

# BIG PLACE NO PLAN



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*Building a Nation takes more than just a typical open border and a “Come on in.”  
It takes four pillars of some very valued infrastructure – housing, transportation,  
health care & education.  
Otherwise it’s just a damn sinking ship!*

## *Chapter 1*

*Boom.*

Today is a day that I just could not allow anything but the biggest of grins.

*Boom.*

I really need this day.

*Boom.*

But unfortunately... those hills surrounding this once peaceful city just keep on exploding.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Fanatics and their egos just keep practising their explosive capabilities.

*Boom.*

Or more like their killing capabilities.

*Boom.*

Or more accurately their terrorizing of the population abilities.

*Boom. Boom.*

Fools every one of them.

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Fellow fools of the same Passport.

*Boom.*

This long drawn-out Civil War has brought out the worst in so many of my country's former neighbors - Albanians have lived peacefully for centuries... Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, even a sprinkling of Jews.

*Grabbing the arm of my beautiful wife.*

Everything changed when that Communist fog lifted so quickly... like ripping off a bandage in just one shot.

"Valerie darling, what can I get you?"

When we became free to our own devices... or more like vices.

"A banana split with chocolate sauce."

"One banana split coming up... take a seat in the patio over there and I'll bring it out to you."

Some greedy bastard with a bespoke suit and shiny veneers – every word that came out sounded like it was exiting the mouth of a Prophet... a Prophet attached to a giant speaker... a teacherly speaker blaring in every corner of the auditorium. A man with all the answers. We all thought we could get rich off the backs of this new exciting system, a system of investing and then getting a stipend from it each and every month.

"Isn't this fun?"

It was more like a game – looking back.

The Vig. The Extra. The Easy Money that makes everyone want more.

Greedy Albanians wanted more... lots more.

"I really needed this... ahhh... especially since that war will just not go away."

*Boom. Boom.*

Ponzi schemes aren't feared here because nobody knew such sophistication existed before, that such a nuanced game that makes you have tunnel-vision for only me me me!

"My beautiful Valerie."

Now these Prophets sport ebony hair and drive around in shiny black limousines.

"Yes my husband... it feels so good to be out here with you, that sun feels so good."

Their Jets at the airport form their own impressive parking lot.

“This is delicious.”

Seems like there was now dozens of these Government Prophets running these *lotteries*.

“You sure it’s ok to be out this long?”

They talked like CEOs.

“I want to treat my wife to a simple ice cream and then a walk in Pasha Park.”

Like Fortune 500 CEOs.

“You sure we shouldn’t just keep moving?”

We just thought they dressed smart - so they were smart.

“Nonsense... finish your banana split.”

That’s what fifty years of Communist Censorship will get you.

Sun shining and a breeze that has both of us only needing thin long sleeve shirts... the feeling is pleasant... extremely pleasant; even the bombs seem to be taking a rest.

“I’m in love with this chocolate sauce.”

“You really like that banana split.”

It has been almost forty-five minutes of bliss.

“Nice not to have the ground shaking.”

“War means taking nothing for granted.”

“Amen to that.”

“And I am loving this day.”

“Come my dear, let’s head towards the Park.”

Marko Street has always been the nicest street in the city... great cafes with their patios and umbrellas aimed just right to cushion the sun’s rays. Wood-oven Pizza Parlors... Hamburger Joints and All-Day Breakfast Diners... walk this long street and you’d think we’re all so capitalistic... so hip.

“I have a double shift tonight, can you pick up Marina from your Dad’s after dinner?”

“Of course.”

“How’s that meningitis girl?”

“Not good, but I’ve been able to stabilize her. The antibiotics are working well... just not sure of any lasting damage.”

The street is full of couples holding hands; sunshine & peace is intoxicating.

“Another spinal tap?”

“Too soon.”

Unfortunately the peace has never gone away completely.

“You need my help?”

“Roan??”, with a stare.

“I’m just asking.”

“Your wife can handle it.”

“I know she can”, plus a mea culpa kiss.

*Ring Ring.*

“Hi Pops.”

“Roey where are you?”

“I’m walking Marko street with Valerie... we’re heading to Pasha Park.”

“I just heard on the radio there is some suspicious activity in the hills, you need to get out of there. Please Roey take Valerie and go home right away!”

“Papa please calm down, it’s so beautiful here... it’s been quiet for hours.”

“Please Roey, I’m begging you... go home!”

“Ok Papa”, nodding at Valerie, “we’re heading to the car now.”

“Oh good... just go home right away, please.”

“We will. Where is Marina?”

“She’s in the other room drawing... I have her easel all set up and she’s working on a new original. You two will be very impressed.”

“That is so great.”

“Creativity feeds the soul, you know that.”

“Oh I do... you used to say that to me every day.”

“And I will keep saying it to you - otherwise what are we? Those Beasts in the hills?”

Doda Prifti has every reason to worry... surviving one of the darkest periods of Baltic history. When the Communist veil ripped itself off without warning, and then everyone ran to their tribal corners. Neighbors who shared meals together on a weekly basis, Fridays for Muslims and Sundays for Catholics, suddenly became distrustful, to say the least. Certain streets became shooting ranges, with Snipers picking off innocent People just walking to the grocery store. The world became horrified... had the Communists actually been *good* for these aggressive clans?!

“How much time do we have?”

“I have to be at the hospital at 5.”

“Let’s take the river path then.”

“I have been dreaming about this Park for so long.”

“Cherry blossoms are starting to sprout.”

“Oh woowow... look at all the little buds. We need to come back and have a picnic right under this tree. I love this tree. Look at how full it is.”

“God loves this tree.”

*Boom. Boom.*

“Guess my Pops was right.”

Valerie’s face instantly changes.

“We should probably be heading back to the car”, reaching for his wife’s hand, “let’s go now.”

The explosions did not seem any different than what Roan Prifti had experienced hundreds of times before.

“Stop pulling so hard Roey, you’re hurting me.”

It’s just that the sound of his father’s voice has gotten inside his head.

“Sorry my darling... but we need to keep moving.”

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Back on Marko Street... walking fast while passing scared faces, both a herd of couples and families trying to stay together. Albanians know far too well what can happen when the animals are let out of their cages.

“Come on keep up”, Roan yells. Every step has his heart beating out of his chest.

*Boom. Boom.*

The store across the street explodes... glass flies in the air. Roan pulls harder on his wife's hand.

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Another explosion erupts from behind... Roan and Valerie just keep running forward, what's behind means nothing. Panic is in control... even for stoic Surgeons who face life or death in the operating room.

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Roan has his sights on their car... a white Toyota that looks like safety... at least when he gets it started and they can get the hell out of here.

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

It's parked at the end of the street. A place he thought was the perfect spot... easy in and easy out.

*Boom. Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Most of Albania's Civil War took place in the streets... in crowded neighborhoods where small men could feel like big players.

*Boom. Boom.*

Fools all of them.

*Boom. Boom.*

*"OH MY GOD NO!!!"*

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Coincidence is just a word.

Irony is just a word.

Serendipity is just a word.

Life is more than a word and it stabs like a dagger, not only to the heart, but to everywhere else.

Challenging you to go on, to learn from the stab and just go on.

It hurts everyday.

It's so hard.

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"Any word back from the Consulate?"

*Washing dinner dishes in the sink... and then drying them.*

"No not a word."

"Here let me help you with that. When did you file your paperwork?"

"Last June."

"Geez louise that's over a year ago."

"I know Pops... I know exactly how long ago it was."

"I don't understand why a country like Canada would not want a Pediatric surgeon in their

hospital?”

“Marina... Marina. Can't answer that Pops. Marina honey I need you to go work on your piano concert for next month.”

“Ok Papa. Love you Baba”, kisses for both.

Looking more like Valerie everyday... Marina owns her mannerisms, her way of walking and talking that reminds both her Pops and her Baba of what an Angel they lost on that horrible day.

“You sure you want to leave?”

“I can't live here any more Pops, I just can't.”

Doda Prifti and Roan Prifti share the same painful life.

“It gets easier son”, putting his hand on his shoulder, “I know it doesn't feel like it ever will, but trust me it will get far less painful.”

Reaching up to put a dish in the cupboard... Roan then stops after his task is complete, like he must, like he needs to gaze out the big kitchen window that faces into a backyard with lush gardens and big trees.

Pops makes sure the weeds are pulled and the lawn is mowed.

“I don't know if I can ever be the same here.”

More than twenty years ago Pops experienced the exact same trauma.

“This is your home Roey... your blood.”

“I don't see it that way anymore”, fixated out that window, “I don't know if I can forgive this place. I don't know how you did it... I really don't.”

“You're a man of medicine, of healing, this place needs you.”

A tear rolls down his son's face. “I just don't know anymore... I just don't know where I'm supposed to be.” “Oh son”, moving in for a supportive hug, “it's ok to feel that way, it's ok”, holding him tight.

Doda Prifti has been to hell and back.

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A bizarre place Albania of 1997 sure was... a bizarre and violent place; but all of the Baltics were. The scenes on the television brought the world back to the horrors of the second world war - the United Nations Peacekeeping Forces were called up in a hurry to get in-between these warring factions that wanted to exterminate the other. Hatreds never leave apparently... they just get buried... so they can build and build.

Fools all of them.

Mixed neighborhoods quickly liquidated... one clan only was the new message! Bridges were destroyed in order to maintain such strict bloodlines.

All of this was made worse by the ruling class who seized all the leadership roles in this new naive country.

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“I want to set the leg here, right at this point. It’s the thickest part of the bone.”

“I see.”

“If we shave it down, smooth it out with that new piece of equipment we just got in...”

“Aren’t you scared of cracks?”

“Sure I am... but that’s why we need to go slow, very slow. This could take a few hours.”

Four sets of eyes are glued to his every word.

“This is going to be like carpentry work.”

Techniques like this are new; Roan is a leader in taking them on.

“I am going to keep the setting on low, I’ve had an electrician friend build a governor on the speed. It won’t go any higher than this setting here.”

Innovation is how Roan was raised.

“We are trying to save the leg, trying to maintain all of its’ functions.”

His father made sure of that.

“The blood vessels here... and here... they must be protected at all costs.”

*“Think creatively Roey... you must think outside the box always!”*

“I am going to clip the main artery here, but only eighty percent, I need to keep a minimal amount of blood flow while I work. If we don’t do this then the leg will weaken fast.”

“But Doctor how do you know what is eighty percent?”

Roan Prifti is a Man of Medicine like no other.

“You see this clamp here, I designed it with my father. It’s got a reading on the side showing you how far the closure will go.”

Four Doctors gasp... Dr. Doda Prifti is a Hero in this country – no matter what tribe you’re from.

“And it won’t weaken the artery walls?”

“Good question... my father shaved down this steel here, and welded some volcanic ash to the edges. It creates a buffer, a smooth surface that won’t wear down with the vibration.”

As head of Pediatric Surgery for the largest hospital in Albania... Roan Prifti garners respect.

“But don’t rely on this solely... this type of surgery must have a feel, a feel for what the bone can take.”

But he knows deep down that Dr. Valerie Prifti could have done this type of work even better than he can.

“We need to keep one eye on the carpentry”, pointing to the sander, “and one eye on the electricity”, shifting to the artery’s blood flow. Roan has a good sense of humour... it hides the pain. “A lot to deal with Doctor”, one of the four Doctors responds. Roan has assembled the best team in the city... experienced and pragmatic for sure. But some of these surgeries are so new that they require out-of-the-box thinking.

“What do you need from us Doctor?”



*Roan stops for a second, he hears his wife's voice, "I'm scared Roan", staring back as he holds her up from the ground. "It's going to be ok my beauty... just stay with me, stay with me Valerie!"*

"Doctor??"

"Oh yes... right... I need you Doctor Banaj to work on setting a ramp so the leg can rest at thirty degrees. We might need to shift that a few degrees up or down. After five minutes or so we'll stop the procedure and measure all the levels for accuracy."

"Got it Doctor."

"And you Doctor Malok, I want you to measure the blood flow in the leg... make sure our clamps are always at the right settings. You understand?"

"I do", with wide eyes.

"Good because that is vital, you need to keep me aware of that at all times."

"Yes Sir."

"Good... and Roan is fine", shifting to all the Doctors.

