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The Weight of the Barbed Wire

Sim-e khardar, otherwise known as barbed wire in English, is the image that pops into my head whenever I think about Afghanistan. As five-year-old me boarded the plane that would flip my life from Central Asia to North America, I saw families across the barbed wire. Families would climb and claw at each other to catch a glimpse of the faces of their relatives, potentially for the last time. Among these families was my own. The image of my mother weeping while looking at her family for the last time has had a profound impact on my life. The emotional consequences of childhood immigration extend far beyond just physical relocation, as it influences personal identity, inspires vocation, and creates lasting memories.



Figure 1. Barbed wire outside of Kabul Airport

In 2015, I walked into Ms. Elkins' first-grade classroom in my new Gand-e-Afghani, a traditional Afghan dress; I couldn't help but be overwhelmed by all the new stares, and so I wailed. I saw faces that weren't my family's and heard a language that I wasn't familiar with. I did not know it then, but this was the point that marked the beginning of my life in America. A life in which I would slowly learn English, celebrate new holidays, and consistently try to fulfill

the American dream. Even with these changes, part of me still stayed in Afghanistan. I still spoke mostly Dari at home. I still waited for family calls that were always separated by thousands of miles and several different time zones. I learned how to live in two different places at once without ever physically returning to one of them. Immigration does not ever erase a person's first home; it simply teaches them how to carry it everywhere they go. Lisa Fortuna explains that "Newcomer children, immigrants and refugees to the United States, are at risk of psychological stress and consequently may develop symptoms of anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress" (Fortuna). Reading this article reminded me that my experience was never mine alone and that my experience is not unique. There are thousands of children who walk into classrooms every year in America feeling the same fear that I felt on my first day.



Figure 2. Me one year before I left

Some of the memories that stayed with me seem insignificant or common until I stop and think about why I still remember them. One day, my mother packed Bolani in my lunchbox before school, an Afghan dish she had made for our family many times before. Bolani is a fried traditional flatbread stuffed with seasoned potatoes or herbs. To me, there was nothing unusual about this dish. However, when I opened my lunchbox, another student laughed and asked what I was eating. A few others turned around to look, and I wished I had brought the same lunch as everyone else. I closed my lunchbox and told myself I would eat when I got home. My mom never knew what happened because I never told her. I did not want her to think there was

something wrong with the food she made or the culture she worked so hard to preserve. Looking back today, I was never embarrassed by the food itself. I was embarrassed that I stood out from the American-born classmates around me.



Figure 3. Bolani my mother made last week

Emotionally, the consequences of childhood immigration are different for everyone, but for those who come from third world countries, they may experience a psychological phenomenon called “survivors’ guilt.” According to Bistas and Grewal, “Survivor’s guilt is the response to an event that some people experience when they survive a traumatic event or situation that others did not.” For me, that “event” was leaving Afghanistan while many of my relatives were left behind. As I have grown older, I have constantly asked myself why I was the one allowed to have education, to pursue my dreams, and to live in a stable society, to ensure my

safety, things that almost all children in Afghanistan are denied. I honestly still do not know the answer, but that very question has shaped the way I see every opportunity I am given. Whenever I speak with my relatives in Afghanistan, I almost always hesitate to talk about my own life. I feel guilty mentioning final exams when their daughters have been prevented from going to school. When my family traveled to Europe, I chose not to tell them because I knew international travel was a privilege they could not ever imagine having. The freedom I experience often feels directly intertwined with the loss that others in my home country continue to endure. Many immigrant children carry this very same invisible burden, the burden of feeling grateful for the own lives they have built while also deeply mourning the opportunities their people have never received.

One of the hardest parts of immigrating as a child was learning what it truly meant to love people across the globe. When I first immigrated to America, I didn't think about the possibility that I may miss birthdays, weddings, and life events with my family. As far as I have counted, I have missed about one to two weddings every year that I am in the United States, meaning I have missed more than eleven weddings total. This also means that I have watched most of these weddings and events on a phone screen for the past eleven years that I have been in the United States. The hardest wedding for me to watch through the screen was my youngest uncle's wedding. This is because it reminded me that as every family member continues to grow in their own ways in Afghanistan, the only way I will see that growth is partially through a screen. Even though technology allowed us all to stay connected, it could never ever replace being together in person. I will never again be able to celebrate life's milestones alongside them, nor will I ever fully know the lives they are living. Every video call will end with another goodbye, reminding me that there will always be an ocean between us. My immigration journey

will continue with every single missed celebration, every family gathering that I am unable to attend, every virtual wedding, every family phone call I make, and every memory I have of my country.



