

A Future My Parents Never Had: My Story of Courage and Ascent by Zulikha Akrami

Badakhshan is a remote province in northeastern Afghanistan, known for its resilience and quiet resistance. And that is where I was born in 1996. I am one of ten children from a traditional Afghan family. My parents, both illiterate and raised in poverty, never had the chance to attend school. Yet somehow, they believed in a future different from their own—a future they placed on my shoulders.

My father's life was shaped by hardship. As a young man, he served in the military during the Soviet-backed regime. Like many of his generation, he was drafted and sent into dangerous conflict zones. After completing his compulsory service, he returned home—but with few opportunities and many mouths to feed, he re-enlisted as a paid soldier. It was the best way he could support his family. As the eldest of seven siblings, the responsibility for his household fell squarely on him. While he was on duty, he stepped on a landmine. In that moment, everything changed. The explosion took one of his legs. Lying in pain, he faced a brutal truth: he could give in to despair and live as a victim of war, or he could rebuild the life he once dreamed of. Behind his quiet eyes lived a fierce determination—not just to survive, but to rise again, for himself, for his family, and for the life that still awaited him. He returned home on a prosthetic leg.

Years later, he entered into an arranged marriage with my mother. She was just sixteen or seventeen, and they did not meet before their wedding. He was likely ten to fifteen years older than her. On their wedding night, after the guests had gone and the house was quiet, my father removed his prosthetic leg before going to bed. My mother was stunned. No one had told her about his disability. She sat there in silence, the realization settling over her like a heavy weight. She cried—not out of cruelty, but from fear and uncertainty about their life ahead. My father,

already so used to pain and endurance, wiped her tears with steady hands. He looked into her eyes—not with shame, but with quiet strength—and whispered a promise that would define their life together: “I will never let you down.” And he never did.

The next morning, her mother came to her and said, “You are my daughter. I raised you. You will accept this man. He is your destiny.” And so, my mother stayed. Over time, she came to accept her fate with grace and strength. What began as shock and sorrow eventually transformed into mutual respect, resilience, and a quiet kind of love. Despite everything, and against all odds, they built a life together—not perfect, but full. A life shaped by sacrifice, strength, and a happiness they created with their own hands.

I was their firstborn child, and I was born during a time of deep uncertainty. The first Taliban had just seized control of Afghanistan. Although Badakhshan remained one of the few provinces that resisted their rule, the atmosphere was heavy with fear. Schools were shut down, especially for girls. There were whispers in every household, a curfew that crept into daily life, and a sense that the world outside our door had grown darker and smaller.

In 2001, when the Taliban regime fell and schools reopened, I was five years old. My mother was determined that I would go. But I didn’t want to. I remember clinging to her, crying and begging not to leave her side. I didn’t understand what school was—only that it meant being apart from the one person who made me feel safe. Still, she was firm. Every morning, she packed my bag, tied my scarf, and sent me off with an older girl from the neighborhood. My grandfather told her not to force me, but she didn’t waver. I didn’t understand it then, but now I know: she was planting the seeds of my freedom.

School quickly became my refuge. I loved learning. Even though my father couldn’t read or write, he sat with me every night, pretending to follow along as I read aloud. He would ask me

to point to specific letters or words, making it seem as though he understood. I knew he didn't—but I also knew he was trying to keep me accountable. He wanted me to believe that he was watching closely, so I wouldn't slack off. When I earned good grades, he rewarded me with small but meaningful gifts: an umbrella to shield me from the sun, a new backpack when mine wore thin, and later, a computer—something no one else in my class had. He gave it to me when I earned first position in my class.

My parents understood that I was intelligent, and they wanted me to have the opportunities they had been denied. They believed in encouraging me to be independent. Although I was a girl, they treated me with the same responsibility and expectations they might have given a firstborn son. I held a special place in their eyes—not just as a daughter, but as someone whose potential they fully believed in.

By the time I was a teenager, I was excelling in all my subjects. My parents saw my drive and did everything they could to support it. They enrolled me in private English and computer classes—an uncommon opportunity in our community. My father worked long hours, and my mother sold milk and eggs from our small farm to help pay for my lessons. We were not wealthy, but they always found a way to give me what I needed to keep going. Their sacrifices were quiet but profound, and I carried them with me into every classroom.

I have always had an unshakable pride in my parents. When I looked around at the lives of my classmates and their families, I knew deep in my soul how incredibly fortunate I was to be their daughter. They had no formal education, no degrees hanging on the wall, but what they gave me was far greater: courage, sacrifice, love without limits, and a belief in the power of hard work. They gave me *everything* that truly matters.

Even as I thrived—in school, in life—a quiet worry lived inside me, especially for my father. He was disabled. He couldn't read or write. Yet every morning, he woke up with purpose, with pride, and went to work—not just to earn a living, but to protect the dignity of our family.

