



WHAT WAS YOUR COUNTRY: A REFUGEE STORY

Written by Bethany Brownholtz
As told by Asaddullah Rahimi

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¹ International Family, Adult, and Child Enhancement Services

Three of us sit, mentally exhausted, in a therapist's office in Chicago: me, Asaddullah, and Ashley—a mental health professional, forever vigilant about where I am taking this conversation. We surround a digital recorder and a phone. An interpreter listens on the line as Asaddullah, 31, describes his escape from Afghanistan in 2008.

The Suitor

When I talk about the past and my family, and all of the things that happened to me, you know, whatever happened to me is not important—maybe it was my destiny. But what happened to my family really upsets me, and I wish that this had not happened, or maybe I could have done something to make it different, but it really bothers me, and sometimes I can't even control my tears. Maybe it wasn't my fault, but I think a part of it was.

The culture where I grew up is very different from the culture of all of Afghanistan because it was in a village,² and people in that village weren't very educated. Even if a boy and a girl wanted to get married in that village, the parents would decide for the girl and the boy to get married, and even when they were engaged, they would not see each other.

The people of that town believe in religion a lot, and if a clergyman or elder says something, everybody listens. We called them “the people with the white beard.” Somehow they have control of the people, and they have the culture in their hands. These clergymen don't even want a woman to go to work; they don't want a woman to go to school, and women cannot go out with their face showing. And people are simpleminded—they haven't seen the world; they don't have any TV. They don't know anything, so they believe whatever these clergymen tell them.

Sometimes I think, “How come I'm different?” Maybe people my age in society are like that, or somehow I'm like that. But I always question why I'm different even though I have a fourth grade education and haven't seen many places. From childhood, from the time

² Asaddullah lived in Daykundi province in Afghanistan.

that I knew myself, I was like that, and if I saw my mom and dad fighting, I would just leave the house or do something so that they would stop.

In our village, girls would not talk to boys, or they wouldn't become friends or anything like that, so when Sogra and I saw each other in the mountains, she was very shy, and she wouldn't talk, and she would cover her face. I don't know if it was because I was really insistent that we started talking and she trusted me, but we talked more and more, and we got to know each other better.

We had cows and sheep, and we would take them to feed on the grass, so while I was doing that, I met her. At night when we came home we were waiting for the morning to come so we could take the sheep and cows into the mountains again and meet up. It wasn't like I would take the sheep to feed every day, or she would take the sheep every day. Two to three days a week I would do it, and then two to three days another neighbor would do it, but luckily a lot of times both of us would be taking the sheep on the same days. Since we were taking care of the cows and sheep, we knew where to take them. It wasn't like we could be seeing each other at home or in the village,³ so we saw each other in the mountains where it was far from people's eyes.

From the first day that I saw her, she was very quiet and very innocent, and she was pretty. She was prettier than the other girls in the village. Now, it's not important that she was prettier, but that innocence and kindness that she had made me like her.⁴ The few times per week that we saw each other in the mountains, we became friends, and we asked each other about our lives. It took maybe a year and a half to two years. If one saw the other was upset, we would ask, "How come you're not happy today? Why are you sad?" One day I saw that she was really upset and she had been crying. She didn't want to show me that she was

³ Their houses were about four hours walking distance from each other.

⁴ When pressed further, Asaddullah shared that Sogra had a "beautiful face" and "nice teeth."

crying, but her eyes were red, and I asked her, “Why are you upset? Did I do something? Are you upset because of me?” She said, “No, they want to give me to this older man who has a wife and kids already.”

In a lot of small towns in Afghanistan, people who have some money and power, when they see a woman who doesn't have a husband and a girl that is pretty, they don't care, they just want to have that girl as their wife. Make them their own. They don't think of their wives as someone that they are sharing their life with. They look at the woman like a maid or a nurse. A woman has no worth. I heard that they wanted to give her to this man—I didn't like that. Would you have liked it if a 17-year-old girl was made to marry a 40-year-old man? It's injustice.⁵

So after that we started thinking about getting married. In a traditional society like Afghanistan, not all parts of the country practice the same traditions. Some parts of the country are deemed very conservative, where others are more relaxed. Before this point I did not officially talk to her parents, and I did not propose because it was not customary. We were not officially boyfriend and girlfriend, but on the sidelines, sure, secretly we had talked. I knew where she stood, and she knew where I was coming from.

When somebody comes to ask for your hand, you don't do it just once—you have to go back and forth, like two or three times, until everything gets okayed. I had sent my parents twice to ask for her, so the first time they had said no, and the second time we went there, they threatened my parents and said, “We don't want you to come back here again. Our answer is no.” Her mother and father did not have anything against me. The main problem was her oldest brother, and if it weren't for him, we wouldn't have left Afghanistan. The suitor was her brother's friend. This man had built the house for her brother; her brother probably owed him money because when you want to build a house,

⁵ Asaddullah was about 23 years old at this time.

you have to have 100,000 Afghani money for the construction materials. So that suitor had money that her brother borrowed to build the house. Then the suitor had said, "Ok, I'm going to come ask for your sister's hand in marriage," and the brother agreed to them getting married.

