An Angel in the Dark

August 11, 2021

When the sun went down, the gunfire started. People came out on the street, screaming “Allah Akbar” and shot into the purple sky with machine guns. As the screaming of Allah Akbar echoed through the streets, the crowd grew instantly to witness the scene.

Neighbors I’d never met were pouring out on the streets supporting the Taliban.I watched them through my apartment's windows, with the lights off. peering through a curtain half closed I couldn’t remove the curtain because I was in hiding. I had barely left that apartment in over a year.

Describe the feelings/emotions: *Oh no, they know I’m here and I’m going to be killed.* Showing the Taliban screaming that you will die. I kneeled on the floor, crying and praying to God. I said, “Oh Lord you see everything that's happening here, and I need help and protection, please make the impossible, possible for me.”

My mom put her arms around me and said, “I know it’s a very heavy and painful moment. We are on your side, and you are not alone.” But nothing could encourage me and there was nothing to hope for. It seemed that after all I had been through, I had no way to escape.

I felt numb, like my body was shutting down completely. I was trying not to cry in front of my mom. She was still weak from her ovarian surgery. She made me dinner, but I couldn’t eat. I wanted to talk to my sister, let my feelings out and fall apart, but the apartment was small, and mom was always around, offering me things.

For the next few hours, I sat in the dark, pressing ‘refresh’ on my phone app, waiting to hear from one of my military contacts. Every single minute my impatience was increasing.

I sent an email to myself to be positive it was working. I wrote:

**When darkness falls, pain is all. I will fight and I will stand until the end. I am a warrior. I am a survivor, and I am a fighter. I am strong and I will never give up until the end. However, with all the positivity that I have had in the darkest moments, it was still hard to escape from the darkness.**

I sent it, and it immediately came to my Inbox. I read it over and over, I was believing in my words and self.

August 12, 2021

In the morning, my phone buzzed against my face and woke me up. The text was from KYLE-DEPT OF STATE. He wanted to know if I was okay. My fingers were shaking. I was hungry but couldn’t eat. I hadn’t heard from Kyle in days. I told him I was safe inside, but the scene last night continued on getting louder outside.

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

You have your passport and visa, right?

ME

No. They kept it at the US embassy. I can pick it up when I need it.

I’d gone to the Embassy for a physical exam in May. The tall buildings stood out to me; it signified freedom and a peaceful life. The test came back negative for COVID. The doctor offered to marry me if I wanted to stay in Afghanistan. This was not the first time I was ever asked to marry; these approaches by Afghans did not make me feel as peaceful or confident. Afghan women are dressed and covered from head to toe, only our eyes can be displayed. Because this doctor could view my entire body openly; he still could not see the real me. I couldn’t feel any sort of love or sense of building a relationship because these emotions were stripped from me. My focus was only looking for freedom and for a peaceful life

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

YOU HAVE TO BE AT THE AIRPORT AUG 15 AT 7AM

…then…

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

OR YR NOT LEAVING

My sister Jamila came with me to the US Embassy. We covered up, head to toe, to make us look like good Muslim women.

The gunfire had calmed down in the light of day. The people in the street were blank-faced and pale, no longer screaming about God. Every night was when mayhem would arise once more; nonetheless, I was on high alert all day and night.

As our taxi pulled into the city, the crowds grew thicker. People were out in the street, looking anxious, ready for something, but not sure what. Not sure who their enemies were. Not sure which slogan to yell.

We separated at the embassy gate. My sister wasn’t allowed inside. **“**Good luck,” she says to me and I give her a reassuring look. “Thanks, wait for me here,” I motioned her to the waiting area in front of the embassy gate. The farther I walked, I turned to get another glimpse of my sister and her eyes did not leave me.

Inside, I found my way to the back of a long line of people, people looking exhausted and sick and scared, sweating under their traditional clothes. I saw down one hall that an entire wing of the embassy was totally abandoned—not a chair or a person or a desk. I wondered if they’d be gone by the end of the day. Like any merchant relocating to a new storefront.

