

Starting Over Again and Again: Holding onto the Light Across Many Stages by Mohammed Altinawi

I had a pretty normal life growing up—nothing extravagant, just a middle-class upbringing in Lebanon. My father provided for the whole family. I’m the youngest of four. My sister got married when I was just ten, so I barely remember living with her. My brothers were older too—they got married and moved on, so most of my life at home was just me and my parents.

I studied filmmaking and theatre at the Lebanese American University, graduating in 2010. I was twenty-one years old then, full of dreams and a passion for storytelling. But that period in Lebanon wasn’t easy—political unrest, tension, and instability. I wasn’t planning to leave forever at that point. I just wanted to continue my studies somewhere else, somewhere more stable.

Malaysia seemed like the easiest option—it didn’t require a visa, and classes were taught in English. So I packed my bags and left for Kuala Lumpur to begin my master’s in digital film. Once I arrived, I was captivated. The country was beautiful, peaceful, and full of opportunity. I even imagined my parents living there one day—and eventually, they did. I brought them to Malaysia, and they loved the way of life.

I studied film, but something shifted in me. Studying film in Asia felt completely different from how I had learned it in Lebanon. The cinematic language was different—camera angles, pacing, emotions, even the humor. I remember making a short film that impressed my friends back home, but my peers in Malaysia didn’t get it. Cultural disconnect. Even jokes didn’t land the same. That’s when I started to feel a little out of place in the field I once loved.

Eventually, I gave up on the master’s degree in film and earned a degree in psychology and life coaching instead. At the time, life coaching was a new trend—not the overused

buzzword it's become today. I also opened a Lebanese restaurant. Kuala Lumpur's diversity made it the perfect place for something like that. I worked hard, and the restaurant became a success. Life was good.

The first five years in Malaysia were golden. I traveled often—for visa runs—I had to leave for a couple of weeks each year to renew my visa. I loved the order and pace of life across Asia.

But then came the second chapter—harder, heavier. My mother's kidneys began to fail, and she started dialysis. We didn't have private insurance, so I had to cover thousands of dollars a month. My siblings helped, but the responsibility weighed on me.

Still, I stayed in Malaysia. I felt rooted there. The simplicity, the people, the calm—it felt like home. But there was always a contrast I couldn't ignore. Back in Lebanon, there was so much pressure to show off—to wear the right brands, drive the best car, go to the most expensive places. Image mattered more than peace of mind. In Asia, life felt simpler, more honest. People valued balance over appearance. That difference touched me deeply, and I think it's part of why I stayed so long.

But life became more serious as I approached my thirties. I began to think more about the future, about safety, and about my parents—especially my mother's health. She relied on dialysis to survive. I knew we couldn't go back to Lebanon; it was too unstable. One blocked road during a demonstration could mean life or death for her.

So where could we go?

Then, a chance encounter changed my life.

While doing a photography project in Kuala Lumpur, I met a Spanish photographer whose wife was a New York lawyer. She needed an Arabic interpreter. One day, during a casual conversation, she asked me, “Where do you see yourself?”

I said, almost without thinking, “Maybe the U.S.”

She didn’t brush it off. She helped me with the paperwork, coached me through the interviews, and stood by me through the entire process.

At the time, we were terrified. The media made it seem like Muslims weren’t safe in the U.S., especially during Trump’s presidency. I worried I might be attacked because my name is Mohammed. I worried my mother, who wears the hijab, would be harassed or assaulted. I did my research, and when I Googled Chicago, all I saw were beautiful images of downtown—the skyline, the river. That’s what I showed my parents: a dream.

Three years later, just before the world shut down for COVID, I arrived in Chicago with my parents—on one of the last planes allowed in before travel stopped. The first thing we did was go to the emergency room for my mother’s dialysis. A nurse said, “Don’t stand outside the hospital. It’s not safe.”

I wondered if I’d made a mistake.

I had done all the planning—searched for apartments online, saved photos of sleek high-rises in Rogers Park. I was expecting a condo like the one we had in Malaysia: twenty-fifth floor, lake view, pools, gyms. But what we walked into was a garden-level apartment infested with cockroaches. My mother was devastated. Within hours, she was begging to go back to Malaysia. She was convinced we had made a terrible mistake.

I had paid for the apartment online. At the time, we had no credit history in the U.S., and landlords were unwilling to rent to us without a large upfront payment. I ended up paying several

months in advance just to secure the place. That made it nearly impossible to leave right away, even though my mom begged me to. We spent the first few nights in a hotel while I tried to figure out what to do.

Eventually, I negotiated with the landlord to let us out early—he found a replacement tenant, and we lost the deposit. It wasn't perfect, but it allowed us to start over. Again.

We eventually moved to Skokie. It wasn't easy, but I was starting to earn some money again—doing lighting design at the Goodman Theatre, then working on projects with Links Hall at Northwestern.

COVID was a difficult time. Theaters closed. Work dried up. But then I found something unexpected: a crisis counseling job through an agency helping immigrants. It started as just a job—remote, flexible, helpful while I was taking care of my parents. But it quickly became more than that. I started connecting with the Arabic-speaking community in Chicago—people struggling with isolation, depression, food insecurity, and domestic violence. Many didn't know their rights or where to go for help. I became a bridge. They called me “Mohammed, the Lebanese guy who helps.” I saw myself in them, and I knew I could make a difference.

That short-term program ended after six months, but by then, people in the community kept calling me. I had become someone they trusted. I was later offered a position at Trellus in the workforce development program. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I took it. I became a career service navigator, helping people find jobs—and I realized: if you give someone a job, you give them their life back. It's not just income. It's pride. It's hope.

One of my first clients, Lina, got a job at Brooks Brothers. I remember going home that night feeling like I had truly achieved something. It wasn't just about her getting a paycheck. It was about seeing someone like me succeed.

Over time, I expanded beyond the Arabic-speaking community. I started working with clients from all backgrounds—American, Asian, Latino—learning how to say “hello” and “thank you” in their languages, building trust. I understood that my role wasn’t just about employment—it was about integration and empowerment.

Eventually, I was promoted to Manager, and then in July, to Associate Director of Workforce. I manage a diverse team now, including American staff. Coming from where I did—being a foreigner for over a decade—I never imagined I’d be leading programs like this in the U.S. But here I am.

Chicago is my home now. When people ask me where I’m from, I say, “Chicago.” If they push further, I say, “Originally Lebanon—but now, I’m from here.”

My mother is still with us. She’s 75. I’ve been trained to perform home dialysis, which makes a big difference for her. I also volunteer to teach others how to do this for their own loved ones. I bought a house for us in Glenview and my parents and I love it there. We made it through.

The theaters eventually reopened, and I still volunteer with different theatre groups on weekends, doing lighting design. That artistic part of me still burns brightly—but my daily work, helping others find their path—that’s what fulfills me now.

I’ve seen too many people from my community believe they’re only meant to drive Ubers, to stay invisible. I’m trying to change that. I share my story because I want them to know: you *can* succeed here. I’ve been where they are—and I’ve come out stronger.

All it takes is someone to believe in you—and the courage to believe in yourself.