

## FICTION

# Asylum

Mina Sharif • December, 2024



I adjust the headscarf that I've allowed to fall loosely around my neck. I'll let it stay there. I've skipped wearing it for most of this trip, but tonight's dinner is with Afghans and I need a scarf near me to feel comfortable.

We drive past endless streets of tightly spaced houses. One after another, identical. I love that in America, there are no walls to block

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grass. Occasionally on chairs by the front doors, where elderly people rock back and forth, looking out at the street. If we stay in America, would we have a house here or would we be able to move straight to Hollywood? I've seen on the internet that California has many walls and gates like the luxurious homes in Kabul.

"We are from Afghanistan," my brother says to the Uber Driver.

In America, Masi and I are constantly answering questions about where we're from. People seem to know right away that we are not local, although we are both in jeans. Maybe it's like back home, in Kabul, where I can tell from the way someone walks or the kind of shoes they're wearing that they are visitors. Here, people also hear us speak in Dari, our native language, to each other.

"Mash'Allah! Welcome, brother and sister. I am from Iraq, also much danger, like Afghanistan. Good you leave."

We're here as guests because I star in a TV show in Afghanistan. I've spoken so much about it already at screenings and presentations for days on end that I don't jump in to elaborate. I leave my brother on his own to continue chatting with him.

"We are here for a short trip. We are invited for dinner tonight. *InshAllah*, Saturday, we return to Afghanistan," says Masi.

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Afghanistan. When my brother is taking time to think, he is impossible to read.

Our trip is a week-long promotional tour arranged by American donors. A vehicle to show the American donors how projects like NAZO, the sitcom I star in, has empowered the women of my country. We were met with applause at every conference room screening as the audiences marveled at my portrayal of a young woman in an office setting. *It's like Ugly Betty, but set in Afghanistan! Brilliant!* The reviews are reassuring and they keep hinting at approving funding for another season. I smile at their praises but Kabul and filming the show feel like distant memories right now, as I imagine us staying here for good. I gaze at the houses and try to imagine this being home.

Masi has been quiet as he accompanies me to the meetings, photo shoots and lunches; the tense decision of claiming asylum in the United States has been sitting with him.

The driver looks at my brother through the rearview mirror as if our return to Afghanistan is the most absurd thing he's heard in a long time. He begins to tell us about his Afghan neighbor and how they love to share kabab dinners together. As he and my brother chat about grilled meat, I silently pray Masi will decide he's on board to stay. He doesn't want to leave Afghanistan and I hate asking him to.

seventeen at that time. He was just twenty, but he immediately took charge of supporting me, our fourteen-year-old brother, and our mother. Masi is under a lot of pressure but he still has a freedom in Afghanistan I've never experienced. He can do whatever job he wants and it will never get the level of criticism that I do for acting. The whispers and comments aren't something men have to deal with the way women do. Masi can walk down any street and never get stared at or spoken to the way I do as a young woman. Masi also has a fiancé, and while he doesn't admit it, he's completely in love with her. On the morning of our flight, she was crying as if someone had died, begging him to promise he would be back. I could hear her through the phone as Masi and I took a taxi to the airport. At the time, I couldn't help but giggle at their theatrics.

Masi's roots in Afghanistan mean everything to him. He works at a pharmacy, has found love, and maintains the two-story house in Wazir Akbar Khan that our father passed on to us. My mother's eyes light up at the sound of 'M' before Masi's whole name can even be said. I understand why he doesn't want to leave. I empathize with his disdain for the scrutiny during his visa application to join me on this trip. There were a lot of hurdles getting him approved, even with our official invitation. "If America is this unwelcoming when they extend the invite..." he would mumble to himself. And it's true, they gave him a hard time with a lot of questions. But I was met with encouragement about my acting. Something rare in my own community. America is my chance, my opportunity to build a career. We need to stay.

between us on the seat. I'd been so preoccupied about asylum that I'd have come empty handed if not for Masi. "She'll like the red flowers; they match her hair. Khala Arezo reminds me of Madarjan," Masi smiled.

"She gave you *naaz* like our mother does," I teased, knowing that Masi had taken to her as soon as she'd pinched his cheek and said "You must be missing Afghan food, come over please and have a meal with us."

All day Masi had fixated on what Afghan food might be served, while I've been gently reminding him that this family is a safe space to ask advice about asylum. Masi hasn't said he would be willing to talk to them, but he also hasn't refused. "Robina, I know it's important to you, just let me think. It's a really big decision. I need some rice in my belly first." He calmed me with the teasing, but I'm still anxious.

We are greeted by Khala Arezo and her warm smile, outside the front door of her house. She's dressed fashionably in all black and her hair is styled with curls. I wish I'd left my scarf at the hotel. She begins to wave in the driver for dinner, which makes me smile. He is hired and not a personal acquaintance, we explain. She ushers us into a tall narrow foyer. A tall man with glasses and a teenage boy, perhaps fifteen or sixteen, smile at us.

kids I saw at the shopping center.

“And this is your *Kaka* Ehsan,” she says, pointing to her husband. He has the same dimpled smile as Billy, with a receding hairline. He greets us in a mix of English and Dari.