Even now, as I look back, I don't feel the absence of anything in my father. I feel *abundance*—of strength, of love, of resilience. He gave me more than many fathers ever could. He taught me what it means to rise, again and again, with quiet dignity and unshakable strength.

When I graduated from high school and passed the competitive entrance exam for college, I was admitted to a public university in my home province to study English Literature. It was a proud moment—not just for me, but for my entire family. I was the first in our family to graduate from high school with high honors, breaking barriers that had stood for generations. I was one of the few girls in my community to pursue higher education, and I poured myself into it. I loved literature. I loved the structure of the English language and the way that words could open new worlds.

During my undergraduate years, I continued to be a top student. I balanced my studies with tutoring, and I helped other girls in my neighborhood prepare for their own exams. Our home became more than just a place to live—it became a classroom. Since then, there has always been a space in our house where children come to learn Math and English. Today, my sisters proudly continue that tradition.

My parents continued to support me however they could, even paying for supplemental English courses so I could improve my fluency. I earned my bachelor's degree in 2017 and graduated at the top of my class.

But I wanted more.

I dreamed of studying political science and pursuing a master's degree, which was only offered in Kabul. That was a radical idea for a girl in my family. In traditional Afghan households, major life decisions—especially for women—are made with the approval of the extended family. When my father brought the idea to my uncles and my grandfather, they strongly opposed it. “Why invest in a girl who will just get married—who belongs to others?” they asked. But my father stood up for me and said, “She is my daughter. It is my decision.”

Kabul was far away—not only in distance, but in culture, in challenge, in the unknown. We didn't have the money to afford the tuition, but my father did something unimaginable. He sold his car to pay for my first semester. That car was more than transportation—it was his livelihood, his independence. And he gave it up so I could go. That sacrifice became a fire inside me. I was determined to succeed.

Kabul was a shock to my system. It was the first time I had ever left my province, and everything felt unfamiliar. The city was crowded and fast-paced. I heard languages I didn't understand—Pashto mixed with Dari—and for the first time, I encountered visible divisions between Sunni and Shia communities. I felt like an outsider. I missed my family deeply. I cried almost every night when I first arrived.

With no one to talk to, I turned to my notebook. I began to pour my feelings onto the page. I wrote poems, stories, and small vignettes about my life. Writing became my way of surviving. It soothed me, gave structure to my pain, and little by little, I adapted. I began to feel less alone. And eventually, I found my way.

While I was studying for my master's degree in Kabul, I also worked to support myself. At first, I taught English to children at a local school. Later, I applied for a position with USAID and was hired as an outreach coordinator for the National Election Commission. In that role, I

helped oversee educational programs in all thirty-four provinces of Afghanistan, teaching citizens about voting rights and democratic participation. Balancing graduate studies with a national-level job was demanding, but I was deeply motivated. My salary helped cover my tuition and supported my family back home. For the first time, I felt I wasn't just learning—I was contributing to something important.

I completed my master's degree in International Relations in 2020 and returned to Badakhshan as one of the few women in the region with such qualifications. Opportunities followed quickly. During the COVID-19 crisis, I worked with NGOs to identify vulnerable families in remote districts, helping to distribute food and essential resources to those most in need. Later, I joined the U.S. Embassy-funded Lincoln Learning Centers project as Deputy Coordinator. Within a short time, I was promoted to Coordinator. I led computer classes, English courses, and organized cultural programs for young people across the region. For the first time, I felt I was not just succeeding—I was helping others rise with me. I was building something that mattered.

Then, in August 2021, everything changed. The Afghan government collapsed, and the Taliban returned to power. But it wasn't just a political collapse—it was the collapse of hope, of progress, of freedom. With their return came a wave of societal oppression. Women were banned from working, from attending school, from even walking the streets alone. Fear hung in the air like smoke. My world crumbled overnight.

I had worked with Americans. I spoke English. I wore clothing they would not approve of. I didn't wear a hijab the way they demanded. I had been part of a U.S.-funded education program. In their eyes, I was aligned with the enemy. I became a target. My father looked at me

with a mixture of fear and love and said, “If you can go, please go. We don’t want your life at risk.”

I was terrified and in complete shock. My entire country was collapsing, and no one knew what would happen next. I had to leave Badakhshan immediately. It had fallen before Kabul, and once it did, I realized I was no longer safe—not even in my own home.

To escape, I dressed in full traditional clothing, including a burqa that covered my entire face, hoping it would keep me from being recognized. My uncle agreed to accompany me, bringing his three-year-old son with him. We planned our story carefully. If the Taliban stopped us, we would say I was his wife, and the child was mine, that we were traveling to Kabul to seek medical treatment for the boy. As I sat on the bus, I trembled. Every time the vehicle stopped and the door opened, my heart pounded so loudly I thought others might hear it. I tried to stay still, tried to hide how much I was shaking. I kept my eyes low and my breath shallow, praying we would make it through without being questioned.