*Valerie Prifti could have managed this procedure with her favourite heels and a set of hazel eyes that could attract anybody - male or female – while walking the streets of Milan afterwards.*

"Doctor Hussein, you monitor the breathing with higher than usual oxygen levels. She's young, our patient is only four, so I want the body full of all that good stuff."

"Yes Roan", a friendly half-smile in return.

*Roan knows how lucky he was to have Valerie as his wife... as his Muse, as his Confidant, as his Mentor... as his Partner for life.*

"Doctor Sabonis I want you with me... I want you by my side for another set of eyes and hands. Be ready to tell me everything you see. I'll be focused on the break, on sanding that break. I will be asking you a lot of questions."

"I understand Roan."

Today's Dr. Prifti has had to learn how to be a Team Leader... Valerie was born into that role.

*"Stay with me Valerie!!", applying pressure on the wound. His hand by her back is covered in blood. "Stay awake!!" He knows the bullet has gone through her chest. "I've got pressure on the wound!! I've stopped the bleeding!" And is probably very close to her heart.*

"Doctor Ovic."

"Yes Roan."

"Keep an eye on the Generator would you please."

"I will Roan."

"Make sure it's ready to go at all times."

2019 Albania is nothing like 1997 Albania.

"Test the pressure every fifteen minutes."

"Got it."

*Doda Prifti lost a lot of Patients back in those days, so many that he used to tear up while sipping his favourite after-dinner Scotch... all because that electrical grid was built – "By those corrupt Communists with little thought for the future."*

“Make sure the fail-safe is always on too.”

“I will.”

*And those warring Clans used to target the power grids in order to make their enemies suffer...*

*“Those innocent Albanians... they sure wanted to see them suffer!”*

“I’m going in the Ambulance!”

*Marko Street had turned into a shooting gallery... a horrific scene that Roan Prifti can never forget. His father had held his mother in his arms almost twenty years earlier to the day.*

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“Good morning Mr. Prifti, my name is Shirley Bannister. I am the Immigration Officer assigned to your file.”

“Good morning Mrs. Bannister.”

“Miss will be fine.”

“Ok Miss Bannister.”

“Now I see that you hold a top position at Tirana General Hospital – Head of Pediatric Surgery. Impressive.” “Thank you.”

“Why do you want to leave Doctor Prifti, why do you want to leave such a good job from what I can tell?”

“My job is great, I’m very grateful to have it. It’s just that I lost my wife a year ago...” - taking a deep breath... - “and I just can’t seem to forgive this place for taking her.”

“I see... I think?”

“The violence here has never really ended from twenty years ago, from the Civil War over twenty years ago. People seem to prefer hate over acceptance, even though under Communism everyone did get along.”

“So you are a single father I see... a daughter.”

“Yes, Marina... she’s twelve.”

“And she’s ok with leaving her home country?”

“Some days... just like me.”

“Guess it’s a very personal set of emotions you two are experiencing.”

“You have no idea Miss Bannister... no idea at all.”

Miss Bannister is silent. Roan is losing control on the inside... but trying to remain strong on the outside.

“You have lots of family in Albania, Doctor Prifti?”

“I do. My Dad is here. So is my sister and her family.”

“I imagine you have friends too?”

“Yes... many.”

“And no one in Canada?”

Roan knows where this is going. “But I will have peace Miss Bannister... peace in a country like Canada.”

“I have never been to Albania, read a little bit about that awful Civil War, and all that violence that just seems to keep going and going.”

“May I ask you a question, Miss Bannister?”

“Sure.”

“Have you ever been scared to walk down the street in the middle of the day in your country?”

“No can't say I have.”

“Have you ever felt the ground shake under your feet from bombs going off?”

“No... no Doctor Prifti.”

“That is why I want to come to Canada, Miss Bannister.”

The phone goes silent.

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“Amazing work in there Doct... I mean Roan”, with a firm shake of gratitude... and a pat on the shoulder.

“Great work Roan, really great”, another pat on the back. “Hey Nurse Hedric, please Nurse Hedric... hang on just a second.” Trying to catch up to the sweat-soaked brunette, who passed the quorum that immediately surrounded the head doctor who had just flawlessly performed surgery on a young child with a serious leg deficiency. “Nurse Hedric.”  
Eight and a half hours worth.

“Wait up.”

Nurse Famke Hedric cannot hear a thing.

“Nurse!”

She keeps wiping her face with a towel in order to try and revive the tiredness that overcame her back in that operating room.

“Famke!”

In any other country she would be a Doctor's most valuable asset.

“Famke.”

Here she is treated like a PSW.

“Famke, can I have a word with you?”

Terminal Chauvinism holds this society back.

“Oh Doctor”, startled. “Famke. I wanted to commend you on your work back there. I don't think I could have had such a good outcome without your help.”

A shocked Famke looks back at Doctor Prifti... then tilts up for a more direct gaze. Doctor Prifti is tall, tall and lean... which comes from his commitment to running. Says it saves his life every time he laces up his Nikes, losing his mother and his wife pain gets a chance to leave him for just a bit. Five kilometers in the middle of the day has always been able to control that heavy stress he can't seem to let go.

Famke's face keeps staring at the Doctor who needs to talk to her immediately it seems.

“I want you to join my team full-time, be a part of our everyday surgeries.”

Late thirties early forties - she is still a youthful looking pretty. “Excuse me?”

Roan knows she has a stressful marriage. “I want you a part of our team.”

Valerie and Roan would talk about Famke's husband with utter disdain. “Really?” Her inability to answer right away is a function of her community. “I will not take no for an answer Famke... I'm telling you now.” Famke looks down... like a lot of women do in this part of the world. “I will

get all the paperwork ready on my desk by tomorrow.” A tear runs down Famke’s face. “There will be a substantial bump in pay as well.” She shows a small hint of a smile. “Are you ok with that?” A hug... an immediate hug hits Roan Prifti from out of nowhere.

“Thank you Doctor... thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome Famke. But you are very capable for this job, I need you to remember that.”

“Thank you from the bottom of my heart, Doctor Prifti.”

“I’m sorry Famke but that will not work, it will just not work for me.”

A sudden stare of confusion appears on Famke Hedric’s face.

“My name is Roan... you must call me Roan from now on.”

“Thank you Roan”... with smiling relief... “thank you so much.”

“Please stop by my office tomorrow to sign all the paperwork.”

Valerie would be so proud of her husband.

“I will... I will Roan”, with a full-sized grin.

“Have a good night... and say hi to Matok and the family.”

“I will.”

Doctor Roan Prifti knows that he wants to leave this hospital better than how he joined it.

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One of the few days that Doda and Aja were ok with leaving their little bundle at home with Doda’s mother – it is like a national holiday when the cherry blossoms bloom like a postcard.

“Look how beautiful it is Doda... oh I love this day, I need this day so much.”

“An early spring”, staring up at those mountains, “an early spring is always nice”, wondering if those hills will erupt even more now that the snow is fading fast.

Cherry blossom trees are a national treasure here... especially in the midst of a war.

“The leaves feel like silk, feel them Doda”, with a smiling face. Aja is so ravishing when she is at Pasha Park. The sunlight smothering her face as she beams... Doda moves in to satisfy her request. “Soft... like your skin.” Like a man that’s madly in love with his wife. “Oh Doda these trees look so full... so lush.” Like a man that wants to protect this innocence from anything this horrible Civil War can throw at them. “Come Doda... come with me.” An elementary school teacher whose students adore her enthusiasm for life. “Look at the branches on this one... and this one.” Aja has a passion for each and every day. “I’m coming. I’m coming.” Being together is the only time Doctor Doda Prifti does not think about the tragically wounded that he has been treating for many months now.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Doda looks up at those hills surrounding the Park.

*Boom. Boom.*

He does not want to dampen Aja’s mood... but he does move closer to her. Protection is deep inside Doda... for his wife and every one of his patients. He knows Roan is safe with his Mother.

*Boom.*

Smoke starts to rise from the hills to the north of the Park. Tribal gangs have divided up this city... hell they have divided up this country. Hiding their stash of ammunition that is suppose to terrorize the People whenever they want to loot.

*Boom.*

The Police are not enough of a deterrent... everyone is on the payroll of either the Christian Gangs... or the Roma Gangs... or the Muslim Gangs.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Or the Government Gang themselves.

Doda was not raised like this - the People in his neighborhood were kind and friendly. For Pete's sake his best friend Jimmy had a mom that was like a second mother to him. Communism was just what he was used to... what he thought was a normal way of life. His home had both love and support... his Parents John and Neda were hard-working types that never let a dinner go by without some deep meaningful conversation.

"How did you do on your math test yesterday?"

Nothing got past Doda's father.

"I got an A."

"Good."

"And your science project?... when is that due?"

His mother loves science.

"End of the month Mom."

"What are you reading?"

"Don Quixote", responding confidently.

"Oh Miguel de Cervantes... one of my favourites", his mother smiles.

"I'm reading Victor Hugo, and am enjoying his style very much", John Prifti announces with intellectual pride.

The World might have looked at these countries behind the Iron Curtain with skepticism... intellectual skepticism that makes society open-up.

"I did like Les Miserable", Neda adds.

That makes it modernize.

"You make the soccer team?"

But yet Doda's childhood was anything but closed.

"I did Papa. Left halfback."

It was full, open, and challenging in every way.

"Good work son."

But 1997 changed everything Doda was used to.

"Come Aja. Come let's go home." Aja's face suddenly changes... leaving her beloved Cherry blossoms has changed her face immediately.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

The bombs are getting closer.

*Boom. Boom.*

Doda grabs his wife's hand and starts back along the path... moving with a forceful gait that says

she must keep up. Aja keeps staring at the trees... like a child who has been told she must leave the playground, but is clearly not ready.

When the Communist veil got ripped off Eastern Europe, People had to fend for themselves. Men at the top of their Clan could now exert real influence on an unsuspecting public. "Capitalism this and Capitalism that" - was all the rage. In the newspapers. On the television sets.

A few men, led by this one specifically-polished Charlatan named Sali Berisha... they started pyramid schemes that just took-off throughout the country. Everybody's bank accounts, and mattresses got emptied in order so they could 'invest' in these get-rich quick schemes.

"Invest five thousand dollars and you'll get back ten thousand", was the Speech being played over and over in every corner of the country.

Five thousand dollars was a lifetime of savings for Albanians... but hearing stories from the early participants made the herd mentality kick into high gear. And in some villages it was even higher than that.

The more Doda thinks about what his country has become - the more he can't believe it. "Hold onto me Aja, hold on tight", moving even faster towards the car.

By January 1997 these pyramid schemes had imploded... losing close to 1.2 billion dollars - which was half of Albania's GDP.

"Come on Aja, I can see the car."

*Boom. Boom.*

"I can see it."

Marko Street is in chaos, couples, families, everyone is trying to get the hell out of here.

Nobody knew where the money had gone... except for the dozen or so Charlatans ruling *The New Capitalist Albania!*

Gunshots have trapped Doda and Aja behind a brick wall five stores from their car. They crouch down while bullets keep whizzing by... they can be heard breaking glass storefronts. "I'm scared Doda." "I know", squeezing his wife's hand. He's waiting for a lull in the sniper fire... a lull so he can get his wife in the car and they can get the hell out of here! "Let's go!", pulling her hand.

Doda is leading her to the passenger door. He's going to get in first and then pull her in immediately behind him.

"We're almost there!"

Good thing he left the car door unlocked - Doda remembers as he gets closer.

"Ok we're here", opening the door and sliding in towards that steering wheel.

"NO!!!"

He has lost her hand.

"OH MY GOD NO!!!"

Instead of pulling Aja into the car he has lost her hand.

By the end of January angry People had taken to the streets... emotions were out-of-control... thousands upon thousands were demanding re-imburements from their government, which they believed had profited from the schemes. Every week the demonstrations became more and more violent. By the beginning of March they could now be accurately called Riots!

On March 1<sup>st</sup> Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi resigned.

On March 2<sup>nd</sup> Sali Berisha declared a State of Emergency.

On March 11<sup>th</sup> the transfer of Power to a Mr. Bashkim Fino and his Socialist Party of Albania changed nothing... the riots in Northern Albania, where the poorest villages lost the most, became unbearable. The South followed suit soon after, with ruthless Gang violence that spared no one in authority – Police Officers were hung in the streets for everyone to see. Mayors were paraded around with a tire around their necks. Every corner of the country was engulfed in *it*... whatever *it* could be called! The People wanted these Charlatans and they wanted them by their own set of rules... by their own form of justice.

Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Romania, Spain, Turkey and the United States all conducted evacuation missions to rescue their citizens.

“New elections for June”, The Government declared.

United Nations Security Council Resolution #1101 sent 7,000 troops on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March in the hopes of restoring order and distributing relief.

It took until the spring of 1998 for the new Government to gain control of all the feeder-funds that had been set up for the main Pyramid Schemes. Inflation and enormously high interest rates created a pain for Albanians that left a mark.

Two thousand People lost their lives in all the chaos.

“Aja stay with me”, holding her head up. Doda sobs uncontrollably.  
Aja is gone.

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Marina speaks with her outer voice... but her father has been speaking with his inner voice since they landed. Fear fills Roan from head to toe – Is this the Place Valerie would have approved of? Is this their future?

Is this the right place for Marina?

“Papa Papa look... it’s the CN Tower.”

Just the thought of leaving Tirana and his family makes Roan sick to his stomach.

“Wow.”

“Can we go to the top Papa? Can we please go to the top?”

“Sure we can go to the top. But first I need to ask you if you are ready to go up that high?”

“Yes Papa yes... I’m ready.”

Father and daughter hold hands with excitement while starting to walk towards those big double front doors.

Suddenly Roan stops, just steps before getting to those massive double front doors. He then looks up... and sees the outside elevator scaling the side of this concrete monstrosity. Pointing up... “Do you know how many feet this structure is my smart daughter?”

“Almost two thousand”, without hesitation.

“Well well well someone has been reading.”

“You always tell me to know my facts... one thousand eight-hundred and twenty-feet to be exact.” A kiss is given to her forehead. “Ok now we can go up to the top.”

The excitement of a new place so far away from home has created a new bond for these two... for these two who have been suffering for such a very long time.

“Hold my hand.”

The crowd is thick inside... the line-up has clear signs and ropes that lead every newcomer to an organized path that will put them exactly at the next spot in the line-up. Roan holds his daughter’s hand normally even though he knows he will never let go... squeezing it will just scare his blond angelic Marina. “How much time is this line-up Papa?”

“Looks like the elevator takes about forty people each time up... probably thirty minutes before we go.”

Strangers in a strange land – these two are looking around taking-in all the People and their behaviours. Canada is not around the corner from Albania – over eleven hours on a plane can test anyone’s patience. Marina and her father were prepared though, two books and four movies were well-researched beforehand. Canadians have different mannerisms than back home that’s for sure... Roan notices. Marina too sees a different way of life here.

I hope they see me as someone wanting to assimilate first before they judge me as the ‘other’, looking around, Canada is known for its acceptance of so many ‘others’. I have studied for eleven years under some of the best Pediatric Surgeons in the world – I hope they see me as a Person, as a serious Doctor who wants to contribute, as a Father who wants to raise a responsible citizen... before they lazily see me as merely the ‘other’.

“Ok let’s move up everybody... let’s move inside the elevator please. Good job People... let’s just move a little more inside the elevator please, so we can fit a few more... please and thank you everybody.”

Canadians are by far the politest People ever.

“Welcome to the CN Tower! Now if everyone can exit the elevator slowly please. Great job People... keep moving People. When you are out you are free to move around the entire floor area. If you want to go outside on the observation deck then you must see the Ticket Agent by the blue doors. Thank you and have a great day.”

Valerie would have loved this place!

“Are you ok Miss?”

“Yes yes thank you. Papa look at this view!”, moving towards the glass wall, “come Papa.”

Roan follows his daughter... like two peas in a pod they are so happy, so giddy with this place. Roan has forgotten his pain. “I’m coming I’m coming.” Because he is falling in love with this place and its’ people. “Look how far we can see Papa... wow!” And what it is doing to his daughter. “Can I get you two anything? Water? Coffee?”

Roan half-smiles at the request.

“It’s all complimentary Sir”, smiling back at a father and daughter gloriously in love.

“Some water would be great, thanks.”

“Coming right up”, passing a few packages of chocolate to a wide-eyed Marina.

“Thank you”, she responds happily.

Roan and Valerie raised a polite daughter by any standard.



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“I need everyone ready in forty-five minutes.”

The Team keeps moving to their synchronized duties.

“Some crazy driver was so drunk he didn’t even stop.”

“What’s our budget for the surgery Roan?”

“I’ve scheduled three hours... that should be enough.”

“Got it”, Nurse Hedric responds as if she is responding for the entire team. Her relationship with Doctor Prifti can be labelled as nothing but ‘extremely close’ - meshing her instincts with his tightly and efficiently. The results have been stellar in the surgeries they have been undertaking; not one has gone over-budget when it comes to time.

*Good morning Doctor Prifti, this is Miss Bannister from Immigration Canada, whenever you are free can you please give me a call. Thank you.*

Reading his new text, Roan puts his phone back on the table; Surgeons don’t have the luxury of returning any communication when every minute absolutely counts!

Preparation. Execution. Recovery.

That is the world Roan and his Team live by; four surgeries a day mean these dedicated Professionals have become a tightly-knit-well-oiled machine.

Continuing his preparation... I wonder if Miss Bannister and the Canadian Immigration system understand how *First-World* my Team and this hospital really are?

“Ok Team lets put the patient under please and thank you.”

Roan has become a polite Canadian.

-----

“Good afternoon Miss Bannister.”

“Oh Doctor Prifti, how are you?”

“I’m doing well today, thanks.”

“Doctor Prifti I do not want to waste any more of your time, so I am going to get right into it with you regarding your application for immigrant status to Canada.”

“You’re the Boss Miss Bannister.”

*Achem.*

“So regarding your application for both you and you daughter Doctor Prifti - you have been rejected by our immigration department.”

The phone goes silent.

Roan is stunned.

He has a million questions but can only think of one. “Why?” And he must contain his anger.

“Now unfortunately Doctor Prifti your score of points gets seriously downgraded because you

are a single Parent. I know it sounds crazy but that is the policy of our present government, they feel with having such a young dependant that if anything were to happen to you then your child would be depending on the government system. And... and”, stumbling, “and some really bad history has been attached to that reality here in Canada.”

Canada and its' health-care system has lost out.

## *Chapter 2*

“I need you two over here now!”

“Me?? Us??”

Ten months in this country and it is the first time she has even noticed me.

“Yes the both of you. Come here now!”

It is the first time I have ever been summoned by the head nurse of the largest Seniors home in southern Montreal.

“Grab her arm over here... and you, you do the same with the other arm.”

Her face means all-business.

“Here!”

My insides are in knots.

“Put your hand under her armpit and lift... you both ready.”

Nauseas knots.

“Ok one two three lift.”

Nurse Raines has on a sturdy posture.

“Right here... down right here.”

The limp patient is put on the stretcher quickly... it's my first emergency since a horrible something has started to rip through this home.

“Ok you, wheel here this way.”

*I remember the first time I arrived at the Joseph & Mary Seniors home in Cote-Ste-Luc... the pace was easy, everyone would say hello, ask me how I was feeling? And did I need any help getting familiar with my surroundings?*

“Through those doors.”

My God?!

“Put her right there.”

But not anymore.

-----

Sundays by the sea was the best day of the week by far. My Mom worked six days a week in the city, and when she came home it was always with a full bag of groceries that she needed to prepare immediately for dinner. Breakfast was always porridge and molasses... which I made since I was six.

“Nikki darling, can you get me the salt over there.”

“Yes Mama.”

A long day nursing our oldest members never stopped Maria Fernandez from being the most positive influence in my life.

“Here you are Mama.”

“Thank you darling.”

Spending time with my Mama was always the best. “I need your help Nikki, can you grab the other side of this pot.” “Sure Mama.” “I want to pour it into this pot.” Wide-eyed and eager is how Nicole Angela Fernandez existed with her Mama. “Ok over here... easy now. Now let’s tip it out at the same time, together.”

My Mother will always be my everything to me.

“Very good Nikki, very good.”

That’s why I want to be a nurse... just like her.

-----

“Ok class let’s take out our science books... and let’s turn to page forty-seven.”

The breeze coming through the sprawling one-floor concrete building that houses grades one through six is always cool, even in the tropical city of Antipolo... forty kilometers from Manila.

“I want you all to read this first page to yourselves, let’s take a few minutes to do that.”

*Grade five was such an important year in my schooling... my Teacher Miss Aquino gave me such excitement to learn, such a need to spend so much time on my own reading about the wonderful world of science.*

“Ok class I want you all to look up here at this full glass of water... and this other glass of baking soda.”

It was like a world of magic.

“Pay attention Class... because I want you all to write down in your workbooks what you see when I mix this... when I mix this glass of baking soda here, with the stirring water.”

Looking back are faces that are eager to understand what Miss Aquino is doing??

What is happening when these two everyday items are mixed together??

Nicole’s eyes are transfixed on the two glasses, her imagination is trying like heck to work out a solution to this experiment. “You see class.” It’s why Nicole’s problem-solving skills for any task she will ever undertake will always be met with passionate understanding. “Now for the rest of the time I want you all to try your best to explain what you have just seen, ok go.”

Thank you Miss Aquino for my passion for learning.

-----

The most I have ever been asked to do is change a patients' diaper, feed the patients, sponge-bath the patients.

"Nikki I need help here right away!"

Now ten months later and I am being asked to really be a part of the nursing responsibilities that come with a degree.

"Get me the IV bag from over there."

I have slept at work the past few nights; it seems no one is allowed to go home with this scary virus in every nook and cranny.

"Hold it up Nikki, hold it up high."

Every week we are getting more deliveries of body suits, personal protective suits that cover us from head to toe.

"Ok now grab me another IV bag."

It gets so hot in here that I could faint.

"Ok I need you to grab the needle and place it in this vein here."

I've been thrown into these nursing duties without a diploma... I'm in my final year of nursing studies, but I've only been hired as a Personal Services Worker... a PSW, the lowest rung on the ladder of responsibility.

"Ok I got it in."

But we are officially in a Pandemic.

"Nice work Nikki."

And all the Seniors homes are getting slammed with sick elderly that are not fairing too well against this virus.

"Let's keep moving Nikki."

So degrees seem to be a luxury.

"I need you to go to the storage closet and get four boxes of IV fluids."

My home town of Antipolo is located in the blissful foothills of the Mount Purro Nature Reserve.

"Got it."

A place I now know I have taken for granted... because except for a few months of rainy season it is warm without any humidity during the day, and cool without any cold at night.

"And be quick about", Nurse Soraya Ahmed reminds sternly with sweat glistening off her forehead.

My dream to come to Canada and study nursing was endorsed by my mother... she has seen the deflating effects of nepotism in her profession, and says she wishes her work was based on skill and not tribal bloodlines. "Canada has always been a dream of mine, but I needed to stay here, my community needed me, my Parents needed me." Many People in my community did not feel the same way... when they turned eighteen it seemed all the young girls were immediately on a plane to Canada... with a promise to send back money every month for the family. Not sure my town would be eating three decent meals if it wasn't for this courageous mentality. Pack up everything you know, everything you are attached to... and Phillipinos are super-attached to the simple life... to family and food under one roof of many generations. And get into either a Student/Work program, or just apply for a Temporary Work Visa. Nannies and PSW's are the most common, the majority are women, but the men have started to make the leap, working in construction, restaurants, and auto service. Phillipinos own a work ethic that meshes well with the most productive nations of the west along with our most-valuable skill – English. It's not

bragging but everyone I know contributes to their new country, government assistance is not in our DNA; that news travels fast if it did happen.

“Here they are.”

“Put them over there and come help me here.”

If Canada seemed like a relaxed place before.

“Put your finger here and don’t move it.”

Suddenly it’s been overrun with a do-or-die mentality.

“Oh damn... we’ve got a bleeder here. I need lots of gauzes!”

My Mother was a god-fearing faith-filled Soul; My Father was too - but only at Sunday Church. Phillipino men have awful hypocrisies.

“Over here Nikki... push the gauzes against here.”

“I’m trying.”

“We need another set of hands here!”

*“What you see and feel from a very early age gets imprinted forever.”*

That sentence - *staring out the window of my elementary class* - hit me like a Typhoon. What my village showed me, imprinted on me were kind women, kind women who had to put up with a system that never took into account their feelings... or their potential. Psychologists believe that your character is formed by elementary school... and if that’s the case then my village did all the shaping. Vulnerability is what I saw day in and day out – but also gorgeous empathy.

