’d sooner work on a construction crew. At least then she wouldn’t have loans. It was as if all that thinking about living a more balanced life prompted by *When Breath Becomes Air* had floated out of her head. She was back, hurtling to make a dent in the universe.

“For me, that was the day I decided, no matter how hard this is, let’s do something that is fun, that has a future,” she said. “I want to leave a name behind. I don’t want to live a meaningless life. You ask me why do I choose hard? I have everything a human needs to survive, so why should I choose easy?”

From her bench perch, she took in the unthinkable number of stars. The universe was vast beyond comprehension. She felt so tiny. This perspective eased her grand anxiety. Really, none of her what-ifs mattered. Her biology and chemistry falter was totally inconsequential from this vantage point. She was just a speck in an endless expanse of space, passing through. If only she could hold on to this sense.

Piano Lessons

JANUARY 16, 2025

Marwa

Marwa leaned against the wall in the hallway, glad she'd arrived early. A fluid, soothing piano melody wafted out through the studio door.

She'd chosen to take a piano class because she needed several additional credits. She padded her schedule each semester to assure that she would remain a full-time student, as required for her scholarship, should she need to drop a course. She'd be fully out of her league in piano; she'd only even banged on a set of keys once. She'd already taken dance and yoga at Chatham and wanted a nonacademic class to balance her STEM-heavy load. She'd always been curious about piano. She'd decided to try since she knew she could always drop it. The class was actually a weekly one-on-one lesson.

The door opened, and an older woman with soft auburn hair down to her shoulders emerged. In a calming voice, she invited Marwa into her office.

"You might notice, I have an accent," she told Marwa once they were settled. "I'm from Ukraine, but I moved here a long time ago." She shared that she and her husband had come to Pittsburgh in 1991 with their three-year-old son. She still had family in Ukraine whom she'd spoken to every day since the war had begun, "to check if they're alive or without heat, electricity, or water," and went back to visit. Her name was Pauline Rovhah. She headed Chatham's piano program, ran benefit concerts to raise money for causes, and was a performer herself.

Marwa was drawn to Pauline instantly. She was so unassuming, warm yet strong. She asked Pauline sympathetically about the Russian invasion of her country.

"Introduce yourself to me," Pauline said to Marwa.

Marwa adored older people. She liked to be in their wise presence. And

Pauline had also left her home for a distant foreign land.

“I’m Marwa. I’m from Afghanistan. I’ve never tried piano, but I have wanted to play.” She explained that right now, music is banned in Afghanistan by the Taliban. “It’s haram,” Marwa told Pauline, meaning forbidden for Muslims.

Marwa shared how she’d finished much of medical school in Afghanistan and was determined to become a doctor.

“You brought such a light in this room with your smile and your passionate face. It’s such a big and positive thing, you being here, listening, learning music,” Pauline told her. Everyone who met Marwa was struck by her smile, noticed that it almost twinkled. “Afghan girls are not even allowed to go to school, and you are learning music.”

“You know, Marwa, you will be a doctor for sure,” Pauline assured her. She also predicted that this day would be the start of a long friendship. “I have a few students I have stayed connected with over the years. I believe you will be next.”

“I want to cry, the way this lady touched my heart the first day,” Marwa said later.

As Marwa went along in her new life in Pittsburgh, she collected mentors like special stones. Her superpower was attracting caring adults who wanted to help her.

The first lesson was elementary. Pauline showed her a short introduction video. There was so much about piano and music basics that Marwa didn’t know. She’d never known that you often press two keys together, that there are upper and lower keys, that a piano has foot pedals.

Pauline demonstrated the proper way to sit. She showed Marwa where to place her wrists and to bend her fingers slightly.

She told Marwa that their lessons would not feel pressured. There would be no grade, no required pace. She explained that she tailored the syllabus to each individual student. They could continue after the semester if Marwa liked.

Marwa loved the soft way she spoke.

“It might be something you enjoy, a time to escape from class,” Pauline said. “We are here for you to find a friend for life.”

Welcoming Zar

FEBRUARY 15, 2025

Mursal

Mursal had long promised her cousin Zar that the moment her plane touched down in the US, Mursal would be there to greet her. She kept her word as best as she could given her Cornell calendar. Mursal flew to San Francisco in mid-February, just weeks after Zar had arrived. Zar, based on her father's business dealings with the US government and military, had received a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and was coming to live with one of her brothers, where the rest of the family was planning to join her.

The pair had not seen one another since August 2021, though they had spent hundreds of hours on WhatsApp video calls over the miles. Zar choreographed the airport reunion carefully. She would bring Mursal's favorite flowers, roses, and red and white ones particularly, and have her brother hang back a few feet so he could video the two reuniting. Unfortunately, Zar hadn't anticipated the impossibility of buying any roses the day after Valentine's Day. She had to settle for carnations.

Mursal and Zar's embrace was long and tearful. The pair hadn't seen one another for three and a half years. Both in long trench coats, one red and one cream, they kept staring into each other's eyes, clinging to one another. "Is this real, or are we FaceTime?" Mursal screeched.

In the car, Zar and Mursal, nearly in unison, asked Zar's brother to see his video. He sheepishly admitted that he'd failed to press the record button. The two barely noticed the hourlong drive east on 580 to the town of Tracy, where Zar had just moved. They'd whizzed by the increasingly arid hillsides, past the Altamont Pass dotted with wind turbines. The two didn't stop talking the whole way or for nearly the entire night and into the next day.

Zar was Mursal's very best friend. "We are like the same blood," Mursal

always said. “Sometimes we think we have to marry two brothers.” Since they were teens, they’d been scheming about having a fashion business together. Zar was still Mursal’s best comfort, even while Zar was working in Turkey awaiting her visa. Mursal would call her almost daily from her desk at the UN, or from school, and they would stay on a video call for hours. Often few words were exchanged as Mursal worked and Zar cleaned her apartment or cooked. But Zar was a supportive presence.

“It’s one thing to talk on the phone, but then seeing you, you change a lot,” Zar told Mursal. “You are more independent, more responsible.”

Mursal looked hard at her cousin. “I feel so tired. So, so tired,” she said. Even her voice sounded depleted. “I feel like I have been running a race.”

Zar was struggling to adjust to Tracy in the farm-heavy Central Valley. Mursal had fielded a string of teary calls from her from the park near the house as she wandered alone, her brother gone all day driving Uber. Mursal reminded her cousin that for the first few months, she and her sisters had barely left their hotel or apartment. One big difference was that Mursal had had the support of a resettlement agency, *The New York Times*, and her entire family. Zar came on an SIV, which made her eligible for government financial assistance, but she was not hooked into any resettlement infrastructure. At least Zar had the advantage of arriving speaking solid English. She also had a direction in mind, pursuing her real-estate license, which typically took around six months.

Every time Zar mentioned the situation with her parents and other brothers, her eyes welled up. They’d planned to move to the US as a family. Zar would join her brother, and her parents and other brothers would follow. But on January 20, days after Zar arrived, Trump took office and the US borders effectively slammed shut. The US Refugee Admissions Program was suspended effective January 27, 2025, “until such time as the further entry into the United States of refugees aligns with the interests of the United States,” an executive order read. Even people like Zar’s parents, who’d completed the SIV process, received approval, and held airplane tickets to the US, were stymied. Her father owned a fleet of cars and properties in Afghanistan that he’d leased to the American military.

In the US, Zar wanted to study further. Even though she had earned her master’s in international relations in Istanbul and her BA in law in Afghanistan, she knew US standards were much higher. But first she

needed to find work.

In Turkey, Zar had worked as a sales agent for a high-end cosmetic surgery practice. Women came from around the world to have facelifts and tummy tucks, and she handled the arrangements for their extended stays. She lived in a studio apartment that she owned, which enabled her to obtain a visa to remain there. She had a group of friends who were forever begging her to remove her scarf and let her hair free, but she felt best continuing to cover herself.

Both cousins wore trench coats and faux-gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses to tour San Francisco. Mursal's garnet-colored brocade long coat matched her vest (both of which belonged to Zar) and red ballet slippers. She said she knew she could walk miles in these shoes because she'd done so all around Manhattan.

"Of course!" Zar said, laughing, on whether she'd borrowed her silver-tipped boots and silk leopard scarf from Mursal.

"My suitcase was overweight!" Mursal said, laughing at herself.

Zar wished she'd taken Mursal's advice to wear sneakers. Her feet were killing her walking around.

Mursal had been anxious for Zar to see San Francisco. Mursal had fallen for the Bay vistas and steep hills when she'd visited for Najim's graduation from Berkeley's graduate journalism school. She wanted Zar to see all that lay beyond Tracy.

Sitting on a curved wooden bench with a view out to the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pacific Ocean a dusty blue brushstroke right up against the lighter blue sky, they held hands like schoolgirls. Mursal commented in Persian, expressing her connection to Zar: "*Ou âyene-ye to-st, chon man khodam râ dar to mibinam*. It means she is your mirror, because I see myself in you," Mursal translated.

They stood, backs to the water, and struck poses for selfies. "The thing about nice cities is you're never overdressed," Mursal declared.

Zar was the only person Mursal had been in text communication with on the day she'd first fled to the Kabul airport. "I was the only one who knew where Mursal's family was," Zar boasted, referring to those harrowing days

while the Rahims were trying to get out of Afghanistan.

The two then started reminiscing about the last gathering of their two families, five days before Kabul fell. They were at Najim's apartment. Mursal's parents had come to Kabul from Kunduz, since that was one of the first cities the Taliban had taken.

Mursal recalled the antics she and her siblings and cousins had gotten up to. They always pooled their money and sent one of Zar's brothers to buy a mountain of junk food. He knew to bring a large black bag to hide the packages of potato chips, fruit leather they call lavāshak, milk chocolates, and soda. "Like you would think that it's trash," Mursal said. They stashed it in a corner upstairs.

As soon as the grown-ups went to bed, the cousins gathered on the second floor, pulling the curtains shut and closing the door. They shoved a towel under the door to dampen the noise. They dumped out the sack of food, talked, snacked, and fell over in peals of laughter. They played Uno and the fruit game, which involved passing around little slips of paper and slapping the ground when you had gathered a set of four of the same fruits. Then all the players tried to add their hand to the hand pile and not be last. The loser got a punishment, like eating pineapple with the skin on or swallowing watermelon covered in pepper. When the sun came up, they were still awake.



Over lunch at a tiny Mediterranean restaurant in San Francisco's Cow Hollow neighborhood, Zar talked about her latest experiences in Kabul. She'd been home to see her family just before coming to California. She had not felt scared walking around Kabul. She'd felt confident she could handle a confrontation with a Talib. But she recognized that she was an exception. Nowadays, women out in public were a rarity. "I used to see eight or ten women for every man. Now I see ten men and one woman—or none," Zar said.

A recent incident that Zar shared with Mursal revealed how on edge women in Afghanistan were feeling. Despite gyms being forbidden for females, women in Zar's community had been going to a "secret gym." There were often as many as one hundred women there working out. One

morning, cars pulled up to the front and blocked the street, and Talib guards began to swarm. A raid was happening.

The gym was on the second floor. While the Talibs waited for the elevator, all the women in the gym ran for a back stairwell. Some were shaking, saying they would be jailed or killed. “Some were not well, having medical issues, high blood pressure, panic attacks,” Zar said. The women all managed to escape before the Talibs in their long beards and large turbans burst into the gym. “I heard they were all sniffing, saying, ‘We smell perfume. We know there were women here.’ After that, the gym closed down and hasn’t reopened.”

The two finished lunch and resumed their sightseeing. Mursal craned her head, trying to see if the cable car was cresting the California Street hill. When the open-sided trolley car trundled up, Mursal rushed to grab outdoor seats. She knew the ropes because she’d ridden an old-fashioned San Francisco trolley with her family while visiting for Najim’s graduation. “Where did you get that beautiful red coat?” the operator in a fluorescent vest asked Mursal. Mursal smiled at her. “It’s from Afghanistan,” she answered. The woman laughed heartily. “Not sure how I can get one of those, then!” she said.

The operator released the oversized brake, and the trolley started creeping down the metal tracks. Mursal motioned to Zar to step down onto the lower platform. Mursal hung out over the street, and Zar followed. They held out their phones to video themselves moving down California Street, the Bay Bridge perfectly framed by the buildings on both sides.

TikTok Killing

MARCH 17, 2025

Sam

The first *New York Times* story reporting the incident was headlined “Father Slays New York Girl, 14, in TikTok ‘Honor Killing.’” An expanded version ran on the front page in early March.

On January 27, Hira, a fourteen-year-old middle schooler from Yonkers, New York, who loved baggy jeans and Billie Eilish, was shot in front of her father’s family home in his home country of Pakistan. There was a rushed burial one day later and, according to the coverage, little grieving.

The girl’s father reportedly had taken his daughter, who had been born and raised in the US, to Pakistan for a “vacation.” The horrific incident took place in Quetta, seventy miles from the Afghanistan border. Quetta was the same arid valley city surrounded by rugged mountains where Sam’s sister Nasima was living, really hiding out, renting a single room, surviving on the scholarship funds she’d been awarded to attend Kabul University just before the country had fallen.

Hira’s father had confessed to the murder. According to the police, he’d said she had brought shame to the family by posting what he called inappropriate videos online. He also disapproved of her clothing choices, lifestyle, and social relationships.

Sam was not the least bit surprised by the incident. She’d heard countless similar tales. “It can happen anytime in Afghanistan,” Sam said, “because they think you owe them your life and they own your entire life. Either obey and live or say no and die. That’s why I helped my sister to run away, because that was the only way she could survive.”

The week before, Durrin had tussled with her two closest friends at day care. At pickup, Laura chatted with the teacher, who shared that the little girls had been more physically aggressive with each other lately but then

quickly reverted to hugging and kissing.

Sam loved hearing the teacher's reports that Laura passed on when she did pickup. That little anecdote about Durrin and her friends came right to her mind upon hearing about Hira's tragedy. She was instantly reminded of the rigidity of her culture, of the powerful social forces controlling behavior. She was so thankful to be free. And yet she wasn't entirely free. Her upbringing under that rigid system had stolen a lightness and confidence of being in the world that she felt she could never get back.