After this, when we saw each other, we felt like there was no other way left, and she was telling me, "I don't want to be a second wife to that man. He's much older than me, and I don't love him, and I'm scared of him." And her parents had not accepted my offer of marriage either, so I asked her, "Will you run away with me?"

If we had stayed at home, they would have come and taken her and done something to her and to me, so we decided to flee. In the village they would say, "This man has come to ask for this girl," and if this girl *doesn't* want to do it, that would be really bad for the man who came to ask for her hand. It injures your pride. They would say, "Oh look, this man took your fiancé," so that person has to retaliate or get revenge.

Because everybody would know what's going on in our small village, we didn't have a place to go. We couldn't go and hide in anybody's house, so we decided to go to the mountains because nobody would have believed that in such cold we would have gone there. You know how Chicago is in winter? It's really hard to stay outside for an hour, but we had to stay in the cold without any food or drink for three days. I sent a message to my family so they could help us to survive. The only time they could bring us food was at nighttime. If my brother had not helped me and brought me food and blankets, we might have died.

We stayed in the mountains for 12-15 days. We were just waiting it out so our parents would come together and agree for us to come back. The mountains were very rough and very dangerous, and if you were to see it for the first time you would be terrified, but we lived there. We were there all the time, so it was normal for us, and we knew where the caves were and which cave was safe. Half of the time we were having fun because we were together and we were away from everybody. Sometimes we would be laughing, and

sometimes out of fear we wouldn't even breathe. Especially at night it was scary. We would go in the caves and hold our ears. We were so scared when we would hear the wolves howling. There aren't many dogs in Afghanistan, but there are a lot of wolves.

Her family was putting pressure on locals to help them find our whereabouts. While we were gone, her family also came to my house, trying to get them to talk and tell them where we were. This was the type of family that did not even feel bad about their own flesh and blood. They were the type of family that wanted my wife to marry someone against her will and put a metal plate or something that got very hot and had her sit on that; there were like flames underneath it, so they were like torturing her to make her say yes. One side of her buttocks was scarred. This is the type of family that did this to their own family member, so you can imagine what they'd do to somebody else's family.

If somebody was there and filmed it, it would have been a very scary movie to watch. There were seven or eight people that came—the two main instigators were her brother and also the man who wanted to marry her. They were ruthless. Whoever was in their way, they would hit them, and they were like kicking them and punching everybody; they weren't even thinking about kids, let alone women. Back then we were five brothers and three sisters. The young ones were probably like 14 or 16. My mother, my father, and my sisters were all living in my house. I think these men had guns, and you know the government doesn't regulate weapons. A lot of people have weapons. So at the end when some neighbors came and tried to stop them, they took out the weapons, and that's when my father got killed.

There have been so many good memories with my father. First of all, my father really was a great father and served us really well. He raised us, he gave us food, he gave us clothing. We used to play with each other and have a lot of fun times together. We used to work, and in our village there was a lot of snow, and we would clear the snow off of

buildings, and we would have snowball fights and joke around, so I have a lot of good memories. I don't know which one to tell.

He was hit with a bullet. When they were kicking and hitting the kids, my father got in front of them, trying to protect them, and they shot him. In every country there are people that are bullies, and even in the US there are people that are dangerous and bullies. These people have like five or six friends, and they're very cruel, and they don't really care about laws or anything like that. And then they get together and they say, "Ok, let's go break in some place" or "This person did this to me or that to me, so let's go beat him up," so that's how it was. When my father was killed, I couldn't carry him to his grave site. That was very hard on me.

Back then in my village there was no government. There were no police, and there was no law, so anybody would just be the judge and the jury, and they would carry out the punishment themselves. Even now we have two presidents, and other governments support them. We still don't have laws; we don't have government. Women are burned for no good reason in Kabul.⁶ We were in the mountains: what kind of law could have protected us? In any country where there is war, there is no law.⁷

When my father was killed, the murderers had to leave. I don't know why they left, but I'm thinking that they couldn't find who they were looking for. They couldn't just sit there because the neighbors would have gone after them because of what they had done. So when they ran away, my mom sent my brother to tell me to leave immediately. She was saying that if they did this to us and the kids, they're going to kill you. My mother gave us money and said, "Just leave because they're going to find you—if not today, tomorrow, or

⁶ Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan. At 27 years old, Farkhunda Malikzada [was brutally murdered there by a mob](#) for allegedly burning the Quran.

⁷ The United States had invaded Afghanistan post 9/11 and [continued to deploy troops](#) in 2008 and beyond.

the next day—because they have a lot of influence.” So we ran and didn’t have time to ask how it happened or where my father got shot.

They Will Find Us

We suffered a lot to get to Kabul. I think we were traveling for two days and two nights. Where we were, there were no roads, and if there were roads, they were for summer, not for winter, so there were no cars, and we didn’t know where we were going or which way we were supposed to go. Whoever we saw we would ask them which way we should go, which valley we should cross. It was not like here where you have a GPS to find your way, so we had to ask everybody until we got to a place where there was a car, and we asked the car which way we should be going to get to Kabul.

At night we would walk because it was dark, and we felt less danger, so we used to rest during the day. But we didn’t really rest for too long, maybe during that 48 hours we rested for six to seven hours. At night we were afraid that if we laid down someplace we would freeze, but during the day because of the sun, it was warmer, and we would sit some place and rest and be less tired. Sometimes we were walking on empty stomachs, and sometimes we asked houses for some bread, and there were neighborhoods that didn’t give us any food. There were no restaurants that you could stop by and eat.