Figure 4. Me at my Oldest Uncle's wedding

One of my most prominent memories of Afghanistan was directly before I left. I made a promise that I was too young to understand at the time. My grandfather had a heart condition, and before saying goodbye, I told him I would fix his heart when I grew up. I was five years old, and in my mind every problem had a solution if someone cared enough to find it. I did not know what a cardiologist was or how many years of school it would take to become a doctor. As I grew older, that childhood promise never disappeared, and instead, it became the reason I found myself drawn toward science, anatomy, and every opportunity to learn about the human body. My mother's own heart condition and my family history of heart conditions made those interests

feel even more personal. Researchers Amy VanMeter-Adams and her colleagues found that “the majority of students...reported extracurricular encounters, such as the influence of a relative or family member and childhood experiences, as the most significant factors that initially ignited their interest in STEM” (VanMeter-Adams et al. 687). When I read that study, I recognized myself in it. My interest in medicine began by saying goodbye to my loved ones, not from textbooks.

For many years, I truly did not fully understand why we left our life in Afghanistan when, by all outside appearances, we were doing so well. Whenever my parents reminisced about our life there, they spoke with a deep longing. We had three amazing houses, an extremely close-knit family, a good community, stable careers, and a life they had worked so incredibly hard to build. As a child, I struggled to understand why anyone would willingly leave behind everything they had spent years working on. It was only as I grew older that my parents began telling me the story that completely changed the way I understood my life. My mother worked alongside the United Nations, something that obviously required extraordinary courage in a country where many women were expected to remain silent at home. Because of this extraordinary courage, and because she worked with Western organizations and refused to abandon her profession, the Taliban viewed her as an enemy. What began as threats against her eventually became threats against our entire family, including me. My parents realized that staying in Afghanistan no longer meant risking just their lives, it meant risking the life of their five year old daughter. Faced with one of the most impossible choices a person can make, they chose to leave behind the country they loved and nearly everything they knew.

My childhood immigration has created an overwhelming amount of pressure to succeed. This is not from my parents pressuring me, but it is from me watching my parents leave

everything they have known behind for me. They left behind their family, language, identity, and nearly everything that makes up one's soul, for me. My mother gave up the most important thing that a human can have: her health. Being away from her family, she developed stress that ultimately made her heart condition worsen. Researchers Ning Xia and Huige Li explain that loneliness and prolonged social isolation are directly associated with “increased peripheral vascular resistance and elevated blood pressure,” demonstrating that separation from loved ones can affect not only emotional well-being but also physical health (Xia and Li). Although my mother is better now than before, I have always known that I cannot let her sacrifice go to waste. Every single one of my achievements feels like a step closer to making that sacrifice seem worth it. At times, however, that motivation starts to look like pressure. I often feel that anything other than perfection would not only disappoint myself but also the people who gave up so much for my future. While that expectation can sometimes feel very overwhelming, it has also become something that often drives me forward. It reminds me that the opportunities I have today were never guaranteed but built through my parents’ willingness to begin again in a country where everything was unfamiliar.

As I have grown older, I have realized that immigration has changed more than just my physical location. It changed the responsibilities I carried out and the way I viewed every opportunity placed in front of me. I became the person who translated conversations in the beginning and helped my parents understand systems that were unfamiliar to them. I watched my mother miss the family she left behind. I watched my parents work hard to build a new life while carrying memories of the one they had left. Andrew Fuligni explains that many children of immigrant parents grow up recognizing their parents’ sacrifices and use those sacrifices as motivation to succeed (Fuligni). I see that motivation every time I sit down to study or try to do

something for my future. Success for me has always been about honoring the people who stood on one side of the barbed wire while my family stood on the other.

When I think back to that airport in Kabul, I truly no longer see only a fence made of twisted, prickly metal. I see the weight that the barbed wires carry. The wires I once saw as a sign of my loss represent separation, sacrifice, uncertainty, and hope. Although it physically divided my family, it also connected my two identities that continue to shape who I am today. The child who looked across that barrier eleven years ago carried very little understanding of the situation, but she also carried memories, promises, and responsibilities that would stay with her forever. Immigration did not take Afghanistan away from me; instead, it taught me that home is not limited by geography. Home lives in the language I still speak with my family, in the promise I made to my grandfather, in every opportunity my parents sacrificed to give me, and in every step I take toward the future they dreamed I could have, and in every step I take towards becoming a doctor. The weight of the barbed wire is something I will always carry as a reminder of where I came from, why I keep moving forward, and who I hope to become as a person.

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