“Good morning Evita.”

“Nice dress Nina.”

“Come over for some pie Fanny.”

Every woman knew every other woman in the village – most were kind, supportive, protective nurturers in the worst types of circumstances.

“I fixed your dress Maria.”

But that imprint showed me it was a thankless job most of the time.

“Go see Nurse Raines in triage room four, stat!”

“Yes.”

PSW’s were never given this much responsibility... but times have changed overnight. Seems the introduction of spring brought an avalanche of sickness nobody has ever seen before. I have been working my hours as a PSW plus keeping up with my nursing studies – complaining before this virus has never been an issue! My new life in Montreal has been fun – study, work... then go out every Saturday night with the girls. The guys sure are cute. But now all us PSW’s are overwhelmed!

*In-Class Schooling has been suspended until further notice.*

Remember when that email came through – my heart sank. Was this going to affect my graduation date next year? How do I tell my Mom my school is now strictly on a screen? Does that affect the money she has carefully-budgeted for my nursing school tuition? Will my PSW work be affected? So many questions – and so few answers. Fear is everywhere... both inside my small apartment and outside the now eerily-empty streets.

*Classes will be held over zoom... attendance is a must.*

So the future is changing fast – I get it. My computer is going to be my new lab partner for achieving my nursing degree next spring.

“Ok class... I want everyone to take out their textbooks to chapter six... we are studying the many different characteristics of blood types...”

*Two months later.*

*Final exams will be emailed to everyone at the exact same time, at 9 a.m. sharp. You can print it out if you wish... or answer all the questions virtually. Up to you.*

Zoom is not how one should take an exam that means so much to your future.

*Ok class... begin the exam.*

Cheating is now rampant.

-----

Chantal Belanger was a great best friend in a new country... a too-cold / too-hot / too-busy country. Understand Miss Chantal - and my blending-in to Canadian society can be better comprehended, a turning of the contrast button to *Clearly Canadian*.

“Is this seat taken?”

It was as simple as that.

“Not that I know of.”

The blond girl with hazel eyes looked up for a second from her textbook.

“Thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

Then goes back to her studying. In the classroom she was a fully determined learning machine... but outside she was the most fun a new student immigrant could ever ask for.

“Ok class let’s get down to work”, Professor Martin walks in with a puff of authority.

She taught me so much.

“Let’s open our textbooks to chapter one.”

Eight months later me and Chantal were roommates – sleeping in the cramped staff room at the Montreal General Hospital whenever we had a blissful break.

-----

“Chapters 6 7 & 8 for tomorrow’s class everyone.” The Professor packs up his stuff.

“You have a study partner?”

“Uh... no.”

“Excuse me where are my manners. My name is Chantal Belanger.”

“Uh... my name is Nikki Fernandez.”

“Nice to meet you Nikki Fernandez”, with an outstretched hand.

Nikki’s shyness in the face of such confidence activates an intrigue that seems new to her... and very different from what she was expecting from her new-to-Canada expedition.

“You like Professor Martin?” But when you travel so far from what you know.  
“He seems ok.” Expectations get thrown out the window.  
“He just goes on and on and on.” Do the locals even understand that??  
“What other classes you taking?” Or do they just see ‘foreigner’.  
“I have biology physics and pharmacology.” A foreigner with more courage than they could possibly understand.  
“You’re in the two-year program, right?”  
Nikki remains reserved as the two exit the classroom together... trailing everyone else.  
“Yes... yes I am.”  
“Where you doing you work program?”  
“Joseph & Mary Seniors home.”  
“Where is that?”  
“Cote-Ste-Luc.”  
“Where you living?”  
“An apartment in NDG.”  
“Any roommates?”  
“Yes... two.”  
“Terrible thing how they pack you in so tight in those shoeboxes.”  
Five generations deep have entrenched this very new friend with privileged opinions.  
“You couldn’t get a place in the dorms?”  
It’s easy to hear.  
“No... they were all full.”  
But there is something inviting about her.  
“Where you from?”  
That makes me want to talk.  
“Philippines.”  
And not be shy.  
“Hot there I heard.”  
“It can be... but I’m from the countryside, the weather is much better there.” As we talk my new friend makes me feel more engaged. “And the big city is always full of chaos.” More sure of myself. “Which big city?” Chantal has a way. “Manila.” The way she looks into my eyes with each new question. “I’ve read about Manila... lots of Phillipino bands that play great rock n’roll.” That makes me want to answer with strength. “Lots is right, Journey’s new singer is from there.”

Two attractive university students intriguing each other continue their walk through long winding hallways of Concordia University’s Nursing School... looking innocent enough. Finally they reach the large Courtyard on a bright balmy day... the meeting place for the entire school. The blond has on a gait that says she is sure of everything because this is her hometown... her familiar life... while the brunette has her *head on a swivel* because this is the life she has always been dreaming about.

“Come sit down with me... wait ‘til you see some of the choice guys around here.”

*Maria Fernandez stares into her young daughter’s eyes after another long day of work, she immediately sits down on the bench near the front door, and motions for her loving daughter to sit down next to her. “One must learn from doing and doing only, remember that Nikki and don’t ever forget it.”*

-----

“Can I borrow your stilettos? Hey Nikki?”

“Shhh.”

“Why are you shooshing me? You think Mrs. Rosen cares about you lending me your stilettos?”

“I’m just trying to get this IV in... I need to concentrate.”

“Hey what are you two troublemakers talking about?”

“Stilettos”, spinning around with glee, “I’m going to wear stilettos to the club tonight”, Liza Rivera and her long brunette locks announces to a private room with a sleeping patient.

“The black suede ones?”

“Yes ma’am”, another spin for good measure.

“I better break out the heavy artillery then, don’t want to be overlooked. Those are some bad-ass heels. What are you going to wear Nikki?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well you better get sure quick. The place is going to be crawling with Alphas.”

The Pandemic has shut everything down... but Millennials, Gen Z’s, and everybody else that was raised with a smart phone by their pillow knows they can never be stopped. Hit up the right app and warehouses in the outskirts of town turn into *Club 54* in under 40 minutes. Entitlement knows no bounds. Or maybe *Rave Central* is a better understood term.

“You ready for the exam next week?”, Nikki reminds.

“You still worrying about exams... come on Nikki I’ll get the answers for you the night before. I told you one of the T.A.’s sells the questions... and then another T.A. sells the answers.”

Nikki looks worried.

Liza could care less... she’s still thinking about those stilettos.

“Are we finished here nurses?!”, storms into the room from out of nowhere. Head Nurse Soraya Ahmed can sneak up on you without any warning whatsoever. Her eyes can scan a room like a snake. She glares at her subordinates like an interesting book cover... which is always followed by a whiff of commands.

“Ah, yes Nurse Ahmed.”

Never is there not a command.

“Yes.”

Or plenty of commands.

“On my way to feed room 412.”

Nikki Fernandez figures her Boss is not a pleasure reader no matter how interesting a book cover may be.

“Good... let’s keep it moving ladies. We’ve got a serious pandemic to navigate through.”

The room vacates in seconds.

“Nikki can you stay for one second please.”

A serious air overtakes the room. Mrs. Rosen keeps sleeping as her nurse-in-training keeps both eyes on the IV fluid, making sure it’s making its way down into her arm. Dehydration has been the silent killer for most of the elderly here when combined with that unknow virus. Wuhan.

Bats. Conspiracy Theories. World Economic Forum. Nikki could care less about where it came from... her genetics are filled with empathy and it’s been slaughtering plenty of her patients!

“How are you holding up?” “Ok.” “You sure?”

“I’m trying my best Nurse Ahmed.” “I know you are... but it’s not easy seeing all this death.



Never seen anything like it in my 32 years.”

“It’s so sad, some never even wake up. They just slip away.”

“Nikki I wanted to inform you that I’ve put in a wage recommendation for you, it should take a week or two. You’re going to see a bit more pay in your next paycheque.”

Her subordinate’s face brightens; student-immigrants get little pay for their back-breaking work as every expense seems to be going up.

“Thanks Nurse Ahmed.”

They are the slave-labor of the system.

“You have the secret sauce Nikki, been doing this a long time and I see your work, you’re strong, just keep it up. This craziness can’t last forever.”

Overworked Nurses and PSW’s are being told that encouraging sentence over and over.

“I’ll do my best Nurse Ahmed.”

If anyone knew how easy it has become to just cheat your way through... just sixty dollars easy.

-----

When the upright woman walks unto the stage, the packed congregation quickly goes silent. Everyone here needed to show-off their QR codes in order to attend this ceremony. The dividing line has created a stir in society that’s for sure... but that topic is better left for another day.

Right now it’s one very exciting moment to be sure for the 180 graduates that are dearly needed by a health-care system that is approaching collapse. Nikki and her friends showed their jab and got admitted. There are no stilettos amongst either Liza or Chantal; Nikki is usually the conservative one, the one calling the Uber at 4 in the morning while wearing low heels.

Masks are still a must.

Zoom education has left everything in tatters... credibility tatters that is.

Before anybody on the outside figures out what the pandemic has done to it’s teaching standards... this learning institution and every one just like it around the country must rabidly attempt to re-store its’ credibility.

“Good morning Concordia University and welcome.”

Ten years from now we will be asking ourselves who passed and who cheated to pass; but no one on the outside even understands what Nikki has been pushed into.

“I cannot tell you how ecstatic I am to be here in the flesh with all of you new Graduates.”

Only the students who were in it... trapped in a pandemic world that tried to, or more importantly needed to keep its doors open to students, especially foreign students who paid a small-fortune.

“The last two years have been a trying time indeed.”

And they paid plenty.

“Education has never been challenged like that.”

Nikkis' mother Maria has been salting-away her nickels and dimes since Nikki was born.

"But I think we did a fine job under the circumstances."

Nikki's father surely wasn't going to be so responsible.

"All of you are proof of our commitment to learning."

And thinking ahead... well that comes from a sober life.

Maria Fernandez sits glued to her screen.

"Concordia has prepared you well for a system that needs everyone, all hands-on deck as the saying goes. As Educators we have adapted well to the realities of today's digital world, implementing learning to a virtual world that continues to be a challenge."

Chancellor Mullins stands taller all of a sudden, then moves in for a glass resting on her podium. She then takes a drink. And then makes a face that seems to be attempting to convince herself of such words.

Her audience is silent.

These students know exactly what she is talking about. They are the first cohort to have been thrust into a new reality... a strange reality. Staring at a screen over and over day after day in order to achieve their dreams. Collective learning in a lecture hall be damned! Lifting your hand for a question aimed at the Professor must also be damned!

Nikki did her best... adjusting week after week and month after month to a new set of learning rules that had been thrust upon her. "Everything is good Mama. Yes classes are still going on."

She repeated to a worried Mother back home. Nikki did not know that her mother kept working throughout the pandemic, there were no government supports. No work. No life. Is the reality in the Philippines. Plenty in her village got sick. Plenty died. But never did Nikki's mother ever let-on that her world had turned deadly... deadly & desperate.

Chantal would never understand.

And Liza Rivera, well Liza had her own desperate realities... also a student-immigrant, Liza came from El Salvador – the murder capital of the world. Her upbeat nature gave way to too many uncontrolled tears when they were alone in Nikki's apartment.

*"What you see and feel from a very early age gets imprinted forever."*

I stayed strong because that is what I was taught by my Mom.

"The challenge going forward will be to adapt the best methods for learning to this digital world... standards must be maintained, even increased, increased vigorously."

The Graduates look at one another in silence.

"You are all the future of our world-renowned health care system... and you must respect that each and every day you walk into your work to help your patients."

More staring around by seemingly every graduate; Maria Fernandez wipes away a tear... she's glued to her screen. She would have loved to have been there in person... but the budget would not allow for it, in fact nothing seems to be in the budget these days. Her village has been decimated by the pandemic.

"Miss Nicole Fernandez - Honor level."

Her fellow graduates clap with emotion; Nicole Angela Fernandez is beloved by all her peers. Maria Fernandez quickly puts her hands over her face, overcome with emotion. Twenty-two years of worrying has finally paid off – that piece of paper proves her commitment to her

daughter that she made the second the doctor handed her such a bundle.  
Love gives strength.