When we got to Kabul, we didn’t know where to go or what to do. Here, I leave the house with a goal and know where I’m going and what I’m going to do. But when we went to Kabul, we didn’t know any of those things, or what was going to happen to us, and that’s very scary. We were afraid that we might be found out, so we just went to an inn.

We stayed there for a day or two and became acquainted with the owner. He came and asked us, “What are your plans? How long are you staying? Where did you come from?” So when we started to talk about that, I don’t know if he knew my father or his father knew my father—when he found out where we came from, he knew of us. It was just by chance.

When he came and talked to us, he asked, “How long are you going to be staying in Kabul?” and we said, “I don’t know, maybe a week or two.” Then he invited us to his home. When we went to his home, we told him everything, so he decided to help us and care for us. We kept staying in his house because the hotel wasn’t a safe place for us with people coming and going. His name was Sarvar. He even helped us find a clergyman to sign an official marriage license, and we got married in his home.

A few days later, we were having dinner when four men with guns came there to take us. Sarvar’s family let us out the back door into the gardens. When the men got into the house, they started to scare the family and they made a lot of noise. The family was terrified and forgot about their sleeping baby, so they didn’t pick up the baby. These men stepped on the baby, like in a stampede, and the baby died. His son was a year, year and half. I feel like in the world there are people that are really good people, truly and innately great people. This family lost their child, but they didn’t tell them where we were.⁸

They had beat up Sarvar, and the women were scared and didn’t know what to do; it was the first time they were seeing such violence. Thankfully, in Kabul there is police, so these men could not just do whatever they wanted to do. They did what they could in half an hour and left, so around 4:00 in the morning the family came to the garden and found us and told us to come back to the house.

I keep scratching my head: How did they find us? How did they know we came to Kabul? I’ve had this question, and I haven’t been able to answer it, and I’m just asking, “Why did this happen?” A few times I went out to get a passport and get some documents together because when we left our village I didn’t bring any kind of documents or any birth certificates or anything like that. Maybe somebody saw us and told them.

⁸ Months later Asaddullah found out that Sarvar’s wife was about a month or two pregnant and lost the baby from the fear of the guns that were fired.

When we left our village and went to Kabul, we were planning on staying and living in Kabul. And then after three to four nights, they found us. We figured out that we were not going to be safe there, and wherever we live in Afghanistan, they're going to find us—either this year or next year, they will find us—so we decided to go to Turkey. Sarvar lent us money and helped us to get fake passports to go to Turkey. In Afghanistan there is a lot of corruption, and if you give them money, they do anything, so we were able to get passports.

I Couldn't Call My Wife's Name

We couldn't get visas, so we had to pay human smugglers to take us into Turkey. When human smugglers talk to you at first, they say, "Oh it's going to be easy, you won't have a problem" and you have no other choice—you don't have the choice of going there legally, so you have to accept this, and when you're doing this, you know that there is a 95% chance of danger and there's only like a 5% chance that you'll get there in one piece.

In order to go to Turkey, you have to pass through Iran,⁹ so we crossed two borders, and this was very dangerous. The border between Iran and Turkey is a very long border, and it's in the mountains and very narrow and steep. Only one person or horse can pass, so if you slip or the horse slips, you go down a cliff. We were on horseback some of the time, and these mountains are very high, and they have valleys underneath them, so a lot of times the people with us were telling us that 50 or 60 people went down the slope with their horses. If you moved the wrong way or slipped, you would go down the slope into the valley and die.

Some of these smugglers—they don't get you horses. They want to bring costs down, so they take your money, and then they make you walk. There were people that

⁹ Asaddullah passed through most of Iran through human smugglers' vehicles, traveling through Mashhad, Tehran, and Tabriz: "Going from Afghanistan to Iran is easy because every day Afghans are going to Iran because there are not many jobs in Afghanistan, so [the Iranian government is] not that strict."

probably never traveled so far, or they were weaker, so walking for 13 hours was not easy. I saw two people that I guess had gotten tired and sat in the winter cold and had frozen to death. They were just by the side of the road we were traveling on, two or three meters away from us. They probably were newly passed because they were frozen, but the animals had not eaten them up. They were just sitting there, and we felt really bad for them. We were worried about our future, you know, what's going to happen to us? There were other people that came after us that told us they saw small kids dead on the road, and someone left their pregnant wife behind.

Bad things happen to women during this journey, and a lot of times they take these women and you never see them again. They make up an excuse and they separate the men and the women; they say that they have to pass separately, and then they take the beautiful girls and young girls, and you never hear of them again. I don't know what they do with them, if they sell them or what they do, but a lot of times women have to dress like men. My wife did the same thing. She had her hair cut and tied, and she was wearing men's clothing and glasses so they wouldn't know that she's a woman.