"I like how Durrin and her friends forgive and forget. I wish there were some things I could just forgive and forget."

Green-Card Blues

MARCH 18, 2025

Mursal

“I have lost a full year toward my residency,” Mursal said.

In addition to being frustrated, she was hungry and exhausted. She was fasting for Ramadan so hadn’t eaten since the night before, and it was almost 4 p.m. She’d slept terribly, her brain in overdrive over her immigration status. During the holy month, she also couldn’t caffeinate her way out of her stupor.

The day before, she’d learned her green-card application had been rejected due to a technicality. Her brother Naim had opened the letter and called her.

Mursal was confused because she’d been the second person in the *Times* group to receive her asylum approval, back in April 2023. Many who’d received their asylum status after her already had their green cards. Even her Afghan friend who was studying at Arizona State University, who’d arrived two years after Mursal, had her green card. She shouldn’t be in this situation.

After being approved, like all asylees, she’d had to wait one year to submit her green-card application. The filing date then counted as the start of the five-year clock for permanent residency as long as the green card was ultimately approved. Her five years should have started ticking down soon after April 2024. But now it was March 2025, and she didn’t even have a clock yet.

First her lawyer was delayed in getting back to her. Once the submission was made, there were issues with the paperwork. The filing was missing one signature; they might have inadvertently used an outdated form, which wasn’t unusual because the forms were constantly being updated.

With the intensifying anti-immigrant environment, Mursal was desperate

to get on solid footing. She was annoyed that she had paid \$1,400 for the required independent medical assessment, confirming her vaccine and TB status, and various other tests. She'd included that assessment, in a sealed envelope, with her filing. Now the assessment envelope had been unsealed, and she worried she'd have to repeat the medical tests. "I am a student," she said. "I don't have this money."

Paranoid thoughts about what the problem might be were bubbling up. She'd heard the government might track your social media. "Now as a green-card holder, you don't have freedom of speech," she said. She was referring to the targeting of students based just on campus and social media activism. These days, she'd started worrying that her calls and WhatsApp communication might not be secure.

While she was annoyed about her green-card delay, she didn't disparage her lawyers. She recognized how overworked immigration lawyers were and how fortunate she was to have counsel, let alone at no cost.

Feeling quite negative was unusual for Mursal. But beyond the green-card issue, she had reason to feel untethered and vulnerable. She was awaiting word on whether she'd been accepted into Cornell's master in laws program.

Even if she was so fortunate, she had started questioning whether she might be better off getting her JD. She'd met a Saudi Arabian woman in Cornell's LLM program who said she wished she'd done her JD instead. Mursal wasn't intimidated about the three-year commitment required for a law degree. "If you want to learn something very deep, it takes time," she said.

Her MPA "capstone" project was due in twelve days, essentially a forty-page thesis, and she and her partner hadn't started writing. They'd been assigned a hugely broad topic: the systemic breakdown in American health care. Mursal's family was under some financial stress because the first jobs her siblings had found after the move to Virginia were less lucrative. Mursal also needed a summer job. If she was turned down by Cornell, she needed summer work. She'd also need a plan for her next year—really, for her whole future.

Red Heels and White Coats

MARCH 23, 2025

Maryam

Maryam needed a hobby.

She'd been down a rabbit hole investigating the résumé of accomplishments and experiences that would give her the best odds of acceptance into a top medical school. She'd parsed the categories on a typical application with surgical precision: fifteen slots to list relevant work experience, certifications, and extracurriculars; expectation of 150 hours each of research, clinical, volunteer, and personal activities. The "personal activity" was the piece eluding her.

"You have to show that you are not just a student, you are a human being. But how do you expect us to be a human being when we are studying until 1 or 2 a.m. every night? There isn't much left for me to be a human being," she said. This tension to be well-rounded and simultaneously ace her STEM classes had her cortisol levels spiking.

Maryam's problem was that she'd never developed hobbies. Passion activities are a luxury. "In Afghanistan, people are looking to survive, not to enjoy. Even buying a book was not something a person could do," she said. "I had classmates who couldn't afford a notebook, let alone a hobby." Her private school had offered volleyball and soccer, and some girls had participated, but sports hadn't appealed to her. There was no access to music classes, and arts were very basic since they weren't prioritized. Girls typically went home after school to cook, clean, and care for siblings. Academic enrichment classes were the exception, typically to prepare for the national exams.

Creative writing was Maryam's leading contender for a hobby. She liked to write and believed she had some talent. As a child, she liked to translate cartoons into lengthy stories. She just needed to find some writing-centric

organizations or publications to join. She reeled off a few ideas—newspaper, literary magazine, newsletter.

Meanwhile, she'd gotten to work bolstering her clinical experience and added two entries to that ledger. She'd identified several opportunities through a portal that amassed research and clinical positions. Persisting past broken links and outdated listings, she had a line on opportunities to shadow in a neurodiagnostics clinic and a cancer ward. She'd registered to take her CCMA certification exam on April 28. She'd also researched registered nursing assistant courses in Virginia for summer 2026.

All spring, she'd managed to stay relatively positive about the tough journey to med school. She'd embraced the reality that premed was simply a grind. Her peers focused in STEM subjects all joked about "going out" to Hellman Library. She'd devised some clever tricks to boost her motivation. She'd searched "white coat ceremony" on YouTube. There were plenty of videos—Class of 2028 at Cornell Weill, Georgetown Class of 2025, Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at UNLV. She'd lose herself in the medical school initiation ceremony. She stared spellbound as one by one, the newbies donned their white coats embroidered with their name and recited the Hippocratic oath. She occasionally took a white-coat break in the library. She listened through her AirPods to the graduates being called one by one. Other days, she watched open-heart surgeries on YouTube.

Visualizing was another technique she used. She channeled being a senior, lined up to enter the graduation ceremony in cap and gown and finally triumphantly throwing her tassel across her mortarboard. She wished she could order her cap and gown now. "I'd put it in my room and look at it. I'll be like 'Oh, I want to wear that thing in three years.'"

She even envisioned the exact shoes she'd wear underneath. Her mom teased her when she shared this image: "Maryam, still three years in advance!" But Maryam's imaginings all helped her keep going. "I was thinking, you know, the red-bottom shoes," she said. "I don't care how much they cost. For graduation, I'm getting those." She would cross the stage in Christian Louboutin heels.

Losing the Law

MARCH 25, 2025

Mursal

Graduation was eight weeks away, and few of Mursal's classmates had jobs lined up. The employment landscape was bleak. News of entire government agencies being “put through the wood chipper” by Elon Musk, or DOGE'd, headlined daily newscasts. USAID had been dismantled in a matter of days. The typical public administration career agencies and organizations, from environmental sustainability to human rights and women's rights, were suddenly defunded.

Mursal thought she would be able to avoid facing the dismal job market. She was so confident she'd be admitted to Cornell's LLM program that she didn't worry about making a plan B.

She had a 3.6 GPA, and admissions would recognize the caliber of her MPA program. She stressed her powerful motivation in her application. “There is an urgent demand for legal advocates in Afghanistan due to the worsening humanitarian crisis. The time to get my LLM is now,” she wrote. In law school in Afghanistan, she had worked in courts and prisons. She'd earned a competitive UN internship, been featured on Cornell panels and in publications, educated refugees about their rights, and served on the board of the Muslim Student Association.

Just before 8 p.m., the email from admissions appeared in her inbox. The words flattened her. Rejected.

“What am I going to do now?” she said, panicking.

The only person she called that night with the news was Marwa.

“That's fine. You shouldn't be sad,” Marwa said. “You are already graduating. You can make another plan and apply to another school.”

But Mursal was devastated. Her dream of working in the law felt dashed. She'd often mentioned that even with just her LLM, she could take

the bar exam and practice law if she passed. She knew that would be exceedingly difficult, but the possibility at least remained.

Mursal had planned to apply to five LLM programs, but she'd believed that she would get into Cornell, so she hadn't given the other applications her full effort. In fact, she'd only sent in three applications, and her NYU application wasn't even complete because she hadn't submitted a TOEFL score. She'd skipped applying to GWU since it required the TOEFL exam. She hadn't retaken a language-proficiency exam since 2022, and she knew her previous score was too low. The University of Chicago had rejected her in February.

Until now, almost everything since she had come to the US had gone her way. She'd been the golden girl among the young people in the *Times* cohort. She'd gotten the Ivy League admission and the top-shelf summer job at the UN.

But now she feared her good fortune had run out. The application process for UN jobs took many months, and the listings she was finding on the UN job portal all required a minimum of seven years' experience. She couldn't afford to do another UN internship because she had no savings. Moving home to Virginia worried her because she'd have little space of her own. Sosan had been unsuccessful in finding an administrative position after months of looking and was readying to start a job at Marshalls. She was still waiting to hear back about substitute teaching opportunities.

These crossroad moments are difficult for all young people fresh out of college or graduate school and left to figure out the next step. For a young woman who already felt like an outsider, the sense of being unable to break into this go-go, achievement-oriented society was even more unsettling.

"What more did they want?" Mursal said, repeating the question to herself several times.

Unable to sleep, at 3 a.m., she drafted a note to the admissions committee, though she doubted she'd send it. She wrote that becoming an asylum attorney was not a career goal but a personal mission. She recalled her first Cornell visit, when a woman at the asylum clinic had told her that if she were admitted, she'd be the first Afghan woman to attend Cornell's LLM program. Mursal emphasized that she'd spoken little English before 2021. "I share my story not as an excuse but to demonstrate my determination and ability to grow, even under difficult circumstances," she

wrote. She asked for feedback that might help her strengthen her candidacy.

When she opened her eyes just before 11 a.m., she felt awful. She got up and sent the email.

In her furry white bathrobe, hair pulled to one side in a thick braid, she looked solemn. She had dark circles under her eyes. “I’m graduating, but now I feel no excitement,” she said quietly.

A Feeling of Weightlessness

APRIL 16, 2025

Mursal walked past the rows of old-school gym lockers and out onto the pool deck. The aqua wall read “Cornell Swimming” in red-and-white lettering, matching the lane dividers and pennant flags strung across the pool.

Headed toward the shallow end, Mursal glanced at the figure gliding through the water. Then she gasped loudly, spun around, and ran back toward the locker room. “I thought this was women-only swim,” she blurted to the lifeguard, exasperated. “That’s only Tuesdays, 10 to 11 a.m., and during the all-women’s class,” the guard clarified. Mursal lunged into the changing room.

She reemerged two minutes later in the same long-sleeved white swim shirt with a high neck, but she’d swapped her spandex bike shorts for long black leggings and covered her hair with a black swim cap. She’d come for an hour of practice before her all-female class and was unhappy and surprised to encounter men.

Mursal’s swim class had quickly become her favorite time of the week. During course registration, she’d been torn between choosing skiing, kickboxing, and swimming, as she wanted to learn them all. But swimming had won out. It felt like a necessary redemption after her failure in Pittsburgh, plus practical for safety. “What if you are on a boat and fall out?” she’d pressed her friend Elja, who always crinkled her nose at talk of swim lessons.

After her first two classes, Mursal had ordered a onesie swim outfit: midthigh shorts attached to a short-sleeved zip-front top. She’d boldly gone for less coverage because she wanted to feel the water on more of her skin. She loved the sensation of wet, cold water against her warm body. That was an intriguing admission by a young woman who covered herself so

completely that as a practical matter she had likely had few sensory experiences like sun on bare shoulders. She wore the shortie getup once but couldn't shake feeling uncomfortably self-conscious.

"Even in front of only women, I do not feel comfortable," she said. "I wonder if it's because I am covered all the time for so long now."

She'd spent the entirety of her first five classes trying to float on her back. Her teacher kept patiently instructing her to raise her hips and chest, which was not an intuitive position. Mursal's swim shirt puffed up like a circus balloon, but she still sank. Eventually, she got the hang of it.

Next she submerged her head and blew small bubbles. "The more bubbles I see, the more you are doing a good job," her teacher told her. For more than a month, she stayed in the shallow end in a little roped-off area.

She practiced backstroke and flutter kick. Her backstroke had come the farthest. Her crawl was still a series of awkward hand slaps punctuated with panicky rope or wall grabs.

Mursal's intention was to push herself to venture beyond the line where the bottom dropped off precipitously. She admitted she was too scared to look down at the depths through her goggles.

She positioned herself at the drop-off and eyed the far wall, her goal. After three backstrokes, she flipped onto her stomach. She pawed for the lane divider, needing a rest, and a surge of water entered her mouth. As she coughed it out, her feet floated up. She thrashed around, trying to get upright, and took in more water. When she finally released the rope, she clasped her hands together and straightened her arms like a missile. She kicked energetically toward the end wall. When her hands touched, she grabbed the lip of the deck. "I made it!" she yelped, and swallowed another gulp.

Drinking so much pool water was a problem. As she warmed up in the sauna after class, she was overcome with a sense of guilt. The sinking feeling was still there when she got home. She was fasting for Ramadan, which meant abstaining from drink until sundown. She felt weighed down from having violated her religious requirements; pool water was still water.

Lying in bed, she resolved to go see the Muslim campus "chaplain," whom she'd sought out once before. She would share her distress about all the water she'd consumed during her fasting period.

"Should I stop my swimming for Ramadan?" she asked him. "I am new,

so I swallow the water.”

“Did you mean to drink the water?” he asked. “If a regular bottle of water had been offered to you, would you have taken a drink?”

He urged her to continue the swim lessons during Ramadan. If she wasn’t intentionally drinking, she wasn’t transgressing. She was relieved. She wanted to swim because she wasn’t sure when she would have the chance to take lessons again. Plus, while she’d told her swim teacher she wasn’t aiming to pass the official swim test at the end, now she secretly wanted to try.

She was newly committed when she arrived to her next class. Her classmates were all crowded by the deep end. “Mursal, we’re going to jump into the deep water,” one yelled to her. “Come over!”

She’d been feeling bold generally. Graduation was fast approaching. She’d been amassing extra tickets for her large family as well as several friends. She planned to have a loud cheering section. Her dad was in the hospital for low hemoglobin, but his doctor had assured them that it was only a precaution. She’d started to think she should celebrate the accomplishment of completing her MPA instead of wallowing about the uncertain path ahead. She’d even been daydreaming about taking a solo trip someplace warm, like Miami or Hawaii. She wanted to lie in the sand.

