

Zabi and Me

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I could not have asked for a better childhood, but my childhood probably could have asked for a better me. Being a Foreign Service child had many perks. I grew up traveling the world, seeing beauty everywhere: the entrancing vastness of the Jordanian deserts, the tranquility of Turkish olive fields, the sheer magnitude of the Pyramids of Giza. Yet even with the abundance of once on a lifetime experiences overseas, I was so preoccupied with these visual experiences that I neglected to pay attention to the blemishes of the world. I only saw the outer beauty, the snapshot, but not the people behind it. I failed to recognize the imperfections and inequalities that burden so many people all around the world. It was apparent that I needed to change. Ironically, this life altering change that challenged the boundaries of my comfort zone took place in the most comforting place I knew: my house in Arlington, Virginia. All it took was one brave man and some open-mindedness to diminish my naïveté and lack of appreciation for the opportunities in my life.

The man who helped open my eyes to this reality was Zabi Nasiri, an Afghan citizen who worked for the United States Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan, alongside my diplomat father. Because Zabi helped the U.S. government, he received many death threats from the Taliban and survived a roadside bomb that spared him but no one else in his Humvee. He moved to America in 2013, in search of a better life, full of opportunity. My parents offered him our home until he could support himself. I wondered what adjustments I would need to make in sharing my space. I felt a mixture of curiosity and trepidation.

But then I actually met Zabi. In his early twenties, he was clean-shaven and well dressed, with a chestnut complexion, short, dark hair and a soft smile that radiated kindness. I tried hard to be welcoming yet even with my hospitality he must have felt out of place in this new country. Soon enough, I found out that he was very intelligent; he spoke surprisingly good English, and had big plans for himself. He demonstrated a strong work ethic and remarkable determination every day, from quitting smoking, to working out, to seeking a job; his resilience deeply impressed me. He cautioned me not to take my life for granted - a novel proposition to me - but rather to appreciate everything in my life that had always been supplied: food, safety, education. By contrast, he had never lived in a time of peace, yet somehow, his life's experiences, full of tragedy, were a source of motivation.

Zabi taught me to expect more of myself. Following his example, I began to take my studies and athletics more seriously, taking to heart his love of education and determination to succeed. We would sit facing each other at the dinner table, he searching for apartments online while I interviewed him for a journalism assignment. We learned from each other. I taught him how to use our modern appliances, while he taught me how to cook the traditional Afghan lamb and rice dish of *qabuli palau*. Four months went by so fast that by the time Zabi moved to his own apartment, he had become family.

When we meet up with Zabi these days for a traditional Afghan dinner, he always

surprises us with a new achievement. He is now working a full time office job, attending night classes, and inviting other Afghans refugees to stay with him in his one bedroom apartment until they get settled. Both he and I are planning to enroll in college this year. I look forward to the journey ahead, and I hope that I can emulate the strength, resilience, and work ethic that Zabi embodied, to make the most of my college career, and live by the examples he taught me.