When we were crossing Turkey, there is a distance of a mile or so where you have to go by horse, and you have to go fast. They would hit the horses so they would go faster. I wasn't too worried about myself, but my wife was wearing men's clothing, and it was her first time on a horse. There were things that you had to pass by and there were holes in the ground. It wasn't a flat surface, so if you fell off the horse, you were lucky to get back on the horse; if not, you would just be left behind. I was really scared for my wife for that mile and a half distance because she didn't know how to ride a horse, and if she had fallen, they didn't know that she's a woman. Then like every five minutes or 10 minutes we would stop and gather everybody together and see if everybody was there and which way we should be going. I couldn't call my wife's name. I had to make up a name for her so I could call her by that name, and we would see if we're okay and start moving again.

When we left Afghanistan, it was just me and my wife, and then when we got to the Iran border, there were about 10-12 of us. Then, when we got to Mashhad,¹⁰ there were 25 of us. Sometimes the government would become stricter, so the smugglers would keep people waiting for those restrictions to ease up and then move. As we got closer to Turkey, the number of people increased more and more. And then when we crossed the border between Iran and Turkey, we got to a border town called Van, and after walking for such a long time, we went to the main road and they picked us up in a big truck. There were like 70-80 of us in that truck, and the police were looking for these types of trucks, and so the truck was driving with the lights off the whole time. If they had made a small mistake, we would have gone down a slope.



Asaddullah's Journey

Coming from Iran to Turkey, we walked for seven hours, and for six hours we rode on horseback. When we were walking, it was good because we were moving and our joints

¹⁰ Mashhad is a city in northeastern Iran.

were warm, but when we were on the horses, it was really cold and our legs would freeze, so when I entered Turkey I started having excruciating leg pains. I had a little bit of this pain in me from before, but because of being weak and hypothermia, the pain got worse.¹¹ With the smugglers, I told them that my knee was hurting a lot, and I couldn't even bear standing or sitting it was so bad, and that I might even die. They said, "Ok, when you get to Istanbul, we're going to take you to doctors."

Istanbul is the center for all the smugglers. When we got to Istanbul, they took us to this basement. It was very cold and damp, and even a criminal wouldn't be left in there, it was in such bad condition. There were three families in one room with me and my wife; in the other room there were like about 20 or 30 single people, and these single people, their living conditions were a lot worse. It smelled bad—there were no showers, and they had to go to the bathroom in the same room.

When I told them that I needed to see the doctor they said, "When you give us all the money that you owe us, then we'll let you out and let you go to the doctors. The things we told you over the phone were just to get you here so you wouldn't run away. We wanted you to come here so we could get our money." These smugglers are so ruthless and selfish. They don't care about you, and they just want to make money. You get sold from one smuggler to the next and have no choice but to go from one hand to the other hand. They do everything by phone, and they have people at the border; they have people in Tehran¹² and they have people in Mashhad, so they just call them and they tell them, "This person is coming and go get this person," so they just pass people along. We had to pay the money we had owed them for bringing us from Afghanistan to Turkey.

¹¹ To this day, Asaddullah has advanced rheumatism and chronic pain. At the time of the interviews, he had been using medicine for this for three years and was getting injections once per week to keep it from getting worse.

¹² Tehran is a city in northern Iran.

After staying in that damp basement for two days, bearing all that pain—the pain was so bad that I felt that I was like passing out every minute—they wanted our money. I didn't have my money with me. The money was with these people that had originally brought us from Afghanistan to Turkey, so I got a phone and called them, and they gave me my money, and then I paid them and they let us out of that basement.

Here Too We Will Manage Something

Over there, these smugglers are all connected, and they all work together, so when we got out of the hands of those smugglers, we got into the hand of another one in Istanbul. I don't know if it was God's work or if it was luck. That second smuggler was Afghani, and he saw what bad shape we were in and felt bad for us. He said, "I want to help you, I'm not going to sell you to another smuggler. I'm just going to let you go, and you go to Gaziantep¹³ where there is a lot of other Afghanis, and they might be able to help you." So we had a little bit of money, we had like \$50 per person, and we were able to get bus tickets to go to Gaziantep.

The person who had let us go in Istanbul called this Afghani person, his friend, and told them, "These two people, this family of two, are coming to this terminal on this date and at this time, so you go and get them because they don't know the language, and we don't want the police to get them because then they will be deported." So that person came and took us from the bus terminal to his home. But I was really not in good condition, and every like hour or so I used to pass out from pain, so he got really scared. We didn't have any papers and we were there illegally. He told us that we had to leave because he didn't know how to answer the police if something happened to me. I mean even if it was me in his

¹³ Gaziantep is a border town near Syria.

situation, I would have been scared. If somebody's like that, and you think they might die—how are you going to answer the police after that?

The Turkish police—whenever they see an immigrant from a different country—they have to have papers from the UN, otherwise they will deport them. We didn't have those documents, but I had no other choice. I had no other place to go. The other person had told me that I can't stay at their house anymore, so I said I'll go and show myself to the police and see what happens. They either deport me to Afghanistan and I die, or they will help me. I was scared and constantly tired and exhausted and in pain. I couldn't sit, I couldn't walk, I couldn't stand on my feet. So I went and I reported myself to the police.

We went and stood by the road and waved down a police car, so the police car stopped to see what was wrong. We didn't know Turkish, and they saw that we didn't know anything. They were asking us for documents and fished our pockets. When they saw that we didn't have anything, they took us to the police station. It was a Saturday and all the offices were closed, so they kept us in this place—it was maybe like a deportation center or a jail—for two days until Monday. The offices would open then, and they would see what we're all about and do something about us.