She often mused about future experiences she planned to have, like walking the avenues of Paris and London or living in Turkey, where her cousin Zar had lived, or Nairobi, where her UN supervisor had worked. She had an aspirational way of moving through the world, always acting and presenting in a way that would seem to make all of those things near certain.

She peered at the deck. The marking on the deck by the ladder read 12’. Twelve very, very deep feet. She was a jumble of nerves. She stood riveted, chest tight, watching each of the young women leap into the water one by one, with their teacher standing by. They clapped and hollered for one another.

When she was the only one left on the deck, she curled her toes around the edge of the pool, as if they might hold her. “Let’s do it, Mursal! Goooo!” her classmates yelled. They were bobbing up and down, pumping their fists. She took a glance at the water, a sharper blue because of the depth. Then she took a deep breath, stared ahead, and leaped.

Pomp and Circumstance

MAY 24, 2025

Procuring a graduation outfit required a half-dozen package deliveries. Mursal was set on wearing cream, ideally a suit. Ivory went best with a black graduation gown and with the unfortunately turquoise-colored hood assigned to MPAs. (She detested that color.) The first off-white suit she ordered was a backup; she then found a fabulous belted blazer, silk skirt, and ivory pumps with a dagger of a heel. But the blazer arrived snug, the skirt big, the heels pinching. She reordered everything, along with low-heeled cream patent Mary Janes for the all-university stadium ceremony, which would involve more walking. She wanted to save her teetering heels for her high-visibility strut across the stage at the Brooks School graduation.

May 24, sadly, did not dawn a day for wearing white, or even off-white. From 5 a.m., when Mursal woke, the Ithaca sky was a patchwork of bloated gray-black clouds. Her weather app showed a 100 percent chance of rain.

The graduates were due to line up at 8:00 a.m. in Arts Quad, so she'd set a 5:30 a.m. alarm to leave herself plenty of time for makeup. Anticipating a day of pictures, she'd bought a setting spray advertised to prevent makeup from smudging and tested it the day before.

Just before 8 a.m., finally satisfied with her black eyeliner, plumped lashes, and dewy foundation, she "set" her face. When she tapped her cheek to check that it was dry, a chunk of makeup stuck to her finger. She touched her chin: another chunk. She fell into a panic.

She started scrubbing. All she could reason was something in the few items she'd switched out from her dry run had triggered some weird reaction. She made fast work of redoing her face. At 8:28, she ordered an Uber, even though she was only going one mile. "It cost me \$30!" she screeched later.

The all-university ceremony felt every bit the rah-rah American rite of passage it was. Thousands of gowned students, necks draped with stoles, crossed campus to Schoellkopf Field. Onlookers hooted and cheered. The Big Red Marching Band struck up, and Cornell's president presided. The students hid under a rainbow of umbrellas. On cue, the dark sky filled with flying black caps.

Omar Ahmadi from the *Times* cohort was also graduating. His parents, two brothers, and sister had driven from Northern Virginia to cheer him on.

The night before, Rebecca and Victoria had planned to meet up with the Ahmadis for an evening hello in downtown Ithaca. The family had immediately stood out to Rebecca as exceptional, and she looked forward to reconnecting with them. All three sons, Omar and his younger brother, Shabir, and older brother, Bilal, had been some of the hardest-working young people in the group early on, all working the night shift at an Amazon fulfillment center near Houston. When the family relocated to Northern Virginia, the brothers determined that only one of them could afford to go to college because two of them needed to earn money at this time to help support the family alongside their father, who'd found a job as a cook at Kabul Castle Kabob in Georgetown. The brothers elected Omar as the most promising; he should go to school first.

Rebecca was late leaving Manhattan for Ithaca, so they didn't reach Lev Kitchen, the casual Middle Eastern place where they had arranged to meet, until 9:45 p.m.. A server was starting to empty pastries from the front case in preparation for the restaurant's 10 p.m. closing. Rebecca explained that we were meeting a proud Afghan family whose son was graduating from Cornell, but our travel had been delayed, and asked if there was any chance of accommodating us for a short visit. The kind staff obliged, even encouraging the big group to sit upstairs in a quieter, out-of-the-way area and staying open for an extra hour.

Rebecca bought most of the remaining sweets and several orders of kebabs and salad, which were quickly delivered upstairs. Omar's mother, Huma, was now speaking understandable English after her online course with a teacher who spoke both English and Dari. She was a compelling woman, and she and Rebecca were clearly thrilled to see one another.

Sitting next to her was her daughter, Yalda, the youngest, who was about to graduate from high school in Alexandria, Virginia. Yalda, flashing a grin,

shared that she planned to begin college at NOVA, where her two older brothers were also taking some classes.

Just after 1 p.m., the public administration graduates marched into Bailey Hall to the grandiose tenor of “Pomp and Circumstance.” Once they were all seated, Dean Colleen Barry, in red-and-black academic regalia, approached the podium. She quickly established that the day’s menacing clouds were not the only storms threatening. These graduates were entering a perilous political moment. She decried the Trump administration’s recent freezing of over \$1 billion of Cornell’s federal funding. She denounced the assault on immigrants. “This spring, over 1,500 students around the US had their visas revoked and their immigration status terminated, including at Cornell,” she said, pausing for emphasis, “including, I am pained to say, at the Brooks School.” Recently, a Chinese student in Mursal’s class had unexpectedly fled the US in fear.

Two days prior, Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem had revoked Harvard’s ability to enroll international students. “A visa is not a right; it’s a privilege,” Secretary of State Marco Rubio had pronounced, backing Secretary Noem up at a tense Senate hearing. The Brooks student body was 60 percent international.

Dean Barry continued, “You may be asked, graduates, to explain why a university like Cornell should exist, and to what purpose it serves our society.” For Mursal, the need to justify her institution’s value was absurd. The opportunity would undeniably change her trajectory, and that of her children, and on down the line. Holding a master’s from Cornell forty-five months after fleeing Afghanistan, having arrived speaking little English, was simply miraculous, and the doors her degree could open were equally stunning.

All spring, startling images of international students being picked up by ICE agents had flooded social media. There was Rümeyza Öztürk, the Tufts grad student who had been surrounded by six masked DHS agents on the

way to break fast with friends during Ramadan. The agents had handcuffed her and forced her into a car, reportedly for her editorial criticizing Tufts's response to resolutions passed by the Tufts Community Union Senate calling for a more aggressive response to the war in Gaza. Columbia University's Mohsen Mahdawi had been arrested by masked ICE agents as he arrived to take his US citizenship test, and another student at the school, a permanent resident and expectant father, Mahmoud Khalil, had been picked up for pro-Palestinian activism.

Mursal and Marwa didn't need news flashes on social media to feel the deep freeze of heightened scrutiny, fear mongering, and screw tightening on immigrants. In April, Mursal had suddenly worried during a WhatsApp call, "What if this is bugged?" Marwa started nervously checking behind her when walking in Pittsburgh, afraid of immigration agents appearing. Whenever police sirens pierced the quiet around the Rahims' Virginia complex, Marwa thought, *Is ICE here?*

The Afghans who'd come under Temporary Protected Status (TPS) after Kabul had fallen were losing their protection effective July 14, 2025. This impacted 11,000 or so of the roughly 200,000 Afghans who, like the *Times* group, had evacuated in the aftermath of the fall of Kabul. Secretary Noem justified this by citing "notable improvements" in Afghanistan under the Taliban's rule in a DHS news release, a notion that Andrew Sullivan, a former infantry company commander in Afghanistan who works for No One Left Behind, called "laughable" in *The Washington Post*. Mursal and Marwa recognized that these Afghans' plight could just as easily be theirs.

Mursal's row was finally signaled to rise and proceed to stage right. She was relieved that she had located the organizer earlier to say she didn't want the presenter of diplomas to shake her hand. She wanted to avoid an awkward interchange. As she awaited her name, her knees started tingling, then shaking. She was overcome by the big moment, yes, but more practically by crossing the stage in such tippy shoes.

Mursal's walk of fame turned out to be perfectly graceful. She stepped onto the stage, and a sense of calm descended. She ran her pointer finger around the edges of the Afghanistan flag patch she'd sewn on the front left

of her stole. Her mind wandered through her earliest weeks there: facing down Quantitative Methods and Analytics; recording lectures to translate into Persian and back to English; taking thirty minutes to read one page. *There aren't words to describe how hard the first semester was*, she thought. She wished she could start again with all she knew now. She raised her chin as she strode across the stage.

Six Rahims drove to Ithaca to celebrate Mursal. The moment the new graduates spilled out into the plaza, she was enveloped by her mother and sisters. Soon her brothers were thrusting bouquets into her arms until she all but disappeared behind the blooms. They took photos in every family configuration and with Omar and his family as well.

Seeing the two families circled around the two Cornell graduates was a stunning milestone, a snapshot of the remarkable distance traveled. Afterward, the Rahims and several friends retreated to their homey Airbnb beside an idyllic river. Mursal and Marwa changed into comfy pants. Mursal left off her scarf, pulling her hair into a ponytail. Everyone was in socks or bare feet.

Mursal stood over the stove, frying potato pancakes and eggplant and baking whole chickens. A huge vat of rice was on the stove in one of several pots Gulalai had brought from Virginia to assure that she could make Qabuli. Once everyone started eating, they urged their guests to refill their plates. "You make us happy if you eat more," Mursal's father told Rebecca, who already knew that, of course.

Rebecca was tapping some of Gulalai's wisdom. Clearly this mother was unusual, having raised such powerful daughters in Afghanistan. Najim translated for Gulalai, who understood a lot but still spoke little English. Rebecca was trying to understand how education had become such a priority for Gulalai. Fingering her wavy hair, Gulalai shared that she and her six sisters had been the only girls in their village to attend school. Her father had insisted.

Gulalai quickly grew to recognize that all progress tied back to education. For that reason, she empowered women in every possible way, at extreme risk. "Every minute, there was the possibility of imprisonment of me or others," she told Rebecca.

"Why did you feel so strongly?" Rebecca pressed. Her fast response: "If you educate a woman, you educate a whole household. If a woman is not

educated, the whole family is not educated. In the deepest part of my heart, I was feeling the pain of that.”

Gulalai’s eyes got misty. She’d endured women being insulted and flogged in the era of the first Taliban. She’d fought back, refusing to be silenced. Once the Americans came, she’d been emboldened. She’d helped women open businesses, taught illiterate women to read and write. Now the Taliban had forced her family out of their homeland, but her girls were carrying her torch. “I’m seeing that they are finding their path,” she said proudly.

Gulalai’s husband, Rahim, sat by the window, staring at the peaceful green water. He occasionally looked over at Mursal, his satisfied expression much like the one he’d worn when he’d first seen her in the plaza after the graduation.

Mursal said she would forever remember the look on her father’s face that day. While she never questioned his love and care for her, his demeanor was naturally stoic. “He shows, but he never said,” Mursal explained. But now she could feel the depth of his admiration and joy. “It was fulfilling my heart. I’m like, *I did something to make them proud*. So now they would see that, OK, leaving everything behind was worth it.

“I know they had the same look at Najim’s Berkeley graduation, but for their daughter, it was bigger.”

Idling

JUNE–AUGUST 2025

Maryam, Marwa, and Mursal

Maryam had high hopes of finding summer work in an ER or at one of the many medical clinics near her family's Virginia apartment. She had planned to start her job search once she returned home in May. Marwa was seeking similar work. She wanted hands-on health field experience after summers at Dillard's and the Gap. Mursal had decided to stay for the summer in Ithaca, where she had free housing. She'd been told that part-time work for the university would be easy to get. But all three spent the summer out of work. The opportunities they sought never materialized.

All three had initially felt the rush of momentum. Mursal was newly graduated, Marwa was celebrating her best semester GPA at Chatham, and Maryam had made a solid decision to transfer to a school near home and was anticipating acceptances from her applications. But instead of moving forward, they got stuck in idle.

The economy was sluggish. Amid massive federal funding cuts to universities, Cornell had a hiring freeze. Marwa and Maryam learned that six months of experience in a hospital setting was basically required to get a clinical position. One medical opportunity surfaced for Marwa, but the office ultimately hired a permanent employee rather than a college student. Maryam applied to over sixty positions through the job website Indeed but struck out except for a Starbucks opening. Then, readying to onboard, she discovered that her employment authorization had expired. The store wouldn't hire her until she had a valid work permit. She filled out the renewal paperwork but was still awaiting her new permit in mid-August.

Marwa, it turned out, couldn't have worked a medical job even if she'd found one. In June, her mom had a torn tendon repaired in her foot. Gulalai could not bear weight for several months so needed help with cooking,

cleaning, and even just getting from room to room. Marwa volunteered. “Marwa was like a housewife,” Mursal teased. Marwa loved being helpful. One bright spot was Marwa being offered a paid research assistantship working for a professor in his anatomy lab when she returned to Chatham. Excitingly, too, her best friend, Karishma, had called from Kabul to share that she was pregnant.

Mursal had applied to over one hundred jobs but had not found anything. As the months wore on, she expanded her job search beyond public administration roles in choice areas like immigration and human rights to general administrative assistant roles—and most anything, really. She checked the UN job postings incessantly but heard from a former colleague that the organization was preparing to cut something like 20 percent of its workforce. The one interview she’d gotten turned out to be with an AI bot. Mursal did get a callback from a human, only to say that she was an interesting candidate but the job was already filled. They said they would keep her in mind.

Not everything about this forced hiatus turned out to be negative. All three young women badly needed a reset. They had exhausted themselves managing through school. Maryam was in a major transition after learning her second semester had gone poorly. She’d gotten a couple of B’s but failed precalculus. She was rejected for transfer to GWU and George Mason. She had already decided she was not going to return to Pitt, so she needed a plan for the fall, and quickly.

Maryam hesitated before calling Victoria for help, but when she did, she admitted she was depressed. With Victoria’s deft coaching, they mapped out a sensible plan. Victoria proposed a transfer to NOVA, where Maryam had done her CCMA course. Maryam could improve her GPA and then transfer to a four-year university near home.