-----

“Have you filled out all your paperwork?”, the Immigration Officer asks Nikki.

She’s seen death & fear on the front lines of covid-19.

“I have.”

Too much for merely a PSW.

Ruffling through her paperwork... “You need to initial here... and here”, leaning over to her nervous applicant, “hope your ready to be Canadian... we need as many of you as we can get.” Understaffed and overworked.

“You’re all Angels in my book... and this last one right here.”

Forbidden any vacation time whatsoever.

“Seen plenty of you wide-eyes come through here ready to make a difference... no right here, sorry my mistake.”

Shockingly-paid when walking aisle after aisle at the grocery store.

“Well I think that’s it for you my dear”, pulling out her chair, and getting up, “the best of luck for your future in our wonderful health care system”, reaching out her hand.

Basically disrespected at every turn.

“Thank you... thank you so much”, responding with a smile.

Do I really need that much luck for a system that is *supposedly so wonderful*?

### *Chapter 3*

It was a tone that took seven generations to yell – that’s over a hundred and fifty years of strict obedience to my role in life... to my duty in the family business. Mayor. Treasurer. Legal Authority. Security Strongman. Hiring Chief. Basically an All-Jobs CEO.

You get the drift.

And despite all that unexpected screaming it was a day that needed to happen because it needed to change the road that I was travelling on... burying my fear and throwing out the truth into another scorching day followed by another dusk dinner.

Something told me that this was going to be *the day* - the exact moment where I must lift myself up... and ask what I really wanted out of this life. What those super-glossy advertisements were

showing me as I stared at them every single night for the past year just before bedtime. People laughing in crystal-clear blue lakes with snow-capped mountains in the distance, I'd then happily turn the page and see that there were just as many smiles in all that pure white snow. I was smitten.

I had found my future.

Yet unfortunately my father did not see it the same way. "What is so great about Canada?"

I just looked back at him.

"You cannot make a good life here in Utter Pradesh?"

My blood started to boil.

"You will graduate and then you will follow your family's caste into the City Government."

All I could think of was eating a donut and drinking this drink called Tims. "But Papa everyone is going to Canada to study. And when they are finished studying they have a program that gives them a work permit for many years after... maybe even citizenship."

Papa's face changed like I had never seen before??

"Please Peter stay calm", Mama steps into the conversation.

Her timing for these things allowed my father and mother to raise nine children with the greatest of respect. Six of them were in the *Family Business*, working in various jobs in the City Government. Over-qualified if you asked me... but I'd never say that out in the real world; respect & fear sometimes originates from the same part of your insides. Two of my sisters moved far away to another part of India because their husbands had prosperous opportunities... which is allowed.

Fourth largest State in India, Utter Pradesh is most certainly its' most populous. It lies in the north-central part of the country, where 200 million People swelter from May until October, along with plenty of monsoon flooding. Then finally we all enjoy the graciousness of God for the rest of the year – as temperatures hover between 70 and 80 degrees. Sleeping is an absolute pleasure. Lucknow, the State Capital located on its' western flank, is my city; although it takes 45 minutes to enter it from our rural outskirts. My family, the Anand Clan, own 400 acres just outside those limits; Peasants never got access to the city's prime soil. But 400 acres in today's India is still worth a pretty penny – it's why so many fathers keep selling off ten acre plots in order to send their offspring abroad for the best Western education. My Papa expects me to return to India with that education and keep the family name alive... which is the source of my stress each and everyday.

After a few sips of tea Peter Anand has tried his best to follow his wife's advice... Nina Anand is a soft-voiced woman who's kept her husband's temper in check, most of the time.

"What are you talking about?"

*Ahem.*

"I'm talking about becoming Canadian Papa, about getting citizenship. Then you and Mama can come stay with me whenever you wish."

Papa Anand halts his aggression, and then reaches for another sip of his tea.

"You have always been smart my boy. Hasn't he Nina?"

"Smart as the wind travelling through a thick jungle," reaching for her tea as well.

"I think I can get a scholarship too Papa. I've been reading about some universities that give a dozen foreign student scholarships every year."

“Hmmm... you’re sure about that?”

“Yes. I can show you the pamphlets.”

“And what kind of certificates are these scholarships for?”

“Degrees Papa, they call them degrees in that part of the world.”

“Ok degrees... why don’t you show me some of the information tied to these degrees. Oh and how many years are these degrees?”

Me and Papa sat at that dinner table for three long hours.

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Expectations change when you travel thousands of miles away from what you know... but thank goodness for timing because landing in Toronto in early August was the most beautiful feeling I have ever felt. Sure there is a growing fear of the unknown, this paper that says *Student Visa* is flimsy at best.

“Remember you are not a citizen, so follow the rules Arjan”, my mother reminded me just before getting on the plane.

Eighteen hours later and I have never felt such a welcoming place... such a different place. Everyone with their continuous greetings of “Hello.” Or “Good day.” Or even “Excuse me”, if they brushed up against me ever-so slightly.

“Do you need a limo today Sir?”

Which is something over a billion Indians know nothing about.

“Sir, a limousine today?”

Even their limousine drivers are polite.

“Can I take you somewhere today, Sir?”

I just smile and walk away.

“Have a good day Sir.”

Which is very unlike the harassment one would expect back home.

“How was your flight Arjan?”

“Surprisingly good... really good in fact.”

“You’ve arrived on a glorious day”, Sai explains.

“I can feel it... beautiful breeze.”

Sai is my first cousin on my Dad’s side, “Canadian summers are nice, not like back home. It’s the winters that will take a little getting used to.”

A concerned shrug by his wide-eyed passenger.

“But I’ll help you pick a good winter jacket... so don’t worry.”

Remembering those advertisements with all that snow.

“Now we just need to get you settled.”

Does not seem to scare this passenger in the least.

“Put on your seat belt... it’s the law here.”

Only this new scent that is enveloping becomes the focus.

“That is a real blue sky.”

Canadian Nature - this new *Temporary Student Visa* thinks while gazing beyond the glass.

“Ten straight days and not a drop of rain.”

Gazing beyond the glass at a clear horizon.

“I slept in the backyard the last few nights under the stars.”

Not like the smoggy skies of back home.

“That sounds wonderful.”

“It was.”

The speedy highway traffic has made sure this new passenger stays glued to the window.

“Lots of tractor-trailers.” Along with a clenched jaw. “This City has become extremely busy, ten years ago it was a lot quieter.”

*Honk.*

“But not anymore that’s for sure.”

*Honk.*

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“Up the stairs, second door on your right is your bedroom. The bathroom is just next to that. Now this is the kitchen we all use... just find a corner of the refrigerator and keep your stuff close together. If you’re going to cook anything on the stove make sure to switch on the fan, the smell can irritate some of the other tenants.”

“Got it. And the backyard?”

“It’s for everybody, some nights we all sit out and tell stories of our crazy Canadian days, the people we meet at our jobs.”

“Jobs?”

“Yup Jobs. You’re going to need to get one right away. Lots of the girls work at Tim Hortons.”

“Tims!”

“Yes Tims.”

The newest tenant flashes a big smile.

“Canadians love their coffee and donuts... they line-up for that stuff day or night.”

“Can I work there?”

“I don’t see why not, they’ll probably put you in the back baking all the donuts.”

Arjan feels his dream is playing out exactly as expected.

“You sure you don’t want to work at Home Depot, or Canadian Tire, in the warehouse?”

“Wooooow Tims... you think I could work in the front?”

Sai’s puzzled response is the first of many... this Student is showing he is ok taking a very different road than his fellow *Visa-holders*.

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By 6am it’s like a cannon went off... triggering another day of Canadian Pathology.

“I need four larges with double cream and sugar ASAP!”

Dawn’s first needed sip of that Pure Pathology.

“Hey A.J. can you get me a box of 50 TimBits, assorted is good.”

It took a few months to get promoted to the *rush hour shift*... which should really be *RUSH HOURS* in big bold letters. Dawn until ten-ish is something to behold. Watching polite Canadians trying their best not to be impolite... as they seek out their fix of Tims; what is in that stuff?

“Ok A.J. I want you to fill up all the empty trays... make sure the TimBits are overflowing, they go quick.” “Got it Boss.” “And prep the ovens, they need to be clean for the morning. What time you coming in?” “Four.” “Good. Start baking right away.” “Yes Boss.” “Ok I’m going home, I’ll see you in the morning.” “Have a good night Boss.” Four months in and I run the dawn shift... the craziest shift of the day. The Anand Clan have been trained to handle a hard day’s work – thanks to Papa and Mama!

By 11am my shift is winding down... I hang out in the small Staff room where most of us look like we’ve just plowed ten acres of rice in the burning heat – and it’s December! Freezing cold mornings greet me when I open the front door of my jammed-packed rooming house of Toronto. The house has been modified for keeping eleven student visa tenants... all of us paying \$900 per month to share kitchens and bathrooms as we navigate our new Country. I’m grateful don’t get me wrong... but I did think Canada would have been a nicer country. I see how they look at me. *We’re happy you’re here. Now do the work we don’t want to do.*

I still wake up grateful everyday.

“Hi Papa. Hi Mama.” “How is it going Arjan? Are you eating enough? What is the weather like? How is the job?”

I sugar-coat the weather – deep winter in Canada is frightful. And the food – well rice with hot sauce and na’an bread is not a complete meal but it’s all I can afford. I’m lucky my Boss let’s me scavenge for some chicken strips and eggs at work when it’s quiet.

“Hey A.J. I need you to come in a little earlier tomorrow.”

What Canadians don’t realize is that Indians lose a lot to live their dreams. Our culture is rich in tradition... and that goes by the wayside when we travel over 6,000 miles to a new land.

“No problem Boss. What time?”

I may be excited to forge ahead with my dreams... but I see the way Canadians look at me.

“Three, can you get here at three.”

I’m invisible.

“Sure Boss.”

Low-end labor is who I am... for now. But a Genius Software Creator is what I have planned for my future.

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A full-time job is supposed to be forty hours per week... apparently it's the law here. The last four weeks it's been fifty-two hours! Plus a full-on course load at Toronto Metropolitan University - my eyes burn something fierce from staring at that damn screen! But my motivation is that flag... that red maple leaf on that white background that flows brilliantly in the air. I pass City Hall every morning and every night... even though it's dark I can still see it, feel it; not sure Canadians understand what I am giving up to contribute to this country! And we can start with double-time, health benefits, and vacation pay!

"How is your day going Arjan?"

"Going good Mama."

"You're eating enough?"

"I am Mama."

"Are you studying enough my son?"

"I am Papa."

"You better Arjan, You better."

It's the same conversation every week.

"I want you to be the best in your class."

"Oh enough Peter, Arjan knows what he has to do. Make sure you eat enough meat."

"I will Mama."

"Say goodbye Peter." "Enjoy Canada my son. I love you."

I can hear my Mama kissing my Papa in the background for his kind words.

"Be safe Arjan, and dress warm."

"I will Mama."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

There's not a single memory of not eating dinner with my family... I can't recall even one minute of alone time in my always-bustling family home.

*Tilting up my phone to play a video.*

If I try to remember my childhood it's one that's full of people, mostly blood, sharing the joys of togetherness that this modern world will never understand. Now I eat alone staring at the latest Bollywood videos on a painfully-small screen.

*Wiping away a homesick tear.*

I miss them so much.

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Fear and Courage are different sides of the same coin - hardly mere words used for just motivation... since I got off that plane four years ago they have instilled in me something I did not own before that first step on terra firma. Some weeks I had so much fear... and some an incredible amount of courage; I was on my journey and that's what made these emotions so close to the surface, I guess. When you are in it, and in it in a strange far-off land, you make the



best of it. I just keep going through some awful days that include six feet of snow and a wind-chill that would freeze your skin raw in minutes.

What am I doing here?, I keep asking the Gods and Goddesses of Ishvara and Ishvari with every painful early-morning step.

Why did I come here?, my brain keeps asking as I perform hard-labor for people who clearly do not appreciate my sacrifices.

Am I really going to make it here?, staring at a screen... studying for an exam that is going to determine my fate.

Maybe my Papa was right?, my eyes burn into the wee hours of the darkness.

*Arjan Piyush Vihaan Anand has learnt so much by leaving his culture... by leaving his familiarities, by leaving a laid-out future in order to find his courage.*

Now I know where real courage comes from... and I really want to be a Canadian!