The two days that we were in that jail until the offices opened, I can remember vividly that I passed out like three or four times from the pain. I didn't know the language, or how to tell them, but I kept pointing to my knee, and they realized that I had pain in my knees. There were other people there, the burglars or people who had done something wrong that were brought to that jail, so every time that they saw me passing out, they would make noise and call the guards to come see that I was passing out. They were worried that I might die. This was really tough on my wife. Every time I passed out, she would get upset. She was very young when she married me. She was 17 or 18, and she didn't have any of this experience, so me not feeling well and passing out had a bad effect on her and she would pass out too.

When on Monday the offices opened up, the police who had to make a decision on what to do with us talked to the police who had been taking care of us for two days in that jail. Those people told them, “This man is in a lot of pain. He needs medical attention, and he’s passed out four or five times.” So the police who took us were very lenient and didn’t deport us. They gave us documents and brought us to the hospital, and they gave me an injection. That injection took away my pain for about three to four hours and I was able to sleep. I had not slept for a whole week because of so much pain in my leg.

Then we were given to this Afghani family in Gaziantep, a family that spoke Turkish fluently and had Turkish passports. The lady of the house was a volunteer interpreter, and she was interpreting for another family with a medical issue at the police station. The police asked the interpreter to help us out, take us home, take us to doctors, and just find a place and get situated—basically if we need any help just help us. That’s how we ended up at the interpreter’s house. The police didn’t want her to take care of us forever, just for a couple of days.

We stayed there, but her family wasn’t able to find us a home. Over there if you want to rent a home, you have to put in a deposit for it, like a month’s rent. They saw we didn’t have this money and could not find a home. They didn’t throw us out of their home, but their attitudes really changed towards us, indirectly expressing that we should leave. When you have a guest in your home, if you like them, you bring them tea, you bring them food, you treat them nicely. They were like this the first night, but then their treatment changed. They wouldn’t talk to us. They would all go and stay in one room, and my wife and I would stay in another room. They wouldn’t ask us to come to dinner when dinner was ready, these types of things.

After a couple of nights spent in the interpreter’s house, I was in agony, and my wife was upset about that and crying. Obviously it’s a burden on somebody’s shoulder when a stranger is living with them and is sick; it’s not easy to deal with. They were right about the

way they were treating us because in Turkey, pretty much like here, people without legal paperwork are kind of a liability. That's why they wanted us to go. They asked us to go and surrender ourselves to the police, and I kind of understand where they were coming from and why they were doing what they were doing.

We had not seen things like this, and it was hard for us to take. We felt that we were not welcome, so we told them that we were going to leave. The way I saw it, we took a risk and we just managed to come from Afghanistan; here too we will manage something. So they did not stop us and said we could go. We didn't speak the language, and we didn't know what to do, so we went to a park about 15 minutes away.¹⁴

All of the Sorrows I Went Through

I wish one thing, that nobody—*nobody*—would experience what we have experienced: sleeping in the park, being in that harsh situation. The park is a beautiful place to go and enjoy your day off or just go and rest and have fun, but it's not a place to live. When you live in a park obviously you need a bathroom, you need to take a shower, you are husband and wife and you want to be intimate—these are basic human needs. But when you're in the park, all these needs are denied. In Turkish bathrooms in the park you have to pay about 50 cents per use, so we would try to go when the attendant was not there to avoid paying. As far as sleeping, parks in Turkey have benches where people would come and rest, like retired people, and people come for picnics and everything, so we would sleep on the benches and lay out on the grass.

During the month that I was there, as far as our intimate privacy, I want to tell you that I was in *so much pain*. If I want to describe my pain, I want to say 24 hours a day during that time I was feeling like a sharp knife or a big needle was pinching right through my leg. I

¹⁴ Asaddullah compared it to lakeshore parks in Chicago.

was in so much pain that I couldn't think of anything, and my wife was constantly crying because of the situation we were in.

While I was at the park, and people were seeing us in agony without any belongings, they would feed and help us all the time. They always came there, day and nighttime, to barbeque or have a picnic, and when they'd see us—although they couldn't communicate with us—they assumed that we were in need. They would approach us, and when they found out we didn't speak the language, they always fed us. I'm not saying that we never stayed hungry, but for the month or so that we lived in that park, maybe we went without food for a day or two.

With my homelessness experience, I don't think people in Turkey were thinking negatively about it because they're really warm, kindhearted people. I believe if we would have spoken their language, and if we could have expressed ourselves, they would have understood us earlier. I don't think we would have been out in the park more than a night or two. I'm sure they would have provided us shelter, and they would have helped us out somehow, someday, because people are different there.¹⁵

One Turkish person came across us, and when they found that we had no place to go and had nothing, they raised the issue to the Turkish authorities about what was going on in the park. Then when Turkish authorities came, they paid attention to us and took care of us. They took us to very harsh living conditions for really cheap rent; it was kind of a smelly, moldy basement with mice, lizards, and roaches.

There in Gaziantep we became friendly with three or four Afghan families, and they told us, "You cannot stay in Turkey because if you don't get caught today you'll get caught tomorrow. The police are always looking for people who are illegal." So they helped us and we went to Ankara, which is the capital of Turkey, and we reported ourselves to the United

¹⁵ I had asked Asaddullah if Turkish people had the same negative attitude towards homeless people that most Americans have.