“In one year, I will apply to the three Georges,” Maryam said, sounding pleased, meaning George Mason, GWU, and Georgetown. Her NOVA classes would be small, allowing more access to professors. NOVA had tutors, an incredible library, and plenty of nearby opportunities for internships. Her mom would also be taking courses at NOVA.

At home, Maryam felt surprisingly independent, even more than in Pittsburgh. Access to a car made the difference. Even if all she did was take herself to Angry Joe’s for spicy wings, she felt free. Pittsburgh allowed a lot

of “me time,” “but I have to say, being with my family, I love it,” she said. She was glad to be able to help her mom. During this time, Maryam loosened up somewhat about always covering her hair in public. She decided she was fine leaving her scarf off if she was just going to the grocery, where she wouldn’t know anyone.

The slow summer also spurred some creativity in Maryam. She’d gotten an idea for a novel and had started outlining. It was about a girl facing down fifteen contradictions, like feelings versus logic and truth versus lies. Her protagonist would choose one over the other and face the consequences. Maryam herself seemed to be increasingly choosing feelings over logic—which was why she’d decided to transfer to a college in Virginia.

She was feeling blessed after her brother Abu had walked away scot-free when his car was totaled in a thirteen-car pileup on his way to Virginia Beach. She was more sober about her trajectory. She admitted that she was unlikely to ever get into Georgetown. But she maintained she’d be fine as long as she kept progressing. “It bothers me when you are stuck somewhere, and you don’t see any solution out of it. When you have ways to fix what you have ruined, it doesn’t bother me,” she said.

With time on her hands in Ithaca, Mursal signed up to learn to ride a bike. The teacher deemed her a quick study at her first class, but she started her second session feeling woozy on what was one of the hottest days of the summer. She decided to pick back up when the weather cooled off.

Her housemate knew some secret swim spots at nearby lakes. Frequently, around 7 p.m., she took Mursal with her for a dip. In these remote places, they had the water to themselves. Mursal avoided going very deep, but her backstroke was solid.

Like Maryam, with more mental space, Mursal had a burst of creative energy. She and her cousin Zar started working on an idea they’d been scheming since girlhood. Both had long fantasized about starting a clothing line. In June, the Zar Rose collection was born. They planned to produce a trench coat and matching vest as a test product, the very same items of Zar’s that Mursal had borrowed and worn that day in San Francisco. The clothes would be handsewn in Kabul by the tailor who’d made clothes for both of them for years.

They sent him photos and described the textured, suede-like fabric they

wanted to use in red and purple. They had him sew twenty coats and provided specifications for American sizing. They designed a logo and hang tags. Zar's father offered to underwrite the first batch.

Still, Mursal had no fantasy that Zar Rose would be more than a side hustle. She needed a substantive job that used her new degree.

She knew her time in Ithaca had run its course. She should go back to Virginia. She felt some urgency, because Marwa was returning to Chatham and her mom still needed help. She wanted to do that, but then it struck her: "The main topic will be me getting married." This time, her voice stayed even. The edge usually provoked by the topic was gone.

She'd discussed the full-court marriage press she feared facing with her Cornell friend from Kazakhstan, who advised Mursal to change her tune and not automatically dismiss all potential mates. Mursal listened. "I kinda agree," she admitted. "Talking more is a good idea. I was saying no even before knowing someone." She did want to get married someday. "I never said I want to stay single forever. But married to the right person."

YEAR FIVE

Fully Afloat

AUGUST 15, 2025

Mursal

Mursal soaked up summer in her final days in Ithaca. She picked fresh flowers at a farm and brought a bouquet to the woman who had housed her all year for free. She cooked eggplant and tomatoes she picked off the vine. Four years to the day from the fall of Kabul, August 15, she did the activity that had made her happiest all summer long—swimming.

Since she wasn't with her housemate who knew the hidden swimming holes, she chose a designated swim area. The main spot at Robert Treman State Park would be crowded, but she knew her way there. A waterfall cascaded from the far rock face into a large natural pool.

She now had a technique for getting in. She had discovered that slinking into cold water gradually only makes it feel chillier, so it was best to get fully in fast, in a burst of gutsiness. Once up to her waist, she quickly dunked under and moved toward the middle of the pool. In the deeper water, she rolled onto her back. She loved the sensation of floating, legs up.

She fluttered her feet under the jade-green water. She arched her back. She took in the vast cornflower-blue sky. Sunbeams streaming through the clouds looked celestial. She was still amazed that she could keep herself afloat with just a slight, steady kick. Maybe right now, all she had to do was pedal softly in a slow, calm, rhythmic motion.

She eyed the activity across the water by the diving board. People were lined up, waiting for a turn. A lifeguard watched from his tall chair. One after another, swimmers of all ages walked to the end of the plank and jumped off. Mursal watched a little boy take the plunge. He couldn't have been even five.

The little boy went a second time. Onlookers cheered for him. He yelped as he took flight.

She wondered, *Could I do that?* Imagining herself out on the board gave her butterflies. She kept watching as she backstroked to the side of the diving zone and climbed the ladder out. She asked one of the lifeguards if she could use his red flotation belt if she jumped, but unfortunately, that wasn't allowed.

Mursal approached the diving board, stepped up, and walked to the end. With no fanfare or hesitation, she leaped. When she popped up, her scarf was gone, and her wet black ponytail was visible. She lurched forward awkwardly and grabbed at the floating ribbon of fabric. Once she got hold of it, she flipped onto her back and attempted to quickly rewrap her head. The soaked scarf was hard to manage. She struggled, splashing and bobbing and panicking as she attempted to tread water and unbunch the fabric. A female lifeguard on the side jumped in and held the flotation belt out for her. Mursal grabbed hold with one hand while she continued organizing her scarf with the other.

Instead of being flustered, she was emboldened. She got out, stealthily rewrapped her scarf, and walked back out on the board. This time, she put her hand on top of her head and held the scarf as she jumped. When she reappeared, her scarf was intact.

"I think I need a bathing suit with a proper headpiece," she said after she backstroked to the edge. "I'm going to buy one!"

She stretched her arms out in front of her, interlaced her fingers, and kicked hard with both feet. Once she reached the deep middle, she flipped onto her back and let the spray of water from the falls spritz her.

Here she was, four years from the most destabilizing day in her life but very much aloft. As long as she pedaled in slow, calm, rhythmic motions, she stayed afloat. She was proud of her jump. She was proud of so much. She smiled, thinking about the painting her lovely housemate had made and given to her of one of the bouquets she'd received for her graduation. She recalled a recent sweet afternoon picking ripe peaches at a local farm. She decided she must stop there with her youngest brother, when he came in two weeks to move her back to Virginia, so she could bring a bushel home to her parents.

She vowed to accompany her dad every day to the pool in their apartment complex so she could practice. She would find a way to take more swim lessons in Virginia.

She looked up at a world that suddenly felt full of possibility. She moved her feet steadily, floating confidently as she separated from the safety of college into a new life that lay beyond.

A Raft of Bad News

LATE AUGUST–LATE SEPTEMBER 2025

Maryam and Marwa

Like the rest of the young generation, Maryam knew all about Charlie Kirk. He'd broken into her consciousness long before his assassination through his prolific social media postings.

Maryam reacted to his tragic death with great sympathy for him and his family. She had no instinct to point out he'd championed the idea that some lives must be lost to protect the Second Amendment. Instead, she said, "Violence doesn't kill violence."

But the incident shook her optimism. Back in Afghanistan, she'd imagined America as a peaceful place, the opposite of her lawless homeland, where people were beheaded and hung from traffic lights and routinely killed by suicide bombers. Now she recognized that the truth was more complicated. "Even though there are no wars, there are wars going on between people with different ideologies," she said.

The brutal killing of a twenty-three-year-old Ukrainian refugee on a commuter train in Charlotte, North Carolina, was the tragedy that had undone Marwa. The fate of Iryna Zarutska haunted her. The ponytailed blond in a baseball cap had been headed home on the bus from her shift at Zepeddie's Pizzeria when a man in the row behind her reached over and stabbed her in the neck. It was a random act of violence, not a crime rooted in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Marwa was so traumatized by this that she vowed to stay off public transit. "Since watching the video, I order everything online," she said. She walked where she could and started having her groceries delivered rather than risk taking the bus to the market. The one time she relented and rode the bus to avoid missing an appointment, she sat in the last row, where nobody could sit behind her.

The bus tragedy occurred in the wake of a natural disaster that felt quite personal to Marwa and Maryam. A 6.0 magnitude earthquake that had struck just before midnight on August 31 had leveled whole villages in Eastern Afghanistan. Over 2,200 people were killed, and the UN reported that half a million people were affected.

Both Maryam and Marwa watched scores of YouTube videos shot around Kunar Province, where the quake was centered. Marwa wept.

A sinister overlay emerged in the days following. Reporters described women and adolescent girls left to die after being passed over by male emergency workers. A piece in the *Times* written by the one female journalist in the group, Fatima, quoted one woman at the scene as saying, "They gathered us in one corner and forgot about us."

Fatima's account included intel from a male volunteer in Kunar Province who revealed that an all-male medical team had been reluctant to pull women from under collapsed buildings. Women were left trapped beneath rubble, waiting for women from other villages to arrive and dig them out. Dead women were dragged out by their clothes to avoid skin contact if no male relative was present.

This unthinkable scenario derived from one among an ever-growing list of restrictions unflinchingly enforced by the Taliban through their Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice. Physical contact between men and women who are not family members is forbidden, apparently even in a disaster zone. Exacerbating the problem was the dearth of female health workers resulting from a ban on women in medical education (Marwa's medical school is now male only).

Maryam was skeptical of the stories about emergency workers leaving women to die. "They have some wrong beliefs, but they are still human," she argued about the rescuers. She attributed the fact that few women survivors appeared in online videos to Afghan women's avoidance of being photographed.

Marwa disagreed. She believed the reports. Her motivation to pursue medicine had begun with the shortage of female doctors, to remedy these exact situations.

The stream of unfortunate events continued. On September 29, the Taliban pulled the plug on the entire nation. All internet and mobile phone service was cut. No explanation was given, though officials outside the

country and analysts asserted that the shutdown had been ordered by Afghanistan's leader, Sheikh Haibatullah Akhundzada, to prevent "immoral acts." For Marwa and Mursal, this felt like a final nail in Afghanistan's coffin. Airports and banks were forced to shut down, not to mention all ability to reach family and to study or work online.

Three days later, Afghanistan was back online. Again, no explanation was given for the reboot. Mursal momentarily thought maybe the Americans had returned, given a comment President Trump had recently made about reclaiming Bagram Air Base.

Marwa bemoaned the forced interruption of her 996-day Snapchat streak with her twenty-year-old cousin. Staring down at her phone, she rattled off her other ruined streaks: "1,136, 266 days..." She said she'd seen screenshots by young Afghans documenting their broken streaks all over social media. Marwa knew that these online competitions didn't really matter, but with everything feeling so hopeless and dire, it was easier to focus her anger on the inane.

Split in Two

END OF SEPTEMBER, 2025

Marwa and Maryam

Maryam wanted her mom to be a little more selfish, a little more independent. For starters, she wanted her to get herself a Starbucks coffee. She was frustrated by her mom's inability to embrace her freedom. She teased her playfully, but intense feelings drove her jesting.

For the first time in decades, Maryam's mother, Shinkae, had her days to herself. Her youngest child, Ali, was three and enrolled in a Head Start program. A bus picked him up each morning and dropped him back home six hours later. Maryam's other younger brother and sister were in middle school. Shinkae now had her driver's license.

Shinkae was taking online courses through NOVA, working toward her associate's degree, planning to do website development. But when she wasn't in class or studying, she almost always stayed home. She rarely did anything except grocery shop or go on a specific errand and return home immediately. This was so different from Shinkae's younger sister, who lived upstairs and was always up for aimless outings with Maryam. "She's a fun person. She loves life. We go out, we buy a coffee, then we go to the shopping mall and every place we want. We buy an ice cream," Maryam said.

Maryam was sitting beside her mom in the living room, each in one of four oversized brown leather recliners positioned in front of an enormous flat-screen TV playing cartoons for Maryam's youngest brother. There was ease between mother and daughter. Shinkae was relieved to have Maryam back living at home. Maryam was finding the setup ideal. She had her own room, a car, home-cooked meals, and her classes nearby. She respected her parents, she felt their respect, and she did what she wanted.

"She doesn't see she could go out," Maryam said about her mom.

Maryam spoke her mind in front of her mom as if she weren't there, a testament to the strength of the relationship. "She could maybe buy herself a coffee or go shopping and buy things she wants."

The moment Maryam could drive, her life opened up. She had agency, independence. Stopping for a latte or Chipotle burrito represented freedom. She wanted this for her mom.

"I decided to buy a coffee in Starbucks myself once," Shinkae said, "but I couldn't!" She laughed. She knew this was silly, but that didn't make it less true.

"I tell my mom, 'Starbucks is just right there. Just go inside and order. It would just take five minutes. I swear it's not that bad. Nobody's stopping you.'"

Maryam's mom did "must things," Maryam said.

"You cannot leave habits behind that built you as a person," Shinkae said. "They become your mindset. I didn't think about living for my own wishes."

"That was 98 percent of the society," Maryam said about adherence to the gender norms that control life in Afghanistan. "If you don't do that, then it's deemed bad." Then, speaking about Afghan men generally, "If you have a partnership with your wife, then it seems like a very disgraceful thing for you. You're not man enough."

But even if Shinkae couldn't bring herself to enjoy a latte on a random Wednesday, her mindset was changing. She'd come to believe that "every person should live for themselves."

The deep constraints of her culture were easy to recognize, but Maryam also struggled to unburden herself. She had her own dual personality. She needed to split herself in two on a weekly basis.

When she spoke to her grandparents in Kabul, whom she adored, she embodied the "good daughter" they expected. But this dutiful young woman who cared for her siblings and mom, put family above all else, wasn't exactly right. Maryam wanted things for herself. She told her grandparents and family back home that she wanted to be a doctor, but not what was entailed in getting there. She'd said she was in college but not that Pitt was four hours away.

She felt two-faced. "It's not that I'm trying to lie. It's different ideas that I have to hold for different people. You cover half of the truth," she said,

and sighed.