“Masi *jan*, Robina *jan*, *khush Amadain*, come on in.”

We are ushered straight to a dining table, and I’m suddenly conscious of how much later we have arrived than the invitation time. I hadn’t factored in that they may stick to strict timelines, uncommon with Afghan gatherings.

Khala Arezo and Billy bring the last of the serving dishes to an already abundant spread at the large dining table. Tall white candles sit at the center, and our now honorary uncle, Kaka Ehsan carefully lights them, telling us with a smile to sit anywhere we like. I am touched by the thought our hosts have put into our visit and can tell from his smiles and nods towards the hosts that my brother is also appreciative. We begin to eat the cumin spiced rice, spinach, *kofta* meatball curry and finely chopped salad. My brother has devoured half a plate of food before I’ve even finished serving myself the steaming rice with a large skimmer spoon. Our hosts are gracious and pass each item to us one at a time. I can see that Khala Arezo is smiling at Masi’s obvious joy as he is inhaling the food. My mother, I imagine, would be mortified to see him eat this way as a guest. I have always found his appetite endearing, and seeing him

“*Noshe Jan!*” says Khala Arezo, wishing for us to connect in health and in spirit to our meal.

“What’s your favorite food in America, Robina?” asks Billy.

I chew on the rice in my mouth quickly so I can answer. I’ve been asked this same question a number of times since arriving in America. I swallow the soft flavorful bite and say, “In American food, so far, I like apple pie. I had it at McDonalds.”

I learned from Google that apple pie is very American. The food I’d *really* liked so far was the pizza because it had so much tomato sauce, unlike the pizza in Kabul. But it wouldn’t make sense to name an Italian food as my favorite American dish.

Billy smiles and shakes his head in disapproval. “Maaan... we need to take y’all to Cheesecake Factory.”

He and his parents laugh, and my brother and I smile along, not knowing for certain what the joke is. This is our first time being around other Afghans outside of Afghanistan. This topic of food has come up in most conversations with Americans on this trip, and it appears that it’s no different here.

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front of you?” teases Kaka Ehsan.

Bilal quickly defends himself. “I love Afghan food! But come on, you have to admit, it’s lacking in the dessert department. Ferni is *not* poppin.”

They all laugh again. Masi and I smile.

“I am sure the Factory can’t match the wonderful meal your mother has prepared here. You’ve really troubled yourself, dear *Khala Arezo*,” my brother says, breaking the awkward disconnect between us and the joke we don’t quite understand. Masi’s compliments on the food and his reference to her as a dear aunt put a twinkle of pride in Khala Arezo’s eyes. She repays his graciousness with another scoop of the delicious cumin spiced rice along with some curried potato.

I smile across the table at Khala Arezo. She’s the only Afghan we’ve met this week at the screenings. *Afareen, my darling girl. Afareen! You are our pride. You show the world the talent of our country. The show was funny and smart and you are such a talented actress!*

A lot about her makes me think of my mother and how much I already missed her.



“There’s a scene in a bowling alley! They have bowling in Afghanistan! You love to bowl too!”

Both Kaka Ehsan and Billy are taken aback.

“Wow, I can’t imagine Kabul so Americanized,” says Kaka Ehsan. He seems to speak to himself, but I answer anyway.

“Bowling was invented in Egypt.”

Kaka Ehsan nods and says, “Touché,” a word I haven’t heard before. From his smile and return to his meal, I think it must be a good word. I have wondered a number of times even before coming to America. Why do so many things get called American or western? We have a lot of habits and foods and influences from all over the world in Afghanistan, but it’s always called American. A question for another day. Masi rubs his stomach and praises Khala Arezo’s cooking again. He has polished off his third plate. I agree and say that her mantu minced meat dumplings are better than I could ever make.

I try to help with the cleaning in the kitchen, but Khala Arezo sends me away, saying she would put everything in a machine to be washed later.

guest I don't want to offend anyone. Perhaps this is the custom here. She points me in the direction of the living room and steps away from the dining table.

All the rooms look typical to what I've seen in films and TV of American homes. The dining table, the kitchen with its huge stove and refrigerator, and now the living room. A large brown leather couch, flanked by two big chairs on either side, that only one person could sit on. A big flat television is mounted on the wall, over a fireplace. The more I look around, though, the more I notice hints of Afghanistan accenting the room. A large oil painting over the fireplace of Buzkashi, a sport unique to Afghanistan, similar to polo. I've not ever seen a photo of it up in a home before.

I love the *Khal Mohammadi* Turkman rug from Afghanistan laid out in the living room. We have the same one in our Kabul living room. The intricate hand knotted design reminds me of home. I wander towards the hallway to look around some more. There are photos of the family on the wall. Khala Arezo and Kaka Ehsan, smiling in bathing suits at a beach, not something I would have imagined in an Afghan home. I wasn't bothered but couldn't help wondering if they remembered we'd see this. There are portraits of Bilal, smiling always, at different ages. On the opposite wall, they've also framed a photo of Sharbat Gul, the green-eyed woman from the cover of National Geographic magazine.