Nations.¹⁶ When the UN interviews you, they ask, “What’s your issue? Why did you leave?” and then your case starts processing, and then they might accept you.

When one is in danger, and in a harsh living environment, obviously one always feels in danger. Even when I was flying to the US, still, in the back of my mind, I was worried. But when the police took us to that basement and we were in contact with the UN, and the UN accepted us as refugees and we received temporary IDs, I had a little bit of peace of mind. A lot of people from the surrounding countries come to Turkey, and so the police and the UN cooperate with each other. A person who wants to become a refugee, you have to report yourself to the UN and then the UN contacts the police and consults with the police to find out where they can send you. The police have the last word, and they choose which city or which town they should send you, and then the UN sends you to that town.

After we got registered as refugees,¹⁷ we were sent back to Gaziantep and lived in the same place with the infestations. At first it was very difficult, and my wife still could not go anywhere alone. There were days when we had no money at all. We would wake up hungry and go to bed hungry. I was carrying a lot of pain in me, no matter what the doctor did. All of the sorrows I went through. Nothing helped. I was given so many pain medications that the nurse said I couldn’t take anymore since it would harm my heart. The injections I needed were so strong that I needed to sign a consent form, but my wife wouldn’t let me.

As we started to get to know our surroundings, we started to get to know some other people from Afghanistan that were in the area. I’m not quite sure whether the police told them that there’s a new Afghan in the area, or somehow they had learned another way, but one day I saw somebody knocking on my door. When I answered the door, I saw this

¹⁶ Funnily enough, the police did not initially connect Asaddullah with the UN.

¹⁷ According to Asaddullah, “In Turkey once a week all the UN refugees have to go to the police and just sign. It’s kind of like taking attendance.”

guy. He introduced himself as an Afghan—he had heard about us—and then he came in and we talked about our situation over a cup of tea. That's how he got the word out about me and my wife. It's kind of a cultural thing with Afghans and Iranians—when one knows, they kind of spread the word. Basically there was a small area where Afghan families initially settled; it became kind of a community, and when they got together for occasions, or hung out in the park, or ran into each other, they would always talk: “Ok, so what's happened? What's going on?” And then they would bring up, “Yeah, there's a new Afghan family. They're new and living in a difficult financial situation and everything.” These Afghani families started to help us out—they put money together, about \$100. Slowly we got to know more people, and they helped my wife to get a job in a tailor shop.

It was a bad environment where they would yell and curse at you if anything wasn't done right. She was working 12 hours a day from eight in the morning to eight at night for 80 lira per week, which is like 40 US dollars. She would get one hour of lunch, and she would have to work 11 hours. That one hour for lunch she would come home, it was 20 minutes to our home—she would come home and have to go back 20 minutes later, so she only had 20 minutes at home to eat. If I was feeling well, I would make food and she would come and eat, but then sometimes I was not feeling well and I couldn't make any food. I had rheumatism and couldn't sit or stand. So she would come and get so upset seeing me in the condition I was in, and she would be crying and would go back to work hungry.

She worked in that place for eight months, but then later on I got better, and we learned a little bit more of the language, so the two of us started working and she changed jobs. My salary was not enough for us, and she didn't want to stay home because if she stayed home by herself, she didn't know anyone and would start thinking about the past, and she would be crying, so she wanted to work as well. She's very smart; she learned how to sew, so it got a little better, but the long hours were hard. Sitting at the sewing machine for 11 hours is hard on your back, and your back gets stuck in that position.

These were really tough conditions, and she got pregnant after two years of being in Turkey, still working long hours. When my wife was pregnant, she started bleeding. I was at work, so she went to this public hospital. By the time I got to the hospital, my wife had taken some medicine. She didn't know what it was; they had given it to her in the office, so she took it and had severe pain. Whenever either of us had pain or were sad, we would try to console each other and hug each other and try to make the other forget the pain. She was in such a bad state an hour later, she had a piece of tissue come out, and I took it to the nurse and said, "What is this?" The nurse said, "This was your baby that was miscarried," and I was going crazy at that time. Without even asking my wife or me, they gave some medicine to my wife so she would have the miscarriage. Maybe they thought that there's no way of keeping this baby, but they didn't have the right to do this without our knowledge. I felt like that whole hospital was coming down on my head. If something like this had happened in America, the person who did that would have been responsible and would have to answer back, but back then we couldn't do anything and we just came home.

Fourth Are Men That Are Respected

When we were in Turkey and we got accepted by America, it was really a joyous moment for us. They give your case to two or three different countries that accept refugees, like America, Canada, Australia, Finland, and other European countries. The same types of thorough interviews that we had at the UN we had with the American government, so it took two years for us to relocate. When you're in that situation with all those problems, you just want your problems to be solved, and you want to leave that difficult situation, so it didn't make a difference to us if we were sent to America or a European country or wherever—you just want to be saved and be safe.