I was told by a very polite woman that my visa and passport weren’t immediately available, and that I’d have to come back. I think I smiled back at her.

She also told me that I’d need to get a COVID vaccination. I told her I already had been vaccinated, but she said I needed to get another one.  *I could do that at the clinic. Tomorrow.*

My phone was filled with messages from old friends and people I’d worked with in the US military. They wanted to know if I was safe. I treasured every one of them, even though I didn’t know how to answer yet. As I watched the city go by through the taxi window, I thought of how much of my life and history was on that device, all those conversations, all those numbers of people I’d probably never see again. And at every stop sign, I planned new ways to destroy that phone if we got pulled over. Memories could only be kept in my head; where it couldn’t be seen by the Taliban.

I looked at the people on the street with their sad and confused faces. They didn’t know how to feel--except everything, all the emotions all at the same time, until you couldn’t feel anything. I was losing my beloved country and I was losing the only life that I ever knew.

Kyle texted me later.

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

Waiting on an official evacuation order for you…then you can pick up your passport and visa. So…get your vaccination and get everything else set. Pack everything. Be ready to go. The evacuation order could come any minute. I told them all about you. I told them you’ve been a translator for the US Army since you were 15, and that you’ve been nearly killed and now you’re in hiding. I told them you’ll die if you don’t get out.

ME

The Taliban told my brother what they’ll do to me. How they’ll kill me. What they’ll do to my private parts.

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

You can’t let it come to that. If we can’t get you out, you need to think about what you’ll do so that it doesn’t come to that.

I had thought about this. I thought about it every time I hung laundry to dry on the roof of our apartment building. The building was seven stories high, above hard pavement on every side.

At home, everybody was asleep, so I opened the window of my room, and the moon was very bright. There was no gunfire tonight. The moon was getting bigger, brighter, and closer to me. I stood by the window and thought I wish I had freedom to go outside, and I wouldn’t be stuck in this apartment like a prisoner. I wish I could just fly away.

Quietly, I opened the door of the apartment, careful not to wake anyone. I crept down the hall to the door to the stairs and then up three stories to the roof.

I sat on the hot tar paper and kept checking my phone. And I cried. The giant moon looked beautiful and cold above me. I could feel waves of heat rising from the pavement below.

August 13, 2021

I stayed up all night, waiting for the evacuation order. At sunrise, I went down to the apartment and waited for my family to wake up. My mother made me an afghan egg fixed with tomato, green paper, garlic and spices. She knows how I love the spices, hands me the plate and says, “You look tired.”

I needed to leave again, to go to the clinic to get my vaccination.

Kyle texted me to ask if my evacuation order had come yet. I felt like when it came, I’d explode and the particles of my body would float away, and everyone everywhere would know I got away because they’d see my smile carved into the moon.

The streets were crowded again. Faces were more anxious, sadder.

The clinic was like a funeral, packed with people crying one minute, shouting the next. Whole families were crowding in, young fathers and mothers carrying children, all of them like me, hoping to get out soon on a special immigrant visa. I wondered if we’d see each other in a couple days, on the airplane, laughing about how we were safe. I wondered how we’d act if there weren’t enough seats or weren’t enough planes.

It was in the clinic that I first heard that the city was surrounded. Even then, I thought this couldn’t be. The Taliban were surging, but they couldn’t have made that much progress so quickly, it was impossible. The Afghan army was ready to fight them. They were equipped with US weapons. I knew because I had been a translator in many meetings between US and Afghan forces. They weren’t the Marines, but they would fight. They wouldn’t just give up. It was impossible.

On the way home, the rumors about the city being surrounded seemed to have spread to the streets. People were screaming at each other, threatening each other. Eyes peaked out from window blinds. I thought about what they’d do to me. It didn’t take much imagination. I’d been held captive by a group of Taliban thugs when I was 15. They tortured me and raped me for three days. And they wanted me to marry their leader. That’s how they treated a woman they wanted to live with. How would they treat me if they were planning on killing me when they finished? They’d tear me to pieces. I’d see pieces of myself ripped away while they laughed at me.