Marwa regularly toggled between worry that she was a sinner and confidence that God recognized her good intentions and nature. Over the summer, she was unexpectedly offered a lab assistantship at Chatham for the upcoming semester—she took it as a sign that she remained in God’s good graces.

She welcomed the reassurance. Summer was a mix of highs and lows. She was pleased that she could care for her mom and cherished their hours talking on the sofa while consuming gallons of green tea. Her Qabuli-making skills greatly improved, including mastering dumping the huge pot of rice onto the platter without spilling everywhere. She and Sosan visited a lovely sunflower farm.

But living at home brought her face-to-face with her family’s challenges. Both of her parents were facing multiple health issues. They missed having the deep community ties that had defined their life back home. Her older sister wanted a better-paying job so she could cover car and insurance payments and other bills. For Gulalai, the issue of finding spouses for her children hung in the air, as several were well past the age when this should typically happen.

The lab job Marwa was offered was to assist biology professor Kevin Hatala in his research on the evolution of human locomotion. He was extracting information from ancient footprints to determine how biomechanics like stride, arch, and big-toe angles have shifted over time and to understand patterns of social movement and interaction.

Once back on campus, Marwa spent Friday afternoons in the Hatala Lab, in the basement, staring into a huge computer screen. Cameras on tall tripods ringed the room, used to capture modern feet from every angle to compare with ancient ones. Clicking her way around a technical software program she’d just learned called Metashape, Marwa turned footprints into 3D digital foot models. The footprints came from Kenya, from field research led by Dr. Hatala, and were thought to belong to two different early human species, *Homo erectus* and *Paranthropus boisei*, and dated back 1.5 million years. The idea was to reverse engineer how those ancient

feet had moved and been structured to uncover clues about evolutionary patterns in anatomy and biomechanics. Once her digital model was complete, she would print it on a 3D printer. Dr. Hatala was struck immediately by how she dove into the work. “She is curious about everything,” he said.

Professor Hatala asked Marwa to send him a headshot so he could add her to his lab website. He also explained that she would be named on any academic publications that came out of their work together. This offer was a big deal; in 2024, he’d published a paper in *Science*.

Marwa, in all the excitement, had not considered how these early human footprints, and the theory of human evolution that Dr. Hatala espoused, fit with her view of the origin of humankind. In her science courses in high school and medical school in Afghanistan, she had never been taught that humans are primates that share ancestry with apes. The view conflicts with Muslim ideology, and Afghanistan is a Muslim country. “The Quran explains piece by piece how God created Adam,” Marwa said, explaining the origin story as she’d learned it. “And from Adam, Eve, and from them all humans.” Marwa had been exposed to human evolution as Professor Hatala had spoken of it briefly, she believed on television, but she considered the idea a Western view that was not accepted in her country.

In her sophomore year at Chatham, her organisms course touched very briefly on evolution. Her professor projected the iconic March of Progress image, which illustrates a series of apes evolving into upright humans. When the slide was projected in class, she shot her friend, also Muslim, a side glance and whispered to her, “OK, this is not what we believe.” Marwa was now taking a full course on evolution taught by Professor Hatala.

Being asked to reconcile her religious understanding with human evolution as it was taught at Chatham made Marwa uncomfortable. She did not want to be pinned down as to what she did and did not believe. She emphasized that she did not have full knowledge of the Quran and Muslim doctrine or enough scientific understanding to debate for or against any evolutionary theory. “I am still learning,” she said repeatedly. She was clear that the notion that humans share ancestry with primates was taboo in her religion. She was intent on avoiding conversations that pit religion against science. “I respect that there are different views, but I don’t want to talk, debate, speak openly about,” she said. “It is a lot, really controversial, to

talk about it. It's a very sensitive topic. I would not openly share my thoughts and opinions."

What she did want to say: "I'm a Muslim. I believe in Islam. And I also believe in science and facts." She did not want to choose.

Like Maryam, who adopted one persona for her grandparents and another in her daily American existence, Marwa could hold two identities at once. On her organisms exam, "I write what the book says. In a classroom, I'm not going to bring my religion to every concept because it's definitely going to challenge everything."

Meanwhile, she diligently carried out Professor Hatala's experiments. She respected him immensely, and the feeling was mutual. He suggested some resources she could use to learn more about human evolution and how different religions think about the subject.



Marwa pulled open the door of her new campus apartment building. As she entered, her friend B, the one who'd given a birthday party the previous year where Marwa had been introduced to Cards Against Humanity, bounded down the stairs.

"Look out for a cutesy invite," B told Marwa. "I've been dying to host in my apartment."

B had made a sweet graphic card in light blue and white. The theme was a PJ party. B loved a theme party. The card said, "I'll have some drinkies, but BYOB." There was a little design of a pair of pajamas.

What is BYOB? Marwa wondered. Her first thought was Be Your Own Boss.

"It's from 8 p.m. to midnight," Marwa said, then giggled. She was surprised that a party would go that late.

Within the hour, she was scrolling Amazon, looking for pajamas. She put two options in her cart but didn't click "Purchase" yet. The party wasn't until Saturday night, and she knew Amazon could deliver in a day.

Many aspects of her Chatham life felt better than ever. She'd discovered a favorite new hangout, the Yemeni café Shimbam, where she'd already been three times, including on her recent twenty-sixth birthday. She loved the atmosphere and often saw other Afghans there. She had a reliable friend

group, and they were hatching a plan to go for pho on Friday at lunch. She had a new counselor she liked who had committed to work with her for the remainder of her time at Chatham. Her social interactions felt relaxed in a way they hadn't before.

"I'm starting to be open—not being in a bubble in my room," Marwa said. "I'm trying to fit in, and I'm doing it."

She had started researching overseas medical schools and discovered that they were a compelling option. They were cheaper, admission was less competitive, and yet they would still enable her to practice medicine in the US. She never talked about her intention to go to medical school around her premed classmates, because she had endured skeptical reactions to her doctor plans. Her standard line was that she was focused on graduating from Chatham. But privately, she had zero doubt. "Definitely a million percent I'm going for the MCAT," she said.

Marwa had resolved a temporary financial crisis after a sob and a message to Victoria. Her bank account as of the previous Friday had been overdrawn by four dollars. Her tuition check from JREF hadn't arrived, which meant Chatham wouldn't lend her the \$10,000 she had planned to use to cover her expenses. That was the amount she had borrowed the prior spring, which had pretty much run out over the summer since she hadn't earned other money while helping her mom. She'd refused to take money from her dad, though he'd offered. "Whenever my dad gives me money, I literally cry, because he wants to support me financially even though he doesn't have his own proper income," she said.

She had been slow to tell Victoria about the tuition delay; Victoria had done too much for her already. When she did, the issue was resolved in a day.

Marwa cried through her entire counseling session. She had gotten into an eddy, mourning her life that would have been but for the Taliban. "I could have the best life right now in Afghanistan," she told the counselor. She would be readying to practice medicine and likely married and starting a family. She knew she had freedom she could only have imagined back home, but even that burdened her. "I know I have all these freedoms, but I don't want to be lost in all this freedom. I still need to be with my family, taking care of them, and be a nice person." After an hour of venting, she felt much lighter. "I'm not giving up. It is what it is. I'm just accepting it." She

had the life-goes-on pragmatism Afghans are known for after facing adversity for centuries.

Walking back to her apartment, Marwa grinned, thinking about seeing her eight-month-old niece in one week.

Her oldest brother was bringing his baby daughter home to Virginia, so of course Marwa was going. She was planning a huge number-eight balloon for the baby's eight-month birthday, a family photo session, and a pink-themed party. If they had been in Afghanistan, a sheep would have been waiting in the front yard, ready to be slaughtered in celebration of the baby's first step inside the family home. Marwa laughed, picturing a sheep in the parking lot behind their Woodbridge apartment building. They would still sacrifice a sheep, but a butcher would do it at an Afghan farm nearby.

Marwa napped for several hours and then dashed to catch Cafe Rachel before it closed at 10 p.m. This was her rhythm. She napped in the early evenings and then studied much of the night, particularly if she had an exam. At the café, she bought the necessary provisions. She had a genetics test in the morning, so she bought a can of Celsius and a caramel latte, to which she added two packets of dried espresso.

Back in her room, she unwrapped a whiteboard she had ordered online and stuck it to her bedroom wall. With an erasable marker, she wrote out the inherited genetic diseases she knew. She reviewed inheritance patterns, P-values, and chi-squares. She found genetics fascinating.

Passage to India

OCTOBER 2025

Sam

Sam's panic about saving her sister Nasima was manifesting throughout her body—brain fog, a racing heart, stomach knots. She had barely slept in days, and popping Unisom wasn't helping. If she had been taking the next nursing class in her sequence right now, a challenging one, she was certain she would fail out of school.

"I was having a stroke and a heart attack at the same time," Sam said.

She urgently needed to get her sister out of Pakistan. Since late 2023, the Pakistani government had been demanding that Afghan refugees leave or face arrest and deportation. As pressure intensified, Nasima described authorities raiding mosques and sweeping homes. Approximately 400,000 Afghan refugees had been deported back to Afghanistan from Pakistan since 2023, and the campaign wasn't slowing.

Sam knew if her sister was caught and deported to Afghanistan, she would be discovered by their parents or relatives who would tell their parents. People were far too interconnected and nosy for Nasima to stay hidden. For months, Sam had pleaded with Nasima to lock herself in her room in Quetta and leave only to buy food.

For hours on end, Sam scrolled online, seeking study-abroad programs, foreign universities, potential scholarships. She reached out to any opportunity she identified, sending inquiries, leaving messages, and filling out lengthy applications. "I lost count," she said, her voice cracking. She almost never heard back.

But in late September, she got a hit. Nasima was offered a spot at South Asian University in New Delhi. The university would provide a student visa for India and a scholarship. Sam was pinching herself, feeling optimistic for Nasima for the first time in years.

But there was a major sticking point. In order for Nasima to fly out of Pakistan to another country, she needed to show proof that she was in Pakistan legally. But she was not. Nasima had crossed into Pakistan during a chaotic time, dodging the authorities and avoiding the need for any visa.

Lying awake at night, Sam schemed solutions. She could pay someone to acquire a medical visa for Nasima, which would enable her to legally enter Pakistan. Nasima would then cross stealthily into Afghanistan and immediately reenter Pakistan, obtaining the critical stamp. *No, that won't work.* She quickly recognized that this plan was foolish. Entering Afghanistan, Nasima would confront Taliban guards. Women, by directive, could travel only with a mahram, a chaperone, and only a husband, brother, or father qualified. That would be hard to fake, because even if Sam could find someone to play guardian, their last names wouldn't match.

Sam needed to bribe someone. She needed the equivalent of the smugglers who brought people into the US from Mexico or a fixer who could talk a border guard into issuing the stamp for a fee.

Sam spent two weeks sending WhatsApp messages to every Pakistani and Indian number in her address book, begging for help. She was a person who saved every contact, though most of the numbers belonged to people she barely knew, had never known, or had forgotten. She would start there, plead for their suggestions and connections, and then ambush them. Any working number she bombarded with texts: "Do you know someone at the border? Do you know someone at the airport? Can you strong-arm a bureaucrat? I will pay!"

She then decided that Nasima needed to take over the outreach. Sam feared texts from a US number would incite a ploy to swindle some supposedly rich American. She conjured crazy scenarios. Nasima might be sedated, then kidnapped for ransom. It was impossible to know where reality ended and Sam's cortisol-soaked brain began.

"I can't gamble on her future," Sam said defensively.

On a lark, Sam found her savior. One of her Hail Mary attempts was to the teacher of an online anatomy class she'd found on Facebook but had only attended for one session. Sam remembered that the woman was in Pakistan and reached out. Shockingly, that woman had a lead. Sam and Wais ended up paying that woman's "friend" 65,000 Pakistani rupees—231 US dollars—for a stamp in Nasima's visa. Nasima avoided having to cross

into Afghanistan. In a happy twist, Sam somehow figured out that the guy was also Ismaili, the same small religious branch of Hazaras that she and Wais belonged to. He was suddenly all in to help Nasima.

But blockades remained. Sam had to get her hands on a manual exit card, a requirement to leave the country. She had to get Nasima to the Islamabad airport. Once there, Nasima was detained at the immigration center. But luckily, Sam found someone and paid them to make the issue go away.

A friend of Sam's in India who had promised to meet Nasima at New Delhi airport and find her a hotel flaked. Sam found a substitute. Then South Asian University wrote to say that due to Nasima's delayed arrival, she had missed the deadline to participate in this year's program.

"Well, we didn't just chill. We were working on all the paperwork!" Sam vented.

She instructed Nasima to go straight to the university to explain her delay and get the decision reversed. But it was Diwali in India, so the country was closed down for several days. Nasima had to hold tight.

Still, Sam was feeling victorious. India was safe. Sam had loved her studies in India. Getting Nasima there was a miracle, really. She could send Nasima money there—that was easy. She told Nasima to explain to a university administrator all that she'd endured, and they would certainly reconsider.

Red Light, Green Light

OCTOBER 2025

Sam and Durrin

Durrin burst into the apartment, baby doll in hand. Wais had picked her up from preschool. She ran right at Sam to plant kisses and then bounded over to gape at Wais's fish tank, his pride and joy, all while pulling off her denim dress. She disappeared into her bedroom and started rummaging for a new outfit.

This bright afternoon, she was switching into her shimmery sky-blue Elsa gown. She reappeared, dropped to her knees, unscrewed a bottle of nail polish, and began applying it to her doll's cloth feet. Sam didn't interfere, despite the sure mess. She was still intent on minimizing no's with Durrin, unwilling for her daughter to experience any aspect of her own childhood.

As on most days, they were planning to eat dinner in Chatham's dining hall. The ease of a buffet, which had choices to please them all, already prepared, no cleanup required, a five-minute drive away, was a godsend given their busy lives. When Durrin started to get cranky, they decided she was probably hungry, so they headed to campus.

Mac and cheese was a fast choice for Durrin. Like a true American mother, Sam fretted about the amount of pasta Durrin consumed. Wais piled his plate with a hot dog, two pizza slices, and fries. Before Samira had even taken two bites of her sweet potato, Durrin was asking for more pasta. She polished off a second serving and pressed Wais about dessert. He told her to go ahead.