We first flew to Istanbul, stayed there one night, then got on the plane and came here. When we got to the airport in America, it was like 5:30 at night. They let my wife in,

but they kept me, and they were talking to me for about seven hours and I was really scared. I was tired and worried that maybe somebody's on the list with the CIA and has a similar name to me. My wife was also really scared and she was pregnant; she was crying, and it was a very bad time for us, but then when we came outside there were four Americans. There was my caseworker and someone that was with the caseworker, and then two ladies that helped us with getting us whatever we needed for the home. They welcomed us, and I was crying from happiness.

When they took us home, the home wasn't really appealing to us. It didn't have a carpet, and we never lived in a place where there was no carpet or rug on the floor.¹⁸ There was just like one couch and a bed, and that's all, and we were concerned: how are we going to sit on this floor—how are we going to live like this? Another thing that was surprising to us was the toilets. Back home they don't have any of these toilets, and then in Turkey there were very few. We never used any of these types of toilets, so when we went to the toilet, I looked at it and then I was looking for a second toilet, like the type that we're used to. The toilet in the Middle East is on the floor, and you squat down and do your business. I told my wife, “This is the toilet we have—we don't have the other kind. How are we going to use this!?”¹⁹ The next day I was telling my caseworker that I want a different home that has the other type of toilet, but the interpreter told us, “In America there are no such toilets like back home. They are all like this.” That was one thing that sticks in my mind.

Another thing that is really interesting to me and makes me happy is when you try to cross the street and the cars stop for you and let you cross. In my country they honk their horn, just pass by you, or try to kill you. Here they respect the pedestrians and wait for them to cross. I really like that.

¹⁸ Culturally, it is common to eat while sitting on the floor on a rug with a tablecloth on top.

¹⁹ Asaddullah was laughing hysterically at this point. The joy was contagious.

When I came here, I also saw that there's so much respect for little kids. I lived in Turkey five years, and there they don't have much value for kids between two and ten. I used to work in a tailor shop where kids would come and work after school for like two or three hours. These are tiny kids, and maybe they weren't able to do the job fast enough, or they don't have the strength to do the job, so they would get a slap in the back of the head so hard they would fall to the floor.

This is how it is in America: first are the kids, second are women, third are dogs, and fourth are men that are respected—in that order.²⁰ There's so much injustice done toward women and kids, and I'm so happy to see that people are valued here, and nobody can do things like this. In my country they don't value women or kids, like a while ago in my country, this woman was stoned to death. They dig a hole like a meter or two, and they put you in the ground half way and then hit you in the head with stones until you die. There was also this couple that wanted to get married so they ran away from home and got married. After five or six years, the families found them and brought them back to that village, and they stoned both of them to death—one on this side and the other one on that side.

Right now because of the media they talk about not committing violence against women and things like that, but I don't think anything is going to change. In my country, when I look at my mother, my sister, my neighbors, a woman is like a slave; if her husband comes home and the clothes are not ready, the food is not ready, there's not tea—they just beat up the woman because of that. A lot of women kill themselves or set themselves on fire because of all this. When I remember things like that, I even hate myself for being a man.

²⁰ Asaddullah was giggling.

Life Is Too Precious

I don't know if you were born here or you were raised here, or if you ever lived in another country, but when you move from one country to another country, first of all you miss your parents, you miss your family, but you also miss what was your country. And maybe for a few years and maybe forever you miss your country, and that second country that you've chosen will never be the same as your own country. You miss the water, the bread, the food. You miss all of these things. And also you feel comfortable in your country. Here we have safety and we've found so many good things; we have friends, we have good friends like Ashley, but you know this place never will be the same as our own home.

I don't think I can go back any time soon. I'm sure that if I go back in the next five years, our life is going to be in danger, so I'm thinking maybe if we talk to my wife's family and have them come to Iran or go to Kabul, we might be able to go and see them. But our old village—I don't think we can ever go back there. And every day we're both just praying we have the opportunity to go back and see our families. I have a question for you. If you don't have the opportunity to see your mom for a month or two months, will you miss your mom?²¹

In my family we love each other very much. My whole life is my family, and I'd rather something happen to me than happen to my family. From what I've seen in other cities and the US, you know I'm not generalizing, but a lot of families are not close. We were so close together and we loved each other so much, and we don't want anything bad to happen to the others.

Like my brother. He was my best friend and confidant. After I fled from Afghanistan and tried to get in contact with my family, a friend put me in touch. My brother could not bear my absence in Afghanistan, that I was gone. He left my hometown and moved because

²¹ After this, Asaddullah asked to be excused and left the room to compose himself. There were many points during these interviews when we paused so that Ashley could facilitate safe emotional processing.

he was living in a village without any phone lines. He wanted to call me so he moved. He was killed in a car accident. This memory, this sadness, is with me every time I think about him. When I found out, I tried to commit suicide because I didn't want to live without him.

I have attempted suicide a couple of times when I was living in Turkey. The first time my wife was not home. I was home alone. I don't know what prompted it. I did try to commit suicide, with all the pressure I was facing, by overdosing myself with poisoning drugs and locking myself in a room. Miraculously, when I woke up, I was in the hospital. How they got me out and who found me, who helped me, I don't know.

The second time, when I was in Turkey again, my wife always worried about my state of thoughts, so she kept monitoring me. Again, I don't know what prompted me; I locked myself in the bathroom and cut myself, hoping to bleed to death. After 10-15 minutes, my wife became suspicious. She called neighbors, and again I did not succeed.

