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## The Muslim Refugee Family: On the Way to Citizenship

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## The Muslim Refugee Family: On the Way to Citizenship—Heidi Naylor

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In the spring of 2001, just before the world went post-9/11, my husband approached me about hosting an Afghan refugee family of four. I was hesitant. But my reservations—lice, tuberculosis, the loss of solitude—seem petty and insulting now. In the end, they were outweighed by his enthusiasm.

So our family arrived in Boise one evening just before Memorial Day, exhausted from long travel. We stood in the front yard nodding, smiling, shaking hands. Akbar wore a dark suit, Rahima a blouse and skirt and heels, the children ribbons and bow tie and shined shoes. We had pizza and soda and very few words.

Next day we bought a Russian-English dictionary. We couldn't find one in Dari, the family's native tongue, but they'd spent years in Moscow. So we found common words through a language belonging to none of us. Spasíba, pazhálasta, ímya, lagushka. The children laughed with our kids and our dog in the backyard. They needed no book, and before long were translating for their parents.

Over the weeks our English developed an accent, and we took to pantomime. One evening my son said he was going to take a shower. He mimicked the spray above his head and pretended a shampoo. I smiled. "Kid, I speak English!" Akbar watched with growing pleasure, finally erupting in laughter.

Rahima overcame her shyness and cooked succulent, beautiful meals with lamb and cummin, raisins, and cilantro. We searched for her

preferred rice and found a species of basmati I still buy for pennies per pound from WinCo. Its burlap bag features an inked-on label: "Once taste eat for ever." Rahima made me tea four times a day, despite my discomfort at her servitude. She asked if I'd like one shovel of sugar or two. We laughed over the confusion of kitchen and chicken. She taught me to cook the okra I'd never liked in a way that was savory and "deshi-lous." One day we discovered our youngest sons were born within ten days of one another, on opposite sides of the earth. "Sistera," she said, pointing shyly at me, and she has introduced me in that way to her friends ever since.

As the common words in the house increased, we began to linger over dinner. We sprinkled our tea with cardamom, bit into Rahima's crunchy lemon cookies, and listened as Akbar spoke of the Taliban and its terrible grip. "I want . . . carpet," he said, gesturing toward our Persian rug. "I want car, home for children. Television. Taliban no good," he said, "No what you want. . . ." He searched, settling on the Russian: "svabódný. No liberty." Everyone was silent. I poured more tea. He looked around the table at his children, his sweet, shy wife, our children. "Politic," he said, like you or I might say "robotic" or "granitic." He slapped his palm on his thigh. "I wery like."

Our Christian religion requires fasting one Sunday each month, so I fixed breakfast for our guests and explained why we couldn't join them to eat. Rahima asked, "One month?"

no doubt thinking of the Ramadan fast her religion requires. Well, no. But the practice, fasting in faith and devotion, was another thing we'd found in common.

After several weeks, their English improved to where they found jobs at a thrift shop and auto auction. They moved into an apartment just off Fairview Avenue, the next step on the way to citizenship. Akbar began to work towards an Idaho driver's license.

And then, 9/11. My husband was traveling, and I feared for his safety. I cried with the nation, watched in disbelief as footage revealed Muslims across the globe dancing in the streets. I phoned our friends and learned they'd also spent the day glued to the television. That evening the kids and I dropped by, and Rahima prepared a tray of tea and cookies. We chatted: work, new friends in the apartment complex, the start of school. The talk was quiet. Their graciousness and loveliness were immediate, familiar, genuine. Our kids ran and shouted together in the grassy square outside the window.

Our friends loved Boise. But they had relatives in Virginia; and before long, they moved there, hoping for better employment, as any American is likely to do. We've visited them across the country; their children have grown and are pursuing further education, poised to better themselves and, as they do, make further contributions, again like so many Americans. They speak of how beautiful Boise is, how they miss the climate, the foothills, the snow. Their friends.

Before they moved away, I drove Akbar to the INS office on Overland to take care of

some paperwork. Taped to the clerk's window was a notice: "Warning!! If you have more than 180 days of unlawful presence in the United States it is our strong recommendation that you do NOT leave the United States for any reason."

This was odd to me, but it was no more strange than the questions on Akbar's application seemed, since I'd come to know him, though I understood their necessity. Are you wanted for extradition for a crime you have or have not committed? Are you wanted for questioning or as a material witness? Are you or have you ever been engaged in espionage? Do you advocate the overthrow of the United States government by force or sedition? (One woman thought a moment and answered, "force.")

I did my best to explain each question. We smiled a bit, there was some patient, acquiescent laughter, and Akbar checked his answer in a box. In this way we tried to give the official behind the glass a clear picture of Akbar and his family. Some reliable notion of who they'd come to be.

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*Heidi Naylor's features and fiction have been published in many magazines, local and national. She currently has a fellowship from the Idaho Commission on the Arts. This essay tells the story of an Afghan refugee family making Boise their new home. "It was our pleasure and privilege to host them for several weeks and to sponsor them on their road to citizenship," Heidi says. A version of this essay appeared a few years ago in the American Public Media's online magazine, OnBeing.*