I arrived in Kabul and spent the next two months trying to secure my evacuation. I left everything behind: my family, my home, my career, my students, my friends—everything that had defined my life. Eventually, I was granted a visa to Pakistan. I never got the chance to hug my father or say goodbye before I left—a regret that still aches in my heart. But my mother and brother, driven by love and urgency, traveled 315 miles through the night just to see me one last time. They arrived only two hours before my flight—worn, breathless, and with tears in their eyes. In that fleeting moment, filled with tight embraces and unspoken words, I felt the weight of everything I was leaving behind—and the depth of what it meant to be loved.

I traveled to Islamabad and stayed in a hotel for more than a month, waiting and hoping. From there, I was flown to a U.S. military base in Doha, Qatar, where I spent two more months

undergoing background checks, medical exams, and interviews. I was one of nearly 8,000 refugees evacuated from Afghanistan. One face in a sea of stories marked by loss, resilience, and quiet courage. The stories from that base—the heartbreak, the small moments of kindness, the faces I’ll never forget—that’s a book for another time. But they live inside me, every day.

In February 2022, I arrived in the United States. I was sent to Houston, Texas. I didn’t know a single person there. I had no family, no friends, no job, no community. I was grieving the sudden loss of everything I had built, and I was terrified about what lay ahead. But I had survived too much to stop now. I’ve always believed in honoring those who help you survive because survival is never a journey we make alone. Once again, I had to start from zero. In a new land, with nothing but my will to rebuild, I found people who lifted me from my darkest moments. I made new friends who became my lifeline, and I found a community that welcomed me with open arms. Slowly, I began to piece together the life I had always dreamed of, not just a life of safety, but of purpose.

Still, I carry the ache of what I left behind. I knew I had no hope of returning. Even now, I cannot go back. The Taliban would execute me—not just for what I’ve done, but for what I represent.

Over time, I rebuilt my life. When I arrived in Houston, there was a housing crisis, and apartments were difficult to find. Refugees like me needed everything—shelter, food, guidance. Some were eating only once a day. I began advocating—not just for myself, but for the entire refugee community. I spoke up, demanded better, and helped connect people with housing, food, employment, and support. My advocacy was so effective that the resettlement organization hired me as a case manager.

In that role, I helped others like me navigate the overwhelming process of starting over. I listened to stories of loss, escape, and survival—so many of them echoing my own. Eventually, I was promoted to program coordinator. The work was demanding and deeply meaningful. I was still healing, still adjusting—but I was also beginning to hope again.

In the early days of building a new life in Houston, I also began supporting my family back home, helping my siblings to attend school online, and buying their school supplies. When things got tight, I skipped things for myself so I could give a little more. But it wasn't just about money. I became their emotional anchor—checking in regularly, listening, reminding them they were not forgotten. I had left Afghanistan, but I had not left my family. Every sacrifice is a choice—a joyful one—because nothing gave me more strength than knowing I can help them rise, just as my parents helped me.

The seeds my parents planted in me at an early age—linking education with freedom and independence—have grown into a fierce, unwavering tree. When I left everything behind and came to the United States, I carried those seeds like a treasure. I believed, and still believe, that every new layer of learning opens another door to dignity, safety, and possibility.

After leaving Afghanistan, I chased every path I could find. I applied to more than a hundred programs and schools. I studied requirements in a system that was new to me, stayed up late drafting essays, and leaned on generous American friends who shared resources and even wrote to schools on my behalf. When Northeastern Illinois University offered me admission, I knew I would have to leave Houston to start over in Illinois. Starting over has become a rhythm in my life: each move brings risk, grief, and renewal, all at once.

In 2024, I moved to Illinois after receiving a full scholarship to pursue a second master's degree in political science at Northeastern Illinois University. My dreams were finally beginning

to take shape—each step forward came with a new challenge, but this time, it was for something beautiful. School became more than just a classroom; it became a doorway to endless possibilities. It welcomed me with friendships I never imagined, kind and supportive instructors who believed in me, classmates from every corner of the world who shared their stories, and a campus that felt like home. Today, I live on campus. I am not only a full-time student, but I also work full-time as a Career Services Navigator at Trellus, where I have found more than just a job. I’ve found a space where I feel seen, safe, and supported. My life is full of responsibility—but also full of purpose and possibility.

My journey is not just about me. It’s about my father, who lost his leg but never his resolve. It’s about my mother, who wiped away her tears and found the courage to stay. It’s about every girl who has been told to sit down, be quiet, and wait for marriage. I am here because my parents looked at me—not with limitation, but with hope. Because they believed I could be more. And I carry their belief with me, every step I take.

Their sacrifices live in everything I do. And now, I rise not just for myself—but for them, and for every girl still waiting to be told she matters.

My story is not over. But every chapter so far is a testament to courage, faith, and the power of education to break the chains of fate.