The third time, although I never attempted, it occurred to me. The thoughts went through my mind. When I came to the US, I asked myself, why do I have to let myself suffer from multilayers of dilemma, social injustice, and whatnot, and a couple of times I came close to it. I broke my computer one time, broke my remote control, but my respectful therapist sitting here in this meeting—it was her that helped me cope with my trauma, and because of continuous support that I have received, I never actually executed. Somehow I thought it through before making a final decision.

I have come to a realization of a different chapter of my life. Whatever happened in the past, I was a victim of circumstances because life brought misery on me against my will, and plus I didn't know any better; the resources were not there. When you don't see a light at the end of the tunnel, oftentimes people who suffer from depression, all kinds of depression, find the easy way out, and of course I was vulnerable to falling in that hole. But ever since receiving help, some therapy sessions, and medical treatment, I want to see my daughter grow. I want to be part of her life. I don't want to end my life. Life is too precious.

Back in Chicago I always had a headache, and I was always sick or irritated and had to take prescriptions, but I'm not taking any more medications, and I feel very calm. Since I've been in the suburbs for a month, I haven't had a headache. It's less crowded; there's no traffic, and I was able to get a job that I wanted.

When I came to America, the kind of jobs that I knew weren't in demand. I'm a construction worker, and I work with setting ceramic tiles, but there weren't jobs like that. At first, I worked as a dishwasher at a restaurant. I used to work seven to eight hours, and by the end of the shift, my clothes and my shoes would be wet, but I did that job because I had to. Then I had a friend who works for a uniform company in Chicago. He said, "If you want I can talk to my manager and you can apply," so I applied,²² got accepted, and worked there for a year and a half.

I have this quality, I don't know if it's bad or good, but I think it's good because I risk anything—I try anything just to see how it goes. It can't work against you. I've tried a lot of different things; even me sitting here and getting to know you guys and doing all of this is a risk that I took. I have a lot of friends that don't take risks, and they just settle for what they have, and they're still living the same life. With my new job, I wasn't sure if I would get accepted or hired. The system is very different from the uniform job. But I said, "Let me try it."

Now I work for a big company, and the tailor has high standing, and you're kind of like your own boss. There's nobody that orders you around, and they really respect you. It's not like before when they'd always ask me, "Why did you do this or why did you do that?" so I'm more at peace, and I feel more in control.

²² While in Turkey Asaddullah worked in a tailor shop: "I started as like a helper to the tailors where I would like pick up the stuff from the ground or help them out a little bit here and there, and whenever I wasn't busy, I would just go and sit at the sewing machine and start practicing."

From the moment I have known myself, I have tried to better myself. My wife was never in a luxury or nice car, and recently I was able to buy a 2015 car and sit next to her and drive her around, and wherever we go there is music. And the house we have is much better. In Chicago, the houses are not standard; when you walk it squeaks and bothers people under you. In the old home we couldn't walk when my daughter was asleep because the squeaks would wake her up. In the suburbs it doesn't happen. It's an excellent home. I always had a dream of living in a tall building, and right now I live on the 11th floor. When I go outside I look down, I see everything beneath my feet and I really enjoy it.

I always wished to be able to go in the woods and live in a tent and camp, so when my daughter was six or seven months old, we went on a picnic and we stayed in the woods for two nights, and it was really nice. And I always wanted to go on vacation in my own car, and I was able to drive all the way to New York and visit our friends over there, and it's a beautiful thing.

We're not like husband and wife; we're like two friends. We respect each other, and we haven't had any problems so far, and I don't think we're going to have any in the future. Thank God,²³ we're doing very good. The things that happened in America, and all the surprises that we had—all of these things brought us to where we are right now, and little by little I'm forgetting all the hardships that we went through. I'm very thankful, and I'm really trying, and my wife has helped me all along and supported me, and I want to make the best for my daughter, for my wife, for myself. The past three to four months have been going really great, and I'm hoping it will continue. I want to know your opinion: do you think that we have started a beautiful life?

²³ When asked if Asaddullah has any religious beliefs, he said, "I believe in God and I don't raise my hand on anybody. I feel there is a higher power, and whenever I need it, I ask God for help...I believe in what I believe. I think it's an excellent way of looking at things."

AUTHOR NOTE

Here I want to articulate important aspects of this process and briefly address my feelings as a writer stepping into the sacred space of someone's therapy. Developing this story was a challenge. It required extensive back and forth with phone interpreters—clarifying and re-clarifying. I felt an almost journalistic responsibility to get to the facts: Where were you? When was this? Who was there? I tried as best I could to uncover details, all the while knowing how difficult it was for my interviewee to access, let alone think about, these traumatic memories. The saving grace was his original wish to share his story, and I kept that in mind as I pressed him for more information. However, should anyone attempt this type of project, I implore them to include a licensed mental health professional for the participants' safety. Suffering is at the root of most amazing stories; story-holders need to be protected.

RESOURCES

- To learn more about this project, visit arefugeestory.com. Direct media and film inquiries to info@arefugeestory.com.
- To donate to Heartland Alliance's refugee program, International FACES, explore heartlandalliance.org.
- To learn more about Ashley Fagnoli, check out ashleyfagnoli.com.