I checked my phone. Nothing. I tried to imagine what it would feel like when the evacuation order came. I closed my eyes and thought of the moon wearing my smile.

August 14, 2021

Kyle texted me again that night, but I didn’t respond. My anxiety was a physical object now, hung on me like sopping wet burqa. Nothing felt like anything. I was terrified, but didn’t feel afraid, I was exhausted but wide awake, I was starving to death but didn’t feel hungry. I just wanted to disappear, but the weight of my stress held me together.

“Nothing,” I texted Kyle.

As the sky grew lighter, I knew this was it. This was the day. The message had to come, or it would be too late. I pictured myself 24 hours from then, on the roof, listening to the fighting and explosions coming street by street, watching the last planes taking off from the airport, and then my phone buzzing, telling me to come to the Embassy to pick up my passport.

That would be funny. After all my adventures, all the sacrifices my family had made to take me into hiding to escape the Taliban, all the frenzied phone calls made by Kyle and others to agency heads and US senators, it would be funny for it to end like that. For my salvation to arrive when it was too late. My evacuation notice buzzing gently in my pocket as I fell from the roof.

But that’s not how it happened. At 4AM, an email notice popped up on my phone. It was from the State Department. I’d wondered how this moment would feel, and now I knew. I felt like the room wasn’t big enough to contain me.

I didn’t even read the email, just the subject line. I couldn’t stop my happy tears and I ran into the next room to wake up my mom and siblings.

I shouted, “Wake up I got the relocation email!” My mom and sisters woke up. My sister asked, “What does it say?”

I said, “I don’t know, I didn't read the whole email because my brain is not working

now.”

The email said I was approved to relocate to the United States on the 15 of August. It told me to go to the U.S. embassy at 1pm today to pick up your visa packet and passport.

We left at noon. Traffic was gridlocked. It was hard to just sit in the taxi. I was tempted to get out and walk the last few blocks, but my sister just laughed at me when I said that. That would be very dangerous. Chaos was taking over the city. Sirens were blaring far away, and columns of smoke were rising over the buildings on the edge of the city.

When we finally arrived at the Embassy, there was a long line, and more waiting. It was hot inside my burqa, but I was glad I was wearing it, because I couldn’t stop crying.

Finally, they called my name. The counselor in the embassy gave me my passport, and then a yellow sealed packet. He said I was not allowed to open this packet and when you arrive at Dulles airport in Washington D.C the police will come and get this packet from you.

I sat down in the corner then I opened my passport and I saw the U.S visa in my passport. I couldn’t stop my happy tears. I checked my first name and last name, and it was all correct. I put my passport in my purse separated from the yellow packet. I checked the seals on the yellow packet carefully. I didn’t want to be blamed for any damage.

In the taxi drive home, my joy subsided. I started to get scared by my sister and myself. I suddenly couldn’t stop thinking what the taxi driver would do if he knew about me, about my job and my plans. My sister saw I was uncomfortable and made a funny face to make me laugh. I forced a smile and crossed my eyes. She giggled.

He’d kill us, I thought to myself.

August 15, 2021.

My boarding pass arrived via email the next morning. My flight left from Hamid Karzai International Airport at 4:15pm.

I texted Kyle with the info, still smiling. He responded that I needed to get the airport as soon as possible. He said the Taliban were entering Kabul. The security forces had fallen apart, and the city would be in Taliban control before the day was over.

I got dressed. I’d been packing for days, and my whole life was in three small suitcases. I climbed into a cab and sat between my mother and sister. As we drove through the neighborhood, I said goodbye to it all. I hoped I’d never see it again.

The taxi driver told us that it would take longer than usual to get to the airport. He said there were new checkpoints. These couldn’t be US or Afghan Security checkpoints. My mother told him that we didn’t want to go through any checkpoints, that we should avoid them if we can. He told her he couldn’t avoid all of them, there was one right by the airport. The streets were packed with cars, all headed to the airport, but many turned askew in the road, to try to turn around, find another route. In traffic like this, horns would usually be blaring, but the whole scene was quiet. All those people, all that panic, and hardly anyone made any noise.