The moment Durrin skipped off, Sam spoke up. She had something on her chest: Durrin had been asking about Sam's mother. Sam looked pained. The question from her daughter had caught her off guard, and she had not yet thought through how she wanted to handle the topic. "I told her, 'Laura. Laura is my mom.' But she said no. She's too smart." Durrin reappeared,

licking a red Dum-Dum lollipop.

Durrin's class was doing a unit on family. Sam, with Durrin's assistance, had made a darling model of their family to bring into the classroom. On a square board, Sam had mounted three miniature Rustamis made from wooden pegs, with yarn hair and twine arms punctuated with pearl-bead hands. Wais's thick eyebrows and black hair with lift were just right, as was Durrin's red felt dress.

Sam was adamant that she would not reveal the truth to Durrin about her own mother or her family in Afghanistan. She turned so Durrin was out of earshot. "She doesn't deserve for Durrin to know about her," Sam hissed about her mom.

Wais and Durrin were her family, and Laura and Jon. Two weeks earlier, for Wais's twenty-fifth birthday, Laura had given them \$100 to spend on a birthday dinner. Laura had covered a driver's-ed class for Sam over the summer and recruited her friend Amy to practice with her—that was Sam's birthday gift. Wais chose Eddie Merlot's, a steak house, for his special meal. He ordered Wagyu beef and lobster salad, and Sam had lamb chops. Samira also ordered a strawberry cocktail. Wais teased her when she tried to drink from the metal shaker before the server had time to transfer it into her glass.

It was the golden hour when they left the dining hall. Streaks of soft yellow light were coming through the trees and hitting the walkway in a dappled pattern. Durrin, three steps ahead of them, waved to a student in chunky boots with red-dyed streaked hair. Durrin was in her element, on a campus she acted like she owned, in an idyllic setting where she was free to roam.

They made their way down the hill to a small pond, where Durrin and Wais peered at giant koi swimming around. Ten seconds later, Durrin was off, charging up a grassy slope on the other side. Sam, in flip-flops, struggled to keep up. Sam was not sporty, but her daughter was naturally athletic.

They started a game of Red Light, Green Light. At Green Light, Durrin made it halfway back down the hillside. When she was unfrozen again, she was back on top of the hill in a flash.

Sam rarely let herself drop the weight of her anxieties and be present. She pressed her cheek against Durrin's warm face. She wondered if Durrin

would become a runner. She thought about how Durrin studied the little anatomy book Sam had given her. Would she be a doctor? Soon, Laura's mother, Suzi, whom Durrin also called Nana, would turn eighty-eight. Sam loved when Durrin sat in Suzi's lap and they looked at books. The last time, they had read a picture book about sea creatures. "That's a snail, like my daddy has in his fish tank," Durrin showed her on the page. Durrin noticed everything. She was a sponge. She was fierce. She was joyful. Her future was bright—very bright.

Epilogue

In the five years since the fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, many in the *Times* group say they have been amazed by the generosity of Americans who helped, with acts both large and small. Everyone who applied for asylum in 2022 received it, and some have their green cards.

That reception began shifting during President Trump's second term. Temporary Protected Status, which offers permission to stay and work, was terminated for Afghans in mid-2025. It left nearly twelve thousand Afghans vulnerable to deportation, though our people, who came under a status called humanitarian parole, were not in this group. In a number of American cities, the presence of ICE agents increased precipitously, as did the number of raids and deportations. Ghazi Zabi, a *Times* reporter in our cohort who completed a journalist-in-residence program at the University of Missouri, was picked up by ICE agents in Chicago and detained in September 2025. Ghazi was about to begin his second year of a master's program in film and documentary at DePaul University in Chicago. He was one of the few in our group who was single, and his detention sent shudders through our group, who remain connected by a WhatsApp chat.

Then, on November 26, 2025, the day before Thanksgiving, two West Virginia National Guard members were shot in Washington, DC, by an Afghan refugee. Army Specialist Sarah Beckstrom, age twenty, died of her injuries; Air Force Staff Sergeant Andrew Wolfe, age twenty-four, was seriously wounded. The man charged was Rahmanullah Lakanwal, an Afghan who had come to the US in 2021 under Operation Allies Welcome, a program instituted to evacuate and resettle vulnerable Afghans who had assisted the US during the war. Lakanwal, who pled not guilty, had reportedly fought as part of a CIA-backed paramilitary group and had been granted asylum during the second Trump administration.

Anger at Afghans quickly mounted. Addressing the nation hours after the shooting, President Trump called the incident an "act of terror" and

pledged to reexamine every Afghan who had entered the US under President Biden. Soon after, the administration halted all asylum decisions and pledged to review all green cards and grants of asylum given over the preceding five years.

The Rahim family were all home in Virginia when the November shooting occurred. Marwa's initial reaction to the news was shock. "For a couple days, we were scared to go out, to communicate with other people, even to say I'm Afghan," she said.

Maryam, also nearby in Virginia at the time, wondered aloud whether her family would be deported back to Afghanistan. She felt urgency about continuing her premed path and couldn't imagine having to start over again if they had to leave. She was already taking extreme care when driving because her license had expired along with her work permit in July, and, frustratingly, she had been unable to get either reissued.

Marwa and Maryam resumed their classes after Thanksgiving. Marwa was uncharacteristically on edge as she returned to Pittsburgh. She felt like she got the side-eye from someone on campus who was usually friendly. "But maybe I am overthinking it," she said. She left Target one snowy day with her groceries and nearly lost it when a uniformed man tugged her jacket. She was sure an ICE agent was grabbing her. She'd left her toilet paper in her cart; he was a kind Target security guard, and she hadn't heard him calling out because she was wearing headphones. She dreaded the shooting coming up in conversation, "because I felt guilty, too, being an Afghan, even though I didn't do anything." Constant offers of support from her professors, adviser, and counselor gave her strength to continue.

But in other ways, life moved on.

One day in mid-December, Maryam went straight from her biology final to get her nose pierced, which she had been wanting to do for some time. She loved how the little diamond stud looked. She got A's in all her first-semester science classes at NOVA—and she decided she could live with a C in calculus, a sign she had progressed in her acceptance of minor setbacks. She found a summer job in a nearby hospital to work the night shift as a patient observer. She would finally be taking a long-desired step—to experience the inner workings of the medical world.

Marwa became an academic star at Chatham, including a paid research job that could well result in published work in a science journal. "There are

so many things I want to share!” Marwa gushed midway through a New Year’s Eve catch-up call. She’d aced her final exams, bringing her cumulative GPA to a 3.54. She said she cried when she learned she’d made the dean’s list. She held up a black roller skate and grinned widely. “I ordered on Depop, size 6, fits perfect, just \$15.” She had always wanted to learn to skate and planned to break in her wheels on the sleek floor of one of Chatham’s dance studios. She gushed about the campus club she had officially founded—the Chatham Motivation Club. “We have seventeen followers so far!” she said about their Instagram. As she started her spring semester, she felt a welcome shift. Her days were fuller than ever between classes, friends, her club, her lab job, and a new committee appointment in the science department. But it wasn’t just her level of busyness that had changed. She felt engaged, a part of the fabric of her college community, for the first time. “I’m not someone from out there,” she said. “I belong. I have value to bring to the table.”

Sam somehow had found her sister a spot in an MBA program in India after the New Delhi opportunity fell through and paid Nasima’s tuition, easing concerns that she would be sent back to Afghanistan. Sam, Wais, and Durrin fit in a short family driving trip to Virginia between the twelve-hour hospital shifts she’d agreed to work on Christmas and New Year’s Eve. They toured the American Civil War Museum in Richmond and treated Durrin to sheer yakh, a classic Afghan ice cream infused with saffron, cardamom, and rose, the serving as big as her face. Sam’s spring nursing class went exceptionally well—she finished the semester with an average grade of 90 percent.

Mursal started work in December 2025 as a case worker at Catholic Charities in Manassas, Virginia, the same resettlement agency the *Times* group had partnered with in Houston. Ninety percent of the clients at Mursal’s agency were Afghans. She’d taken several refresher driving lessons and finagled the use of her brother Tamim’s black BMW for her commute since he was now driving a truck and was almost always away. Her role was not the career she’d hoped for with a master’s degree from Cornell. But she recognized that it was a stepping stone to something substantive in the arena of human rights and was relieved to have professional employment after a frustrating search. Many of her Cornell classmates were still unemployed, including Omar, in one of the toughest

job markets for college graduates in recent history. She found her role helping Afghan refugees find employment fulfilling, but the situations she encountered during intake made her exceedingly sad. Still, Mursal found bright spots in her life. She clicked immediately with a woman at work, so she now had a close friend in her new town. Her cousin Zar was getting engaged, and she was going to California to be part of the formal celebration. She discovered a place to kayak near home, and she planned to buy an inflatable boat.

Five years later, Afghanistan's cruelty to women is without parallel. Minister Al-Khater has continued to lead an effort to prompt a reexamination of what she calls the Taliban's mistaken belief that women should not be educated. "Among the 56 countries in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), the only state limiting female education is Afghanistan," she wrote in a reflection strongly condemning the actions of the Taliban. "The decrees issued by the interim Afghan authorities banning women's education beyond primary school have received widespread condemnation from Muslim countries. The exclusionary measures taken by the interim authorities stem from reactionary political and cultural motivations, with no legitimate religious basis, and are firmly rejected at all levels."

Minister Al-Khater said she was deeply moved by her leadership role in the unprecedented evacuation. "My relationship with Afghan brothers and sisters started through professional engagement but quickly became central to my heart. I have gained many friends, and many chosen kin, each inspiring and powerful in their capacity," she wrote. She went on to describe a miraculous tale of a life transformed by Qatar's efforts. Two hundred minors were transported to Doha on American flights, and among them was an infant they took to calling Mary. It took two years in partnership with UNICEF and International Migration Organization to reunite all the unaccompanied minors with their families, including Mary, real name Mariam, who lives today with her uncle and family in Afghanistan.

In America, the future feels uncertain but still promising. No one can predict whether the women or their family members will be called in to be reinterviewed for asylum and what the outcome will be if they are, or when green card processing will resume. Some days, Marwa, Mursal, Samira, and

Maryam believe the threats will never materialize. Other times, they feel deep anxiety about what might become of them. Maryam finally resolved the issue of being unable to renew her driver's license. But that was only after her aunt spent weeks driving her around to her four spring classes which were spread across three NOVA campuses.

The benefit of the adversity they have faced is they have come to accept that there are some things they cannot control. They forge ahead.

Their freedom is imperfect, but they know their fate is far better than it would have been if they had been left behind. Fatima, the sole female journalist in the *Times* cohort, is now at Columbia University, closing in on her undergraduate degree, which has been a lifelong dream. She reels from the abandonment of the Afghan women. Her cousin in Afghanistan recently shared a photo of his daughter, a third or fourth grader, proudly holding up a paper showing that she was first in the class. Her reaction was dark. "I thought, *You have two more years and then you can't continue*," Fatima said. Men, in her opinion, hold much responsibility for the dire status of Afghan women. "I wish that men stood up behind these women, said, 'Go ahead, I have your back.' But that didn't happen." She sighed, then added, "I really hope the next generation doesn't have to live my mother's life."

Others in the group are rolling along. Khadija, who had the dream about Kabul burning, has a smiley eleven-month-old son named Benjamin with an American passport. The rest of her family have received their green cards. Her husband has steady work servicing buses in Houston, and her seven-year-old son writes and reads English beautifully.

Najiba, a woman in the group who lost her husband to the war in Afghanistan, is living in Chico, California. In June, her son Parsaa, a high school senior, was chosen as a graduation speaker. He spoke passionately, calling his diploma "a symbol of survival, of dreams that refuse to die, and of the power of education to transform lives. It's a promise to those who couldn't make it this far that we will carry their hopes forward." In August, he began college at Chico State University. Omar's sister, Yalda, who arrived at age fifteen speaking no English, is now studying at NOVA and hopes to become a lawyer. Maryam's sister Hasina is in fifth grade, plays the viola and volleyball, and says she plans on becoming an astronaut.

Ghazi, the former reporter, remains in a difficult limbo. He was called before an immigration judge and was granted asylum in February 2026, to

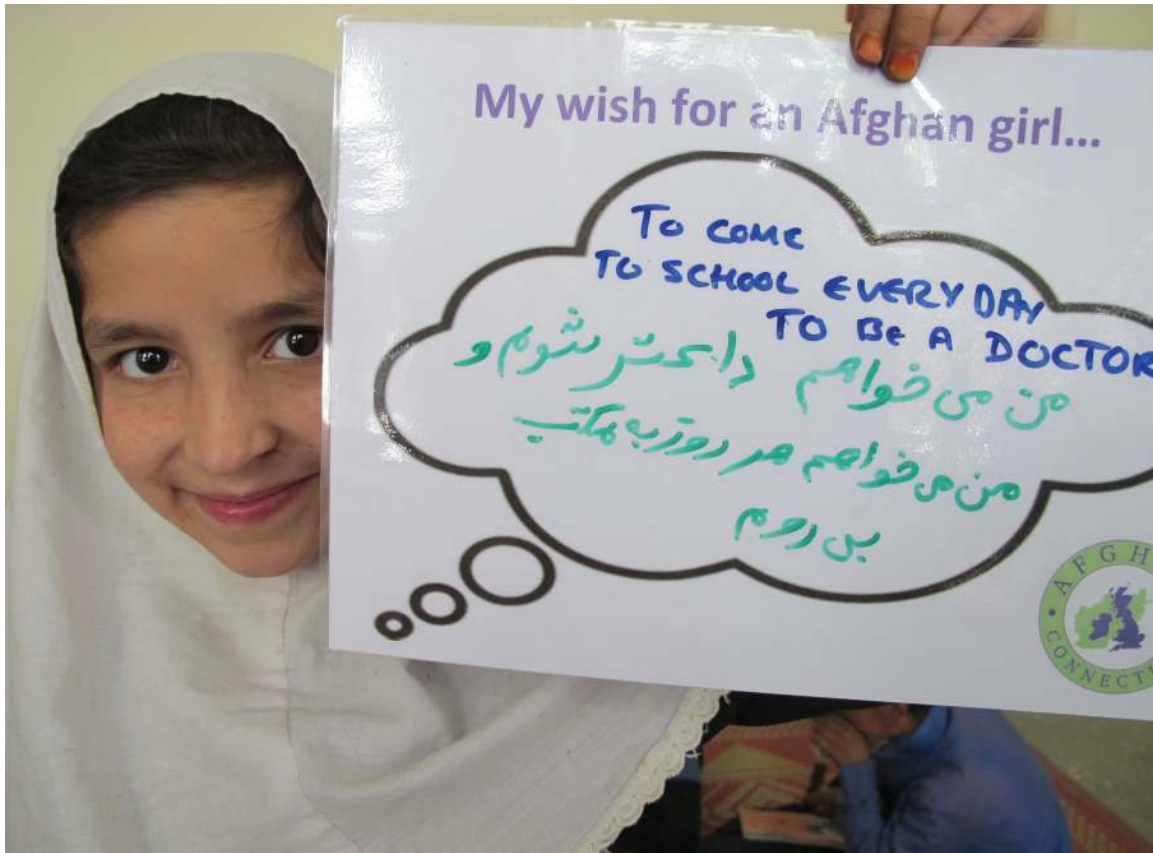
the great relief of our group and Kathy Kiely, a University of Missouri journalism professor who spearheaded his case. T. M., Lauren, and others testified on his behalf in the proceedings. However, he remained in detention.