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“Number 52. Number 52. Is there a number 52 in the room?”

Sit in a chair for ten minutes and I could dose off. “I’m number 52.”

“Do you have your papers?”

“I do.”

“Can I have them?”

The middle-aged lady with no emotion takes my papers... and begins to read them.

At that moment I take a step back... something I’ve learned to do when dealing with paperwork and government officials.

“Is this all you have?”

“Achem... yes.”

“Did you not get an N-68 form?”

“No... no I did not.”

She looks away, shaking her head as if I am bothering her flow to the day. I wonder if she realizes what I have done to be here... what I have accepted, what I have swallowed to be here trying to get to the next step in this country that professes to be *welcoming*. “Ok let’s do this now, pull your chair closer would ya.”

Following her orders like a prison inmate; Mama’s words ring in my head constantly.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get an email with an N-68 form? Government... Jesusss.”

I say nothing... Government Officials ask a lot of rhetorical questions. Sai taught me not to answer everything that comes out of their mouth, just sit and look grateful.

“Ok so you went to Toronto Memorial University.” “Yes.”

“And you took Computer Programming?” “Yes.”

“You graduated?” “Yes, I have my degree right here.”

“Ok good.” Opening up my degree proudly. “Certificate number 746218... Toronto Memorial University.” “Ok where have you been working these last four years?”

“Tim Hortons on Jarvis Street... 6117 Jarvis Street.” “Contact Person?”

“My Manager is Bianca Ferraro.” “Ok. Contact number?”  
“416 717 8094.” “Ok.” Nestled in her chair, Eve Langford leans in towards me. “Now technically your Student Work Visa has expired. This form is what extends it, but for whatever reason you did not get your renewal by email. Still not sure why?”  
From the outside Canada looks like a country that works.  
“But”, leaning in, “you probably have an astronomical rent to pay each and every month, shameful, so keep going to work and I’ll put a rush on this approval.”  
And not wanting to sound arrogant or something like that... but it feels like this country is so ill-prepared for all these hard-working students that just want to get mixed-into the Canadian way.  
“Ok Arjan”, handing back all my paperwork, “here is all your stuff for your files. And thanks for your patience”, with an appreciative smile.  
I paid twelve times the tuition cost of a homegrown student. “Have a good day Miss Langford.”  
That’s fifty-eight thousand dollars! “You as well Arjan.”  
That’s the first time anybody saw it from my perspective.

#### *Chapter 4*

How Dictatorships paint us all as victims... as closed-minded and dreadfully primitive victims. Pick the wrong Politician, the wrong Ideology – even for one damn day – and a new Regime will emerge that will swallow your freedom up whole.

*“Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil...”*

Dream about a better future for your family... for your entire community after a blood-thirsty Regime has cemented its’ hold over all of us.

*“May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host...”*

And you will be risking your life.

*“By the Power of God cast into hell Satan and all the evil spirits who prowl...”*

Evil did not come to power in my country.

*“Throughout the world seeking the ruin of Souls...”*

It disguised itself with plenty of talk of – *“Fairness For Everyone.”*

*“Amen.”*

Only Fools think it is that simple, that easy to explain away... as if we deserved it! My Country was educated and open-minded, trusting in fact – too much so when looking back. My Grandmother used to take a parcel of food down to the Community Center each and every Friday, dropping it on the table with a gigantic smile that was so much a part of her insides. Then she'd turn right around, and head home with a bounce in her step that I remember so clearly... with a bounce that was going to feed her own gigantic family. Salt of the Earth both her and my Grandfather – my Parents are the exact same Souls. I just can't stomach the thought that my fellow humans in the west could possibly see me as prejudice and unkind. Governments don't always represent their People... especially when there are no free elections!

*“Good morning Congregation.”*

The Worshippers of about a hundred or so take a seat in the makeshift basement.

*“Good morning” - the smiling Flock responds.*

The makeshift Church that has been operating in silence for the past year.

*“I would like to welcome every one of you here this morning.”*

That has become a big part of my life.

*“Jesus would like to welcome you all as well.”*

Bigger with each passing month.

*“Jesus wants to tell you that he loves you... and that you are all worth something in the eyes of the Lord.”*

This Government has been indiscriminately shooting at its' citizen for weeks now.

*“Jesus brought buckets of water to the Lepers because he wanted them to know that they were loved by God. Forget your Government isolating you in these colonies... Jesus said as he washed their hands and feet clean. Forget your Government's actions against your beautiful Souls. That is not God's work in the least.”*

Since first grade I have had to absorb a brainwashing movement that has nowhere to hide... nowhere to release the truth. All my teachers have been revising history so much that I must be absolutely distrustful of *the other* in a way that makes me uneasy.

At the dinner table I could feel my Parent's unease, see my Parent's stress with what the Iranian Regime's *educational system* was teaching. “I will teach you myself every Sunday.” My father announced after he became overwhelmed by my reporting.

That year my Parents took me to their Church for the first time; they said they didn't want to take me until I was baptized.

Guess they felt they had no choice.

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“Who wants to explain what they think Holden Caulfield was thinking at this very moment?”

Half the class raises their hand with an eagerness that delights their teacher.

“Maryam, why don’t you tell us what Holden was thinking when Stradlater came back from his late-night date?”

Teaching is not merely an occupation.

“Ahem... well I think Stradlater is everything Holden wishes he could be.”

It is a personal calling.

“He’s popular with both the girls and the guys... and plays all the sports well.”

A personal calling with a beautiful scent.

“Why does Holden feel the need to challenge Stradlater physically if he knows he will lose?”

A scent that wafts beautifully for how it is supposed to be done, with just the right amount of pushing and pulling. Three hands go up in this all-girls school located in the heart of overcrowded Tehran.

“Holden resents Stradlater because he’s not like Stradlater... deep down he really wishes he could be more like Stradlater.”

Deeply-Religious. Rich. Poor. Or Secretly-Secular.

Another hand goes up eagerly. “Yes Vida.”

“I think people can really resent what they aren’t, what they really want to be but know they just can’t.”

“And where does that come from?”

“It’s Freudian if you asked me”, another student adds who gladly took off her head-scarf the second the classroom door was closed, “my father says we all have secret desires that we can’t share with the world”, Fara Doojian confirms with the sound of confidence.

Every person in today’s Islamic Republic of Iran understands that reality.

“What about Jane Gallagher?”

“Jane Gallagher hits Holden’s machismo hard.”

“Ya right in the gut!”

“Men are so stupid.”

“And weak.”

The participation rate in Esther Dabiri’s class is always 100%.

“Maybe it’s not his machismo?”

Miss Dabiri throws out a question.

“Not sure what you mean Miss Dabiri??”

The Class failed to pick up their teacher’s sharp turn.

“Machismo is always considered such a bad word... always full of chauvinism. What if?? Now listen carefully class... what if Holden’s machismo is coming from a different place, from a different way of thinking?”

Challenging is the most important skill in teaching.

“What if Holden is nothing like Stradlater, nothing at all.”

And teaching at its core is about earning the trust of your students.

“What if his machismo is only for good... let’s say.”

And trust is how you open young minds to be better.

“You mean there is a good machismo??”, Fara Doojian answers from a class struggling with their teacher’s new concept.

Open minds equal successful minds.

“Why not... why can't machismo be for good. Why can't a man have machismo that is only meant for protecting??”

“So what you are saying is machismo can have two meanings... two ways of looking at it.”

“I am saying exactly that.”

There is that beautiful scent again.

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“Freedom to read any book you want... to read and discuss any book you can find in this big interesting world!”

You remember your father's face when he uttered such words for the first time... when he looked fierce in his declaration of a world that had frustratingly escaped him.

“When I was growing up the curriculum was full of the classics... was full of any book you could get your hands on. How could that ever be a bad thing!”

My father's face showed emotion I had never seen before.

“I argued for so many nights with my fellow students... with those naïve students that thought the Shah needed to go... that he was destroying our country.”

When my father started really going my mother just sat there and looked like she wanted to be somewhere else.

“Was the country corrupt... you bet your life! But it had been corrupt for centuries, run by a handful of families. We could have fixed that later - first we needed to pull people out of an awful poverty, teach them how to read and write... and understand basic math. Geez Louise!”

At these house parties she always looked so beautiful to me.

“You think you can fix every problem all at once??”

Probably the most glamorous couple in all of Tehran.

“Didn't Europe teach us enough about mixing Church and State?!”

Two Professors that could have contributed so much to their country.

“Come on... we were so naïve.”

That could have contributed so much if they had not been shut out entirely from the policy-making class.

Growing up was not easy in the Dabiri household... sure there was lots of love and support... but there was also a clear divide of two very distinct worlds that I needed to understand... that I needed to navigate.

“What are you reading Esther?”, routinely came at the dinner table from either Parent.

I understood that meant here at home and not from school.

“Anna Karenina.”

“Oh Tolstoy”, my father smiles, “spent many an afternoon trying to digest that behemoth.”

“It's so dramatic Papa.”

“Yes it is... Tolstoy was a master of imagery... was a master of painting the grandest stage for his drama.” “Train stations... he really loves train stations.”

“And trains too, he uses them to describe the clear divide that existed in Czarist Russia.

Transportation was a service for the upper classes, for the socialites of society.”

“Makes me sad when he describes the despair of the peasants.”

“Class divide is the cancer of society, of any society. You see it here. What a crock the Islamists fed us about making society fairer, more accountable to the people. Government doesn’t do that, the people do that. Government just provides the roadmap for doing it is all. And religion in government... don’t get me started!”

“Ok Siamek that’s enough for today”, Mama insists.

Never does a meal go by without Papa getting too heated for Mama’s liking.

“Let’s talk about our next trip up to the Caspian, can we please.”

This tight family of three loves to drive up to the Caspian Sea for the day.

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“Can we see past our prejudices?”

It was a learning day like no other.

“Can we see past our pre-conceived notions?”

A day that embedded itself in the minds of two very idealistic Souls.

“Can we really be objective when it comes to justice?”

Questions that had never been contemplated before.

“What is justice... really, what does it mean?”

Questions that a burgeoning new society was trying to ask itself.

“What is the highest form of justice that we can hope for as a society?”

That it was trying to shed from a historical cloak of religion.

Siamek Dabiri and Farah Ardalan had glanced at each... longer than just innocent glances that is for sure. Everyone in Professor Kashkari’s *Modern Justice* class definitely had a curiosity buried deep in their character. Education in 1970’s Iran was taking on modern subjects at a rate no country in the region was taking on; from head-scarfs to mini-skirts... Tehran was changing fast, faster than any place in this religious jurisdiction of geography. Western Capitalists were flocking to the country, bringing with them a European Flair that was sweeping over the People like a sandstorm. Walk through Iran’s biggest Universities and it was impossible not to be alarmed – older generations walking in full garb with their eyes down – while younger generations, Teachers and Students with their erect spines looking everywhere with giant smiles. Dreaming about the future... dreaming about what is possible for their country’s future. The times were in flux... swagger from one side... anxiety from the other.

I always knew where my Parents stood!

“Ok Class... I want to talk about Marriage Law.”

“Law?? There is no Law if one side has all the power.”

“You got that right girl!”

“Men own us”, says another female classmate.

“How many People think marriage law gives men ownership over women?”

Every female hand lifts... except for a few in their hijabs.

“Ok this is something we need to talk about”, Professor Kashkari starts to stroll around the

room, “let’s go back to a starting point, a question that can lay the foundation for this type of debate.”

Modern Iran was developing discourse like this in every University in the country; Queen Fara Pahlavi, the glamorous Empress of this quickly-developing nation, made higher learning her main priority. Creating a scoring system that set out an ambitious record for every classroom in the country. Big Cities moved fast... smaller rural areas did not.

The divide was apparent.

“How do we move away from a Patriarchal system? Into one that is far more equal? Far more beneficial to both participants in a marriage?”

“You blow it up and start over!” A young Turk shouts with utter contempt.

“Ok ok... anarchists never get anywhere, in my humble opinion”, Professor Kashkari’s work looks to be starting.

“You really think you can make those fanatics happy?”, Farah Ardalan asks without too much volume.

“Modernizing a country, an ancient country with ancient beliefs is hard... it’s going to be really hard. All you young People here today are going to have the responsibility of respecting the past while changing the future. Breaking traditions, some very closely held ways is not an easy task... it creates resentment, animosity, and eventually bloodshed.”