I tucked all my documents under my burqa. I knew I had to protect the yellow packet most of all. It would only take one curious idiot ripping it open and my life would be over.

For hours, the cabbie wound us around through different traffic jams, and block by block, we avoided checkpoints and inched toward the airport.

Just outside the airport, there was a line of cars being stopped between big military vehicles. People were getting out of the cars and being questioned by men with machine guns.

We’d barely spoken a word to the taxi driver the whole time. There was nothing to say. He pulled up to the man with the gun and told them we were going to the airport. I was terrified that we would be taken out of the car, that my phone and paperwork would spill out and we’d be exposed. But we were dressed like good Pashtun women. The Taliban didn’t even look at us. They waved the taxi through.

Once we were at the airport, I cried with my family. We knew we might never see each other again. I realized I’d left a bag at home, one with many of my clothes. I’d spent days deciding what to put into that bag and what to leave out, folding and refolding clothes to fit, and just like that, it was gone from me forever. My mom and sister hugged me, we practically carried each other through the terminal.

They sat with me as long as they could. We talked about my father. We talked about my younger sister, and what would become of her education now. We tried to keep the conversation light and happy, but every good memory led back to the hopeless now. Beneath my despair, I felt blown up like a balloon, joyous that I was escaping. But escaping meant leaving them here.

There was a call to begin boarding my flight. We hugged and cried. I saw us from outside my body, like I was looking at a snapshot. That image was all I’d have left of them.

I sat alone, waiting to board. The terminal was packed with bleary-eyed employees, worried passengers, and small herds of children running around or clinging to their parents. I saw a women lean over to kiss her little girl. She pulled off her head scarf. Once the kiss was over, and the little girl was soothed, the mother stood up, smiling. She didn’t put her hijab back on.

I noticed then how many foreigners there were around me, how many women not dressed appropriately. My flight left in half an hour. I reached up and pulled my burqa off. I shared a smile with several women around me. A few minutes later, I got up and walked over to a trash can and stuffed it inside.

The moment I sat down, the digital display near the counter listed my flight as “DELAYED.” I went back to the trash can and dug out my burqa, brushed off some wet spots.

At 5pm, I heard an explosion in the distance, and smoke rose from the far end of the runway. Then bursts of automatic gunfire. No one said anything. No one knew what to do. Airport employees began to pull steel barriers across the shops in the terminal, and then pulled out a barrier blocking us off from the rest of the airport. Like it was closing time. A calm, friendly voice on the loudspeaker said that this part of the airport would remain operational, and all their flights would board as soon as possible.

A siren wailed in the distance. Outside, gray military vehicles drove onto the tarmac.

Kyle texted and asked what was happening. I didn’t know what to say. Then I saw an American flag on one of the vehicles.

ME

The Taliban is in the airport. But I think the US has secured this side.

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

They’ll protect the commercial flights.

There was an explosion, the closest yet. I recognized this as RPG fire.

I texted him a smiley face, then I put my dirty burqa back on and moved as close to the entrance to the plane as possible.

The flight was delayed again, but at 6pm, we boarded. I was the first on board. My insides were churning, but none of the other passengers looked panicked. I took some comfort in this. The flight attendant asked me if I wanted to eat anything, she seemed concerned about how stressed I looked. I told her I was fine.

The flight boarded but wasn’t taking off. The sirens and gunfire were getting closer.

I texted Kyle and I told him I was afraid they were going to get here before the flight took off.

KYLE-DEPT OF STATE

Then don’t worry. The flight will take off.

Smiley face.

A different flight attendant asked me if I was okay. I wanted to shout at her “No, and you shouldn’t be, either!” They made us put our phones away because the plane was going to take off. It taxied for awhile and then stopped. We just sat there.

A toddler made some nonsense noises that only a parent could understand, and his dad laughed. Who were these people? This is just another day to them.

And then the plane took off. I wanted to get up and grab that kid and make nonsense noises with him. I was laughing and crying at the same time. We were in the air. **The moon was coming up ahead of us,** and everything I’d ever seen, every person I’d ever known, was racing away behind us.