The Journalism Refugees Education Fund, the nonprofit that David, Steven, Lauren, Rebecca, and others founded, has now helped dozens of students continue their education, awarding an average scholarship amount of \$11,000. While the initial focus was supporting the young people in the *Times* group, both in the US and Canada, JREF has expanded its grants to the increasing numbers of exiled journalists, and their families, from other news organizations and conflicts.

Rebecca often recalls a comment by Aaron Tate, the refugee resettlement coordinator the *Times* hired in Houston, who has spent much of his career working with refugees. He has since moved to Colombia and Spain to continue his work. “I would never make it as a refugee,” Aaron declared to Rebecca on one of their last visits together. Rebecca was floored by his comment, especially because Aaron is an expert on refugees and has committed his life to helping them.

But there is great truth in his comment—an acknowledgment of the bravery it requires to be a refugee. The courage it takes to leave—and the journey to reestablish a life in a new land, learn the language, and obtain education or employment and, most of all, a sense of belonging, is long and unpredictable. We have both frequently found ourselves marveling at the indomitable spirits and resilience of the Afghans in our group, wondering how we would fare in a similar situation.

Their stories continue to unfold. They go on, each of them. Despite all the upheaval, their resolve is extraordinary and a rebuke to those who question their value and right to freedom.



While visiting Takhar province in 2013 to report a story for *More* magazine about girls' education in Afghanistan, co-author Diana Kapp asked young women what they wanted to be when they grew up. Like Marwa and Maryam, this sparkly student was intent on becoming a doctor. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



The schools Diana visited, often at the end of vast, windswept valleys, felt perched on the edge of the world. But upon arrival, she and Sarah Fane, a British physician who was responsible for the schools being built and the subject of Diana's profile, were greeted by throngs of enthused students. Over the twenty years the Americans occupied Afghanistan, the number of girls and young women in school increased from near zero to 2.5 million, and literacy rates among women nearly doubled. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



The *Times* employees and their families erected a barbed wire enclosure to protect themselves from the mass chaos engulfing the civilian side of the Kabul airport. This first evacuation attempt began on August 15, 2021, and entailed a thirty-hour wait through a frigid night and two scorching days, children wilting from dehydration, and a violent attack by armed guards, only to have to flee in terror and ultimately face a second attempt to secure an aircraft and evacuate. *Courtesy of Najim Rahim.*



Mursal and Marwa (far left) exit the military C-17 aircraft from Doha in Mexico City on August 25, 2021. A humanitarian effort led by Mexico's Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard gave Afghans a sanctuary as the *Times* continued to push for them to gain entry into the US. *Courtesy of Azam Ahmed/The New York Times/Redux.*



The Rahim sisters and their parents lost in thought in a park in Mexico City during their weeklong layover in August 2021 while awaiting permission to enter the US. The *Times* group made their first attempt to flee Kabul on August 15, 2021, and did not touch down in Houston until late on August 30. *Courtesy of Najim Rahim.*



When Mursal learned as a young girl that there was only one female attorney in the entirety of Kunduz province that handled divorce cases, she pledged to become a lawyer. Unsurprisingly, the indomitable Mursal did as she professed, pictured here clutching her law degree from Salam University in Kunduz, Afghanistan, on graduation day in 2020.

Courtesy of Mursal Rahim.



Marwa (center) with her two best friends from medical school at Rahnaward University in Mazar-e-Sharif. They met on the very first day in 2019 and instantly became an inseparable trio. *Courtesy of Marwa Rahim.*



Samira and Wais were known in the group as the “love couple,” a rare instance of being sweethearts before marriage in a Muslim country where arranged marriage is the norm. Samira hid this detail from her parents, along with her inner arm tattoo that matched Wais’s, for fear the relationship would not be sanctioned. They were married on June 4, 2021, just nine weeks before the evacuation. *Courtesy of Samira Rustami.*



The full group (Rebecca Blumenstein in the center) assembled in November 2021 at a gathering organized to take family photographs. *Times* photographer Meredith Kohut had the idea to take a portrait of each family after learning how distraught they felt at having had to leave all their photographs behind. She stood each family next to an American flag. Aaron Tate, the refugee coordinator the *Times* hired, who developed close relationships with the families, opened the evening sharing a portrait taken in 1947 of his own grandparents arriving in the US from Cyprus. *Meredith Kohut/The New York Times/Redux.*



There was a bumper crop of babies born to women in the *Times* group in the first year in Houston. Durrin arrived in late June, about ten months after Samira's arrival. Samira (left) and her husband, Wais, both hoped for a girl. Marwa and Mursal's mom, Gulalai (right), with seven children of her own, provided a helpful set of hands. *Courtesy of Rebecca Blumenstein.*



The women in the *Times* group gathered for their daily English class in an apartment that the *Times* rented specifically for this purpose. English was new to all these women, and several were not literate in their own language so were learning to read and write for the first time. The class were started after publisher A. G. Sulzberger visited and realized the women with children needed extra help to learn the language. A visit by David McCraw (back right, with Rebecca and T. M. to his left) solidified his instinct that funding college and continuing education was an imperative. This produced the momentum which ultimately drove the launch of the Journalism Refugees Education Fund (JREF). *Courtesy of Rebecca Blumenstein.*



Three of the Afghans in the *Times* group Mursal (fourth from left), Fahim Abed, and Fakhruddin Shoaib stand with assistant Anna Nordeen, publisher A. G. Sulzberger, deputy general counsel David McCraw, and Rebecca, following the annual gathering of the Ochs-Sulzberger family who control the *Times*. The forum provided an opportunity to spotlight the evacuation and allow the family to hear the experiences of several members of the group. Mursal wowed the room with her poignant words about the fight for Afghan women's rights and having thirty minutes to pack your entire life into a backpack and flee your homeland. At the end of the session, Victoria Dryfoos, a family member and high school counselor, volunteered to help the young people apply to college. She would go on to devote hundreds of hours to helping them. *Courtesy of Rebecca Blumenstein.*



Marwa shocked her best friend back in Afghanistan when she shared that she now worked at Gap. A young woman would never work in retail sales in Afghanistan. All three Rahim sisters worked during that first year in Houston to help keep the family afloat. *Meredith Kohut/The New York Times/Redux.*



It wasn't easy for Samira and Wais to arrive in Pittsburgh to start Chatham with an infant in the dead of winter. By spring, they were finding their footing. Durrin was a picky eater, which stressed Samira out, so she tried endlessly to cook a variety of foods to entice her. *Courtesy of Samira Rustami.*



Rebecca (far left) and Diana (far right) with Marwa (second from left) and Mursal (second from right) outside the sister's Chatham dorm in 2023. They were in the final week of their first year, speaking solid English and savvy about many aspects of college life, including Yik Yak, DoorDash, Mac computers, and pizza. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



The Rahim sisters at the base of Market Street in San Francisco during their visit to see their brother Najim graduate from UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism in May 2024. Early on in Houston, the brunette trio was often noticed for their beauty but also for their professional pursuits—one each in business, law, and medicine. *Courtesy of Mursal Rahim.*



Mursal was five years old when she first felt the power of the UN. The letters were stamped on the little notebooks, backpacks, and benches in her bare bones classroom without desks or chairs. At Cornell, she wrote applications for thirty separate UN department internships. She defied the naysayers who warned that these jobs are impossible to get and happily spent the summer of 2024 in an office that handles internal legal disputes.

Courtesy of Victoria Dryfoos.



Mursal (center) out for dinner in Brooklyn while in New York for her summer internship at the UN. She's sandwiched here between two people she considers guardian angels. The college counselor Victoria Dryfoos (left) and Rebecca's assistant Anna Nordeen (right), who Mursal clicked with immediately and who always offered sound advice and friendship. *Courtesy of Mursal Rahim.*



Saturdays are for soccer in the Pittsburgh suburbs, and Durrin (center) was right in the mix. This photo is taken on August 17, 2024, three years after the fall of Kabul. Laura Kessler (back right) signed her up for the youngest age group of Soccer Shots, and of course was there on the sidelines to cheer with Samira (front right), Rebecca (back center) and Wais (front left). *Courtesy of Rebecca Blumenstein.*



The Cathedral of Learning at University of Pittsburgh, or “Cady” as students say, was one of Maryam’s favorite study spots. True to her nickname “GPA,” she did schoolwork nonstop. She hadn’t anticipated how tough her freshman pre-med courses in 2025 were going to be. “I was kind of like, damn, this is going to be hard,” she said in her first weeks of school.

Courtesy of Diana Kapp.



Tiny Chatham University—which boasts Rachel Carson as its most famous graduate but that few people have heard of—generously took five members of the *Times* group. Their unique offering of a period dedicated to intensive English followed by matriculation into undergraduate courses was ideal for refugees facing so much adjustment. Chatham quickly felt like home, particularly Café Rachel, where Marwa (right) and Samira (left, Durrin in tow) socialized between classes, and Marwa dashed nightly before the 10:00 p.m. close for her fix of caffeine to power late night studies. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



An all-day downpour did not dampen Mursal's graduation day from Cornell's Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy. Forty-five months after landing in Houston, she strutted across the stage to claim her MPA diploma. She proudly displayed an Afghan flag she had sewn to her ceremonial red stole. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



Leaping off a diving board for the first time at Robert Terman State Park in Ithaca was a fitting way for Mursal to spend the afternoon of August 15, four years to the day from the fall of Kabul. She had been gaining confidence going for regular late afternoon swims with her housemate. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



Sam and Wais on the main quad at Chatham University. Both are full-time students and committed parents, and their partnership has felt strikingly equitable and modern from the start. With Samira's nursing program in high gear, Wais does preschool pick-up, grocery shops, and cooks, all unimaginable roles if they were in Afghanistan. *Courtesy of Diana Kapp.*



There were pink cupcakes and a family party at Laura and Jon's country house to mark Durrin's third birthday. Samira, Durrin, and Wais have been fully incorporated into the Kessler family, and join them for all holidays and special occasions. *Courtesy of Laura Kessler.*



Marwa looks at samples in her microbiology lab at Chatham in 2026. She was studying the bacteria from a scoby found in a bottle of kombucha and trying to culture them in the lab.

Courtesy of Marwa Rahim.



Durrin moves in for a bite of sheer yakh, traditional Afghan ice cream made with saffron and cardamom.

Sam usually said no to sweets, though put up with Laura who insisted as Durrin's "nana" she got to spoil her, but this was an exception. The family of three was on a driving trip in December 2025, and in Northern Virginia, home to America's second largest population of Afghans, found this Afghan delicacy. *Courtesy of Samira Rustami.*

Acknowledgments

This book was made possible by the bravery and tenacity of four young women who put their trust in us to tell their story.

They shared their journey to help bring attention to the plight of Afghanistan's women, who largely remain shut off from the world five years after the jarring collapse of Kabul.

Marwa, Mursal, Samira, and Maryam, we offer our deepest gratitude to you. We have learned so much from you and are inspired by the progress you, and so many in the group, have made since your life was upended on that fateful August day.

We also want to thank their families.

The Rahim family: Their mother, Gulalai, who defied the Taliban for much of her life to be a pioneer in the education of girls and a model for her daughters. Their father, Rahim, himself an accomplished professor; their brother Najim, a supremely talented journalist and photographer who sounded the initial alarm; and four siblings who exhibit remarkable resilience.

The Alokozay family: Shinkae, who is raising her beautiful family while obtaining an associate's degree in web design; Khalid, who was a stringer for the *Times* in Nangarhar Province and who is now driving so that his daughters, Maryam and Hasinat, and his sons, Abu, Abdulrahman, and Ali, can have the opportunities he did not.

We salute Wais, who always supports his wife, Samira, in her quest to become a nurse. Their Houston-born daughter, Durrin, dazzles.

We want to acknowledge the grace, generosity, and perseverance of every Afghan in our group, those who settled in both the US and Canada.

The Ahmadi family, led by Huma and Azizuddin, one of the Kabul bureau's cook, are one example of the pluck and resolve we saw over and

over. Brothers Bilal and Shabir decided that they would work overnight shifts to support the family while Omar became the first to go to college full-time. They are both now attending college part-time, and their sister, Yalda, is a full-time student at Northern Virginia Community College, hoping to pursue law.

Thank you to Fahim Abed, who stepped in to lead the group along the way, and his wife, Mina, who has always welcomed us, and many others she has met in America, with her infectious smile.

We want to pay a special tribute to Fatima Faizi, one of the few female Afghan journalists, who is now finishing her degree at Columbia University. She fought to bring her family with her and has remained a forceful advocate for Afghan women.