“You need to break a few eggs to make an omelette”, Siamek Dabiri engages his Professor.

“Very true... moving away from myths and traditions into a more egalitarian method of law is going to be a must... but internal bloodshed is also a real possibility from that, a real result of trying to change those hearts and minds.”

“So be it”, Siamek makes sure his Professor feels his passion. “Ok class, I want us to look at the next book on the reading list as something that can really add to this debate – To Kill A Mockingbird shows the reader what the lens of justice in the American South looks like. What those closely-held beliefs mean for the oppressed, for those without power when they get into a courtroom.”

Siamek & Farah love to learn... together.

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Definitely not a basement... *hymns singing loudly*... definitely not a sanctuary that is in life-saving hiding.

“Peace be upon you all today for taking the time to be here.”

*The Choir erupts in a full-on melody after the smiling Priest welcomes us all.*

*“Joy to the World.”*

It is the first time I have ever been to a country where all religions are most-certainly free to congregate.

*“The Lord is come.”*

To sing.

*“Let Earth receive her King.”*

To support one another in their community.

*“Let every heart prepare him room.”*

To release all that is good from our insides.

*“And heaven and nature sing.”*

My insides feel free... free and fantastic in a way I have never felt before.

*“And heaven... and heaven... and nature sing.”*

We are in Canada for our first trip outside of Iran as a family; the discussion at the dinner table lasted for months. “I want to see Paris.” “I want to go to the Vatican.” “How about a safari in Africa?” Each one of us had a different destination. “Canada... what about Canada?” Until my father threw that out. “Don’t they say Canada is the United States if it was run by the Swiss.” Me and Mama were interested. “And all that green space.” It was a few years after 9/11 and both my mother and father really appreciated how that country handled themselves in the face of such rising intolerance. “It seems everyone we know is emigrating to Toronto or Vancouver.” Xenophobia was taking hold of the middle east and beyond.

*“Joy to the earth... the Savoir reigns.”*

The massive Cathedral echoes like nothing my ears have ever heard before.

*“Let all their songs employ.”*

The Giant stain-glass windows allow sunlight to enter with many different colors.

*“While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains.”*

My voice is loud in here... in this magnificent country that I am so happy we chose to visit.

*“Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat the sounding joy. Repeat... repeat... repeat the sounding joy.”*

My faith is free here... free and excited for sure.

*“And heaven... and heaven... and nature sing.”*

Never have I felt an awakening like this.

“Peace be upon you Mama.”

*Kiss Kiss.*

“I love you Mama.”

“Love you my Princess.”

“Peace be upon you Papa.”

*Kiss Kiss.*

“I love you Esther.”

“Love you Papa.”

“Peace be upon you”, a smiling grey-haired woman closes in.

“Thank you... and Peace be upon you as well”, my father responds like never before.

“Oh come here you beautiful girl”, moving in for a hug, “oh you feel so good, so pure with those big gorgeous eyes”, squeezing my reluctance right out of me.

“What a beautiful family you have”, the stranger’s tall thin grey-haired partner adds.

Dictatorships don’t foster intimacy like this?? - pops right in my head from that amazing hug.

“Thank you, thank you so much”, my father looks lighter than I’ve ever seen.

“Peace be upon you”, my mother offers our new group of friends an original authenticity.

“To you as well.”

This went on for some time... visitors approaching from every corner... never have I absorbed so much pure kindness. Sure our basement Church in Tehran has lots of love – but with a hundred or so Parishioners hiding from those street-level Thugs it just can’t feel like this.

Guess the Soul can feel freedom; who knew?

“Peace be upon you.”

I surely did not know such a feeling existed, to be honest.



“Peace be upon you.”

There must be a thousand smiling faces.

“Peace be upon you.”

All swarming us with kind words and a full heart.

“Come join us for our luncheon.”

My country has been infected with fanaticism.

“You must join us for some lunch.”

Which is everything faith is not supposed to be!

“Welcome to St. Michaels Congregation, it is so great to have new People join us.”

Faith gets poisoned when it is not pure!

“Come on... off we go now”, grabbing my hand and my Mama’s with a gigantic smile.

Quite a crew these Congregants are... smiles so big and laughs so loud that merge with a compassion that makes you want to apply for citizenship right here and now.

“I would like to propose a toast... to our new friends Siamek & Farah & Esther.”

Nobody asked where we were from.

“Here here.”

“May God bless you.”

“God bless you all.”

“Ok everyone now let’s eat.”

Canada has left a mark on me I was not expecting.

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“I thought at first I would call this class – Classic literature in books.” Walking around the front of the class. “But I thought it might come across as too pretentious. After all everyone does not, everyone can not believe that these novels are all classics.” No tweed jacket with patches from this Professor. “My job is to teach these books, to pick out all the nuances that are inside the author’s head.” This Professor is here to change our society. “That get inside the author’s head and crack his or her code of creativity.” Starting with the most curious young people in the country. “You are all here to judge these works, liking them is not part of the curriculum, studying them, understanding them, really learning what makes a novel become a novel that can endure, that can last throughout the generations.” To break free from the cloak of the past. “What I want you all to understand first-off is that disagreements are going to happen, in fact they must happen, they must happen within these four walls in order for us to study literature properly. Because only through discourse can we study, can we grow in our own understanding of great art.”

I still remember when my Papa would reminisce about those early days of study... what it was like to be amongst the *new normal* that was flowing throughout his University Campus. “There was this one Professor, Professor Bandari, he really affected me. He really opened my mind to literature, to seeing beyond the words on the page.” He always said it was better to grow up in a

country that was going from dark to light than from light to dark. I didn't truly understand what he was talking about until my first trip to Canada... but most especially from my first Sunday inside that awesome St. Michael's Church.

"Mini-skirts and wide-leg jeans mixed with hijabs and burkas... my graduating class was a mix of old Iran and new Iran... the excitement was amazing. I wish you could have seen what your Mother and I were raised with."

"Oh Siamek enough of the nostalgia."

"Nostalgia? Farah you have given up is what you have done."

Mama stands, and leans in to grab a few empty plates from the table... taking them to the counter without a word. I know her feeling... my mother and father have become polar opposites on this topic. My Papa won't let himself be defeated, never, he won't let himself be smothered by a crushing Islamic ideology that we must all live with when we go out that door... when we exit those high walls and iron gate of our property.

"I am going to give you a book that I want you to read... that I want you to really understand. It will explain adolescent angst to you a little bit more, and the importance of it, of rebelling against the way things are suppose to be by all those close-minded older people."

"Oh Siamek enough already."

My Papa's stare let's my Mama know he is not giving up. "Read it and then let's talk."

Her sigh says the opposite as she loads the dishwasher.

"You need to question everything in this life... you need to be aware of everything that is being taught to you!" My father's voice quickly gets serious. "A Teacher needs to create an open journey for learning or else this place will never change."

My Mama wipes away a tear.

"Me and your mother had the best education you could ever dream of... Professor Kashkari, Professor Bandari... these were great teachers, passionate communicators. They did not teach us what to think, they taught us how to think", along with a nostalgic smile. "Give me one second", getting up, and leaving the kitchen. "Hand me those glasses Esther, would you please."

"Sure Mama."

"Thanks."

"Here it is... The Catcher in the Rye. I want you to read this right away", passing it to his daughter like it is the most valuable book in the world. "I will Papa." "Good."

My Father's enthusiasm for books is still apparent... my Mother's not so much - but Iran for a woman is far more soul-crushing than it is for a man!

"J.D. Salinger was an interesting guy."

Studying the jacket of this weathered book.

"His own story is full of the worst trauma you can ever imagine."

Papa has taught me that only through pain can we create the most profound art.

"He saw things that made him question everything around him... just like me and your mother."

Starting out as a student protest on the streets of Tehran day after day, week after week, gained a momentum amongst the youth of my country that I have only ever felt once in my life. And that experience changed me forever.

"We hit the streets peacefully, not one ounce of violence amongst us. I remember getting up on the curb and the words just came out of my mouth. Brothers & Sisters we must unite for our future, for creating a fair and just society for every Iranian of this country."

My Father is painting what it was like to hit the streets against the Shah... against the tyranny of corruption of the late seventies.

“Islamists. Communists. Secularists. We all got along for that one common goal.”

I have heard the same story from all of my Parent’s generation.

“We wanted to share the wealth so we could build something for everybody.”

At every dinner party the men would eventually bring up the past, always during the serving of tea and dessert... like it was pre-programmed in each one of them.

“What we did not realize, what we did not take seriously, is that religion and government never mix.” “Never!”, my Mom forcefully adds from the sink. My Dad looks away, straight through the back window of our house, as if he is looking into the past. “Read this book... I want to talk about it with you, yes I do.”

What a beautiful thing to have Parents who are both Professors, not heads of their Departments of course, but respected and admired Professors by every one of their students.

“I will start it tonight.”

Their truthful Souls did not allow them to suck-up to their Islamic Overlords and secure those endless promotions.

“Good.”

Which was fine by me.

-----

Once the news media, controlled tightly by our black-eyed dirty-bearded government of course, had started to announce the results of the general election before the voting booths had even closed - well something snapped inside all of us.

The mood changed right there and then.

Everybody went outside as if we all needed to or we would simply explode with frustration. My Papa always talked about a *Black Swan* event... but those were just words until something really happens.

How was I suppose to understand??

We congregated in tea houses, parks... and social media of course. Government monitoring of those virtual meeting rooms had not fully taken hold, allowing us to safely bypass their censors was common knowledge back then. We all knew how to stay connected and not threaten ourselves with getting in the hands of those savage Paramilitary Robots.

Ten years later when I was safely out of the country that was clearly not the case - the horrors were unspeakable; it rocked my insides. I was safe in Canada with Kavon & Sara in our cramped little basement apartment, which felt like a castle by the way. My Parents revolutionary days were long in the past... but worrying for my country’s quest for freedom never left me. I prayed about that and only that every Sunday at St. Michael’s Church; the love around me helped a ton.

Knowing Sara can grow up to be anything she wants, can listen to anything she wants, can dress anyway she wants does sooth the pain just a little bit. I'm not sure my new country understands what losing their freedom means??? Yet I am so grateful to having a future here in Canada... to having a path to citizenship. I just want a job, a permanent teaching job so I can show what I have inside of me – so I can give back.

*We are meeting at Azadi square at 9, after the sun goes down. Everyone must bring a candle so we can show how many of us there are... and so the cameras can't video our faces.*

Flashes across my phone at 6pm that night. I went upstairs to take a shower. I knew I would need to leave at 8 to get there for 9. I was not going to take the train, too many people, too many military police, and too many of those 1984 cameras. If my Parents taught me anything it is to never trust this Government... or your neighbor; terrible thing when a society turns on each other! It plays right into the tyranny. You hear that my fellow Canadians!

“Hello Esther.”

“Hi Arman. Hello Nasrin.”

Hugs for everyone.

You can feel the emotion filling-up the air.

“Esther my sweet”, an old school friend moves in for a hug filled with immense curiosity.

It's like nothing I have ever felt before.

“Sharooz”, mixing our fear of the unknown with our support for being here.

Calmness... responsible calmness is what I am feeling from everyone around me... and there are so many faces that keep coming... endless streams of scared faces full of determination that add to the crowd... fitting like a perfect chain onto an already large chain... no pushing... just fitting together. “You'll see it one day my daughter, human courage is amazing despite the consequences.” My Papa once said. “It moves mountains.”

I have never forgotten that expression.

The gathering crowd represents every facet of Iranian life... women in hijabs, old women, young women, families of women holding hands... the Government has gone too far it seems.

“Where is my vote?” blares out from the bullhorn, “Where has our vote gone?”, fills the air.

I am feeling connected to every one of the People like never before.

“Brothers & Sisters we are asking nicely, we are asking to know where is our vote?”

My friends and I move a few feet to the side... trying to get a clearer view of who is doing the yelling??

“Where is the only thing we own in this country??”

The crowd cheers!!

“Where is the only thing we own in this country??”

“Yes!!!”

“Absolutely!!!”

“Give it back!!!”

“Where is the one thing you cannot take from us??”

The cheering grows louder.

The young man up on the ledge of the statue has the crowd full of emotion. “We are asking nicely... we will always ask nicely. We are not violent because we are united!!!”, flows from his mouth as if he has practised this many times before. Us University students have been waiting for this moment forever... we have studied the great revolutionaries of history... in secret of course.

“We are going to walk together as Iranians!!!”

Only students are allowed into those private discussions at my University.

“We are united for our rights!!!”

The crowd starts to move forward.

“Now Where is our vote?”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

As the crowd slowly moves forward.

“Where is the only thing we own in this country??”, the man at the front screams into his bullhorn.

“Where is our vote?”, the crowd forcefully returns.

My Superpower has always been to remember faces... to merely take a glance... and remember all the specifics that make a face recognizable. *Click. Click. Click.* Like a polaroid snapping an imprint forever... my eyes keep scanning... taking in every face in the crowd... with the glare of many candles illuminating... illuminating both the courage and the fear.

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

I was raised to “Question Everything!”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

To be “Aware of Everything!”

“*Rai Man Kajasti?*”

“Where is our vote?”

Because “The Regime puts its’ own among us!”

The Crowd has swelled beyond anything I was expecting; I always wished I had a sister, had a close sister for events like this. “Esther! Esther!” “Hey Friya”, plus a warm embrace. My friends will have to do. “Amazing isn’t it?” “Sure is”, walking together as a growing group. There is no way to see how far back this crowd goes?? But the ground beneath our feet is trembling so there must be plenty. My Father’s strong words at the table are working overtime in my head.

“Where is our vote?”

“Where is our vote?”

The flickering candles are creating a strength inside of me.

“Be aware Esther.”

It is a feeling I have never had before.

“Where is our vote?”

The entire country feels like it is together... together as one in this election-rigged darkness... yet we have more than enough light to provide us all courage.

“Where is our vote?”

One can only understand this type of power.

“Where is our vote?”

When you are amongst it.

“Where is our vote?”

Amongst a *Black Swan Event*.

-----

Fourteen nights in a row of the exact same behaviour.  
I kiss my Parents with extra strength... and they return with a strong squeeze.  
I exit the front door... and then close the iron gate at 8.  
I join my friends slowly over the next hour, picking up some at different spots on the journey as we all bravely... and excitingly... head to the Azadi Square area – where the start of our walk for change begins! Every City in Iran has duplicated our behaviour... providing strong Young Leadership with a bullhorn, flickering candles, patriotic songs, and a slow collective walk for human dignity. It fills my Soul... it fills our Soul; but I know I will never be able to explain it to anybody in my new adopted country – so I won't try.

“Where is our vote?”

The crowd starts to move forward with our call.

*“Rai Man Kajasti?”*

“Where is our vote?”

*“Rai Man Kajasti?”*

And keeps walking as one.

“Where is our vote?”

*“Rai Man Kajasti?”*

The crowd feels powerful.

“Where is our vote?”

*“Rai Man Kajasti?”*

More powerful than ever.

“Where is our vote?”

“Where is the only thing we own in this country??”, the man at the front screams into his bullhorn.

“Where is our vote?”, the crowd forcefully returns.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

The crowd scatters.

*Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

They are shooting at us from the rooftops.

-----

A weekend trip to Turkey that I need to take if I want to change my life.

I finally realized that I have had enough!

The Canadian Embassy in Tehran abruptly closed in 2012 – something about nefarious activities going on by the Iranian Secret Police in all parts of Canada.

Watching young women being harassed by the Morality Police on my way into work day after day... after day... after day... really wears on you. This one particular early-morning subway ride into work hit me like a ton of bricks. Two dreadfully-dour faces wrapped in their black chadors

moved in on this poor innocent soul. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone!", she began to scream. My heart sank.

"Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

When they called for back-up everyone on the train knew this was not going to end well.

"Leave me alone. Leave me alone." The two women needed help... and three black-eyed hulks started to provide that help. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone." The memories of those shootings back in 2009... back when we were so hopeful and brave. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone." So united. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone." Now my country seems broken. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone." Broken and indifferent. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

*The subway car stops after one of them pushes a button next to the doors.*

"Leave me alone. Leave me alone." These men have her subdued... one is holding her arms, while the other two have her by each leg. My insides are doing somersaults... just like they were when they were shooting at us... shooting at us at our peaceful marches! What I saw! What I felt! It took so long for me to recover... for my generation to recover! "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

They crossed a line and we've never been the same since. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

*The subway doors close.*

I knew that I could not raise a family here anymore; but the thought of leaving without my Parents causes me enormous pain in the pit of my stomach.

-----

Waiting in that line since dawn. "Next!" It feels like I'm someone without a country.

"We're next", my mother offers with an upbeat grin.

At that second I realize what she has had to do to herself in order to survive... in order to survive the dark misogyny!

"You two are next", the Guard opens the door for us.

Waiting outside only adds to my shame.

"Proceed to your right ladies... in that direction. Then take the first door on your left, please", his polite words echo.

"So this is it", I mumble to myself.

I then grab my mother's hand... and together, after a short hallway walk, we enter the first door on our left.

"Welcome to the Government of Canada ladies. Please take a seat and make yourselves comfortable."

Excited for sure... but also strangely like I am betraying my own People.

"Canada is a multi-cultural country of many nations, many Iranians have decided to call Canada their home." Her genuine nature cements my nerves. "Let's start the paperwork because this can take a few years of waiting", passing us both a pen, "but don't worry, you are both exactly what we are looking for", plus a welcoming smile. "Now let's open your booklets to page 1."

It's like St. Michaels Church all over again.

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“Ok Shirin... you can close the door now.”

The second that solid metal door closes... pushed shut by a slight girl with big eyes for open-minded study... every girl removes their headscarf like it had just been set on fire.

“Now let’s discuss last night’s assignment.”

There are no spies in Esther Dabiri’s class.

“I want to discuss the importance of legal representation... and the vitalness that everyone, regardless of color or religion, gets a responsible form of legal representation.”

This teacher knows she must raise the emotional temperature in order to truly *teach* her class.

“Now what if an Ayatollah needed legal representation? In fact, what if that Ayatollah was Ayatollah Khomeini himself that was charged with a crime?”

“Let him rot.”

“Hang him.”

“That man does not deserve justice.”

“Now hang on... just hang on”, circling the classroom. “Now I understand why that man stirs up so much hate in here, and to be honest I feel the same way. That Man has so much blood on his hands that justice seems like a privilege he does not deserve.”

“You are damn right on that one!”

“That man killed my Uncle.”

“Mine just disappeared.”

“My Mom’s medical career was stolen from her because she’s a woman.”

A good teacher knows when to allow all that student emotion to be released.

“Both my Parents never became Tenured Professors because of that man’s bullshit.”

And when to add it emphatically herself.

“But let’s forget about him for a moment, let’s just agree that every charged defendant, every person brought in front of a judge should have a standard of representation that guarantees a real system... a real foundation for representation. Otherwise... well... otherwise without a code of conduct you have nothing, truly nothing.”

“I would never represent him if I was a lawyer.”

“Legal systems. Medical systems. Even Educational systems. They are only as successful as when they work for the lower classes”, strolling counterclockwise, “a society is measured by these systems pure and simple”, pacing hypnotically, “Atticus Finch represented Tom Robinson, an illiterate black man accused of raping a young white woman, that action alone might have made him a lawyer... but the fact that he chose to represent him to the best of his ability made him a hero, regardless of the outcome.”

*Teachers truly are born.*



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Silence. The shock of silence. They called it a mystery virus... after Italy we were the second country of the planet to get smacked with that unknown killer.

“Ok let’s see here”, walking in quickly.

Sanctions for decades... People in the West made sure the innocents here lacked the basic tools to fight this raging infection. Never would anybody from this city, from this month in 2020 that does not want to end... never would anybody not choose to be vaccinated... “Jab me Doc.” Is how everyone I know would insist. The Covid spring of 2020 hit like a biblical plague.

“His oxygen levels are low... increase the gas another 20%.”

“Yes Doctor.”

“Doctor, is there anything we can do.” He looks away, tired and gaunt. “Keep him hydrated.” Only six months later that same doctor would fall prey to the virus himself.

“Thank you Doctor.” My Mother has been in shock from my father’s rapid deterioration.

“Follow protocol please.” The Doctor asks before turning... and fleeing. “We will.”

I go over and hug my mother. “Come on Mama let’s sit you down, and get you some water.”

The email came from out of nowhere; I had pretty much given up on Canada – after all never ever would I leave my father and mother in this state.

*The Government of Canada would like to congratulate you on being accepted for their citizenry. Your date for entry and processing into Canada has been set for November 1<sup>st</sup> to November 5<sup>th</sup> 2020. Any concerns in not meeting those entry dates should be brought to our attention as soon as possible.*

*True. Patriot. Love.*

*Minister of Immigration*

*Pierre Frazeau*

*c/o Sean Spencer @immigrationcanada 613 874 6555*

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Overcome with emotion the second we landed.

“Welcome to Toronto”, the Pilot announces to his weary passengers.

I held on to my beautiful Sara’s hand, and took a deep stare over at Kavon. What a journey it has been... my body is full of emotion that has been piling up since I was little. Burying my father in those overcrowded cemeteries broke my heart; my country is going through the worst of it. The Government has no clue how to handle any type of governance, so of course this pandemic is going to be a mess. My Mother promised me she would stay away from the crowds, wear her mask, and basically live indoors. I cried and cried when we said goodbye... she insisted we needed to leave, that it was my time, my family’s time to begin the task of building a new life in Canada.

“I’ll come when you’re settled, I promise”, she insisted.

I wonder if Canadians truly understand what it takes to leave everything you know and love behind???

My appointment is set for November 2<sup>nd</sup> at ten o’clock - nervous would be an understatement. I went over my paperwork too many times to remember, even had Kavon check it. He’s an electrical engineer with deep incurable OCD... which makes him the best kind of checker. His paperwork had already been completed by his employer, which then arrived in his inbox four months later with all his work permits and immigration papers. Seems - *I’m just a teacher who loves to teach!* So I’ll have to fill out all my forms by myself??

“I’ll go outside and get a cab.”

“Mama Mama... look at all the snow.”

I’m frozen in place.

“Mama Mama... it looks so beautiful.”

Big flakes keep falling from the sky... resting on the huge piles on the ground.

I grab my daughter’s hand a little tighter as Kavon leaves the airport.

“I can’t wait to play in all that snow.”

And realize for the first time what my future is.

“I really can’t wait to play in all that snow.”

And what I need to get used to.

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“Ok Miss Dabiri why don’t you take a seat.”

“Thank you Miss Wineberg.”

“Now let’s get started, shall we.”

“Sounds good”, keeping all her paperwork handy.

“I see here that you are a teacher with a lot of experience... a lot a lot in fact.”

“Yes, I have plenty of experience in English literature... teaching the classics you know.”

“I see.”

“And I also have experience teaching remedial classes for those hard-to-teach kids.”

“God bless you for that.”

“My father taught me so much in that area”, looking down with sadness.

“He must be a great father.”

“He was.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“He just passed away... from covid. It’s really bad back home.”

“It doesn’t seem to be getting any better here... my kids have been home for months. Some days I think I’m going to go crazy being cooped up with them.”

“Yes... it definitely is not good keeping kids away from their schooling.”

“I agree fully.”

Esther is nervous... full of a dry mouth as she leans into Miss Judith Wineberg, an overweight Gatekeeper who is set to assimilate her into her Canadian work life. It has been stressful for sure... not knowing where and when she will get her own classroom of kids so she can sink her teeth into what she does best. The wait is wearing on her... she has never been without her own classroom since graduation over a decade ago.

“Now everything has checked out on our end... we were waiting for some paperwork from your university. Which seems to have arrived a few days ago. Which is good”, ruffling through the many files spread out on her desk.

Esther remains calm and just waits.

“Now I know this is going to sound crazy... but you will be starting out as a supply teacher in district four... here is the map of the city that shows you where that is.” Leaning in. “Now if you see here... these are the schools that you’ll be working at. It will vary. It will vary depending on the needs of each school.” Esther does not like the sound of this. “I will give you a contact person that will guide you through all of this. Talk to her and she will get you started.”

Esther leans back... absorbing her new reality.

“I know what your thinking... and to be honest I agree. Someone with your experience should be getting their own classroom right away. But here in this country, in this city, we’re just not equipped to be doing the right thing right off the bat.”

“But I don’t understand??”

“I know... just stay patient, please.”

I had a line-up of countries that wanted me asap.