"The president of Afghanistan gave that woman a house," I say.

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Geographic magazine. People all over the world have been in awe of her beautiful green eyes for decades.”

I remember seeing her on TV as she was ceremoniously awarded a home a few years ago, when she returned to Afghanistan. She looked like any of our poorest Afghan mothers, exhausted, and hardened with age, like so many other refugee-camp survivors. Not like someone who was *famous around the world*.

Kaka Ehsan chimes in as I’m still gazing at the photo. “I know what you’re thinking. Lots of people have beautiful eyes in Afghanistan. My mother used to laugh that we had this up on the wall. *Faqad ke chism sabz kam ast da Afghanistan!* She’d say!”

Masi and I laugh, agreeing with Kaka Ehsan’s mother that striking eyes were hardly a rarity in our country.

“My mother lived with us for about two years, before she passed away last year,” adds Kaka Ehsan.

Masi and I offer condolences for her loss. Khala Arezo and Kaka Ehsan nod appreciatively. I’m quite thrown by the information that an elderly Afghan grandmother lived in this house. Suddenly I’m looking around the room through a new lens. I can’t imagine an elderly Afghan woman in this house. How would she have spoken to Billy? I wonder. I hear Khala Arezo say, “She had just arrived in America. She didn’t even have time to get used to it.”

The decorative Afghan touches don't look endearing to me anymore. They feel like museum pieces. A framed photo of a stranger they've never met? A painting of Buzkashi in place of seeing the mountain ranges from the window? How must that have felt to the grandmother? I wonder if she was comfortable sitting around a formal table for dinner instead of sitting on the ground? My own grandmother ate her meals seated on the floor as was the Afghan tradition, even when her knees were sore.

Kaka Ehsan picks up a remote control that ignites the fireplace. I wonder if it's a real fire. Masi's voice and the word "asylum" snap me out of my wandering thoughts. Kaka Ehsan, sitting on the brown leather couch with Masi, nods attentively and they begin discussing general security concerns in Afghanistan. Billy sits down as well and scrolls through his phone, understandably uninterested in the topic. I feel the big meal turning in my stomach as the anxiety remains and a sense of hesitation makes it feel like stomach cramps. I keep listening but avoid joining.

"It would take some time but if we're able to claim asylum for you, you can eventually bring your mother and brother as well. I understand your father has passed." Kaka Ehsan sips the tea Khala Arezo has placed in front of him.

My brother thanks Khala Arezo with a nod and smile, then begins to ask Kaka Ehsan about timelines and details he'd never seemed interested in before. How long would asylum take? Would his

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lovely house, this beautiful room, all feel suddenly suffocating. Afghanistan is present here through us, but only as a ghost or a memory. I rub the goosebumps on my arm and take a deep breath to calm my heart.

I remember my brother arguing with my mother in Afghanistan, about seeking asylum on this trip. “What will we do in America? Why mother? We have a house here. I will always work to keep us fed and comfortable.” His desperation to stay hadn’t resonated with me at all in Kabul, when he’d said, “It won’t feel like home, Robina.” Now those words were an invisible weight. I want to pull Masi aside and tell him to wait, we should think. But I am frozen. And we don’t have time.

Khala Arezo comes out of the kitchen with two ceramic mugs she sets on the table in front of me, with a little wrapped candy resting on the saucer. “My favorite cups for us,” she says with a wink.

Thanking her, I try to overcome the instinctive shame of not only being cleaned up after, but being served by an elder while I’m lost in my own thoughts. I’m not sure if we go by American rules or Afghan ones, from one thing to another, but I know I don’t like this feeling that has me all the more disassociated.

“Do you miss Afghanistan?” I ask her.

“Definitely. I love Afghanistan very much. But I left when I was just 20. I’ve lived more than half my life here, so I don’t know if I miss it in the same way I did when I first left. I’ve come to really appreciate the opportunities here. My friends... the comfort of life here. You will too, Robina. The feeling of safety is not something I take for granted.”

I look at Billy scrolling his phone, safe and cared for from the day he was born in a way that so many Afghan children aren’t. “Of course I miss Afghanistan, but the safety, I think of it all the time.” Khala Arezo squeezes my hand and takes a seat on the dining chair she’s brought into the living room.

“So, if we were to stay... do you think it would take a long time to move to Los Angeles and start to act in films?” Let Masi and Ehsan talk about paperwork and lawyers and such details, I decide.

“How long it would take depends, Robina Jan. Acting for a living is not easy here, and I will be honest with you. It’s a lot harder for people from minority backgrounds like us. But with a lot of hard work, it’s something you can reach one day, I’m sure of it. You are very talented and have great success in your sitcom. That should help open some doors if you meet the right people out there, but it isn’t going to be easy.”

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haven't thought this through.

Masi and Kaka Ehsan head to another room, saying they want to print out information from websites about asylum. Khala Arezo sets a tray of Afghan *ferni* on the coffee table, next to it a cheesecake that Billy proudly cuts and serves to me.

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## Mina Sharif

Mina Sharif is an emerging writer, cultural consultant, and advocate based in Toronto. Her work, which focuses on challenging stereotypes about conflict