Qatar's Deputy Foreign Minister Lolwah Al-Khater paved the way for our group to get out of Kabul and helped so many others, including other journalists, Afghanistan's Youth Orchestra, and the Afghan Girls Robotics Team. Nofe K. Al-Suwaidi, secretary-general of Qatar's National Commission for Education, Culture and Science, and Sara A. Al-Mulla, assistant director of the Minister's Office for Research and Policy, also provided critical assists throughout it all. Thank you to Matt Pottinger, who answered Rebecca's request for help. Former First Lady Laura Bush was one of the first to bring attention to the plight of Afghanistan's women, and her support helped lead to the creation of the American University of Afghanistan. Ian Bickford, the school's longtime president until early 2026, never stopped fighting for the young women who fled Afghanistan and are now scattered around the world, as well as those who remain.

We would like to thank Dave Whitmer, who reached out after hearing Rebecca speak about the Afghan women, and all veterans who served in Afghanistan. Many mounted their own efforts to evacuate Afghans who helped the US Marines during the war after the fall of Kabul. We honor those who made the ultimate sacrifice, including the US Marines who died at Abbey Gate.

None of the events depicted in this book would have been possible without *The New York Times* and its unwavering commitment to rescuing its people and their families. It is the collective action of so many that led to an accomplishment that will reverberate for generations.

A. G. Sulzberger set the standard, pushing and supporting along the way

and often urging us to “do more.” CEO Meredith Kopit Levien offered her unwavering support and financial commitment from the beginning, as moved by the mission as any of us. Roland Caputo, the former chief financial officer, didn’t question the cost.

Joe Kahn and Dean Baquet mobilized an ambitious effort to rescue our group, and Joe played an indispensable role navigating the chaotic evacuation. They were supported by the entire masthead of the *Times*, including Monica Drake, Marc Lacey, Carolyn Ryan, Matt Purdy, and Sam Dolnick, who changed the trajectory of our group’s journey by asking them to tell their story at a Sulzberger family forum.

David McCraw has been the general of this journey, from the early warning signs to the evacuation and resettlement of more than 220 people. Dana Green fought hard on behalf of our group on immigration and legal issues. They worked with law firms across the country in a massive pro bono effort to represent each individual in their cases for asylum and green cards. Diane Brayton, the *Times*’ sage general counsel, always helped make the right calls and taught us how to “operationalize” a crisis, along with Joanna Helferich and Shushana Jacobov.

Our group simply would not have gotten out of Afghanistan without Mujib Mashal and Thomas Gibbons-Neff. They formed a unique and courageous partnership, with no playbook to guide them. They were assisted by the *Times*’ expert security team, Tug Wilson, Charlie O’Malley, Mark Powell, Bunny Coleman, Jason Reich, and Maria Salazar Ferro.

Azam Ahmed provided an invaluable assist in convincing Mexico’s foreign minister to allow our group safe harbor so that they could transit to a place then unknown. Lauren Katzenberg’s help compiling the manifest of names was game-changing. Michael Slackman and Greg Winter rallied the staff and came up with a way to organize them and welcome them to Mexico City, where Daniela Rodriguez welcomed four different waves of *Times* employees and their families.

Anna Nordeen organized and helped manage it all, developing deep connections to a number of the young people in our group with her infectious smile and can-do attitude. Steven McElroy solved any problem that arose, and Amanda Morgan always helped keep us ahead of it all. Photographers Meridith Kohut and Daniel Berehulak documented the journey of our group with great skill and sensitivity.

So many more made a difference, including Alissa Rubin, Manny Fernandez, Elda Cantú, Ana Sosa, Daniella “Dani” Eguiguren, Chris J. Chivers, Matthew Rosenberg, Christina Goldbaum, Nick Casey, Carlotta Gall, Maria Abi-Habib, Doug Schorzman, Amanda Taub, Jonathan Galinsky, Carol Huang, Danielle Rhoades Ha, Elisabeth Bumiller, Ellen Pollock, Julie Bloom, Adrienne Carter, Phil Pan, Alison Mitchell, Steve Kenny, Ron Lieber, Somini Sengupta, Grace Wong, Sam Felix, Andrew Ross Sorkin, Sharon Chan, Ted Kim, and Paul Moon.

Aaron Tate taught us so much about how to resettle refugees and about ourselves, working day and night to settle our group in Houston. We didn’t realize what a big ask it was to keep our group of 124 together, but Cynthia Colbert, president and CEO of Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, took on the challenge. Ardiane Ademi, vice president of Refugee Services, and many others went above and beyond. We are grateful to Ali Al Sudani, programming head of Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, who offered critical advice about what would be possible in Houston, and Norma Church, property manager of the Woodchase apartment complex in Houston, who gave our families a chance after they had been turned down by so many others.

The Journalism Refugees Education Fund (JREF) went from an idea to a reality because of a band of people who wouldn’t take no for an answer. In addition to David McCraw and Lauren Katzenberg, the group also includes Dana Green, Victoria Dryfoos, Wahid Wafa, Aaron Tate, Emily Wolfe, Steven McElroy, Andrew Steers, Marcia Parker, and Jai Ramos.

Victoria Dryfoos has spent countless hours helping our young people with essays, applications, and advice. We would like to thank the extended Sulzberger family for their commitment to the *Times* and the Afghan rescue and resettlement. Many in the family have offered their support to JREF, along with Sam Nappi; Mantosh Dewan, the president of Upstate Medical University; Don Graham; Nathan Collier; and several others.

So many others jumped in to help along the way.

Laura and Jon Kessler and the entire Paul family, including Dick and Suzi, who have adopted Samira, Wais, and Durrin as their own and offered countless dinners and support to our Pittsburgh students. The small but mighty Chatham University in Pittsburgh, which came up with a model of how to help the Afghan students succeed by first reinforcing their English

—an outsized commitment and contribution. Farnam Jahanian, president of Carnegie Mellon, who helped spark the mobilization of Pittsburgh schools; Lynette Clemetson, director of the Wallace House Center for Journalists at the University of Michigan; and Kathy Kiely at the University of Missouri’s Journalism School for her loyal and dogged support of Ghazi Zabi. Dawn Blitz in Houston jumped in whenever we needed an assist, as did Penina Glazer as well as Geeta Anand and the University of California’s Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism.

Our agent, Sarah Chalfant, recognized the importance of this story and deftly steered us through, and Rebecca Nagel provided guidance and support at every step. Thank you to Josh Prager for the introduction. Will Schwalbe answered our call over and over and provided critical guidance and sanity checks. Nick Summers, who has a keen way with words, turned on a dime to help us elevate our manuscript.

Amar Deol, our editor at Grand Central, who has his own immigrant story, believed in our idea and the story of our young women from the very start. Brant Rumble stepped in at a critical juncture and shepherded our manuscript along with the able and organized Morgan Spehar. We appreciate Colin Dickerman for his savvy leadership at GCP, as well as Megan Perritt-Jacobson, Quinne Rogers, Albert Tang for our fabulous cover, and surely many others working behind the scenes.

Lisa Dallos, Evan Strome, Kaitlyn Kurosky, Brody Sklar, Nathan Pettijohn, Gina Meza, and the team at High 10 Media signed on to help us share these valiant young women with the world and to raise awareness about journalists in exile and the important work of the Journalism Refugees Education Fund.

Thanks from Rebecca

Little about writing this book made sense. I decided to leave the *Times* to become president, editorial of NBC News, in early 2023, and it felt natural that I should leave my involvement with the Afghan refugees behind.

But I realized that I just couldn’t shake them or the stories of the young women who had so captivated me. I found the perfect coauthor in my old friend Diana Kapp, who years ago gave me a handmade necklace after she

visited a girls' school in Afghanistan.

The incredible journalists of NBC News are a source of inspiration and pride. I'm grateful to Cesar Conde for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime and to Catherine Kim, Libby Leist, Cheryl Rosenblum, Stephen Labaton, and Dana Klinghoffer for their support. They help lead a large, fantastic team of reporters, editors, producers, photographers, engineers, and support staff who reach millions of people every day with a fierce commitment to telling stories that need to be told.

I have been so fortunate, both in life and career, to be surrounded by people who always encouraged me.

The Wall Street Journal was my journalistic home for over twenty years and a place where I learned under the guidance of fantastic editors and colleagues, including but by no means limited to Dan Hertzberg, Paul Steiger, Bob Simison, Gabriella Stern, Bill Grueskin, Marcus Brauchli, Matthew Rose, Bruce Orwall, Laurie Hays, Ken Brown, Alix Freedman, Mike Williams, Mike Miller, Raju Narisetti, Carol Hymowitz, Robert Thomson, Gerry Baker, Almar Latour, Li Yuan, Kevin Delaney, Alessandra Galloni, Matt Murray, Marcus Brauchli, Ann Podd, and Christine Glancey. I will never forget the China bureau: Kathy Chen, Cui Rong, Kersten Zhang, Mei Fong, Loretta Chao, James Areddy, Gordon Fairclough, Andrew Batson, Andy Browne, Shai Oster, Jason Dean, Scott and Lisa Kronick, and Geoff Fowler. John Bussey sent me to China with three young kids and became a partner once again on Afghanistan. Nik Deogun and Amanda Bennett have remained steadfast supporters. We all mourn the loss of Cathy Panagoulas, ever the champion of young journalists around the world, and are grateful for the contributions made in her honor to JREF.

Eternal thanks to Theo and Jim Yardley for welcoming us to the Beijing Riviera with open arms. So many Beijing friends remain central to my life, including Kristi and Nathan Belete, Vivian Nazari, Ellen Carberry and Maya Alexandri.

Thanks to Stephanie Mehta, Cindi Leive, Ianthe Dugan, Titi Liu, Steve Goldberg, Arlene Correa, Greg Benson, Laura Whimire, Leah and David Gomberg, the Soul Runners, Jane Schneider, Mary Ellen Dawkins, Brooke and Matt Lefferts, Laura Romanoff, Silvia Kleer, Sara Knutsen, Michael Wolfson, and many others who keep me laughing. Danny Rosen, Lisa Russ, and Wendy Zazik always have their phone lines open for wise counsel.

Joanna Stern and Sapna Maheshwari, you call me a mentor but have taught me so much. Jodi Kantor encouraged me to keep going when a book seemed insane, reminding me that it is always good to go back to my roots as a reporter.

My parents, Ruth and Harold Blumenstein, are a model of Midwestern humility, optimism, and grit, having come so far in their lives and given so selflessly to their family of five girls. They have been consistent supporters of my career since I started at *The Michigan Daily*, one of the nation's great independent student newspapers, where I fell under the spell of the wonder and hard work of journalism.

My grandparents Sonia and Charles Blumenstein immigrated from the Ukraine and Poland to Ottawa and then Detroit. I grew up listening to stories about how they'd had to start over but always helped people along the way. My grandfather took out a newspaper ad in London looking for lost Blumensteins after the Holocaust and found a cousin whose entire extended family had been exterminated. My aunts Judy and Nettie opened my eyes to the wider world, as did the always generous Lisa Amster. I will never forget Jonathan Klein, who left us far too soon.

It takes a village, and I'm so thankful to my immediate and extended family, including but not limited to my sisters, Sara, Jenny, Molly, and Beth, and their families; my in-laws Suzi and Dick, Kathy and David; and our Maplewood shtetl, Joan and Ben, Carrie and Dave, Amy, Danny, and Alisa.

People have sometimes asked me how I could have my career with three kids. My reply is that I can't imagine doing it without them. I'm in awe of Jacob for his idealism and love of books, to Eli for always appreciating those around him and being a great road-trip partner, and to Anna for solving problems and taking charge when things seem overwhelming. They are my biggest and proudest accomplishments.

None of it would be possible without Alan, whose writing and playing bring joy to so many people. To quote Dickey Betts, "You're my blue sky, you're my sunny day."

Thanks from Diana

This project truly began with my dear friend Amy Atkinson, who bravely

went to Afghanistan to record the lives of young women and whose beautiful narratives about those girls drew me to this country and its remarkable people. Amy introduced me to Dr. Sarah Fane, OBE, who showed me the spirit of the Afghan people, taking me along to see her remarkable schools in remote provinces. My mother, whom I still miss every day, gamely joined that trip and supported Sarah's work; a girls' school in northern Afghanistan was subsequently named in her honor.

My deep gratitude goes to my daughter Elliot, who saved me from myself with multiple edits but most importantly with her blunt marginalia of "boring," "cliché," and "you can do better"; my daughter Emma, who reminds me every day of the unique power of young women; my son, Kapp, who pushes me to make my words sharper and arguments smarter. My three children span the ages of Maryam, Samira, Marwa, and Mursal, and I think often about a future that will be brighter because of these generous-spirited, principled young people.

Susan Britton, whose keen intellect I admire, generously read a full draft. Nina Martin, my longtime mentor and friend, taught me to write narrative nonfiction and countless times has helped me find the story. Jen Noland has been an invaluable sounding board down many hiking trails. Rodes Fishburne, my Union Street neighbor, regularly stopped my swirling and set me back to solid writing, and Todd Oppenheimer deftly nudged me unstuck at one memorable lunch. Alan Paul, Rebecca's husband, whom I know from UM days, has been the steadying third leg of our writing partnership and always seems to know how to proceed in journalism and in life. Jessica Cheung, a rising superstar radio journalist, now teaches me. Rachel Breinin, wise and giving, always generously offers her brilliance and creativity. A special thanks to Danielle Svetcov, my savvy agent, who steered me through my first two books.

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Jennifer and Courtney.

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For Rebecca, for trusting me with this precious story, for being a perennial optimist during this project, and for being a role model to me since the early days.

David, my brightest light, for everything, always, thank you.

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About the Authors

Rebecca Blumenstein is president, editorial, at NBC News, where she oversees newsgathering, field operations, NBCNews.com, and flagship shows including *Nightly News*, *Meet the Press*, and *Dateline*. She was a deputy managing editor at *The New York Times* from 2017 to 2022, where she expanded business and digital coverage and worked as a partner with A. G. Sulzberger. She worked for twenty-two years as a reporter, editor, and deputy editor in chief at *The Wall Street Journal*, where she led the China team that won the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting.

Diana Kapp is a journalist who writes frequently about the intersection of women and modern culture and has traveled in Afghanistan to report on the education of girls in the country's rural northern provinces. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Elle*, *More*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Marie Claire*, among other publications. She is the author of two young-adult books profiling female changemakers, *Girls Who Run the World* and *Girls Who Green the World*.



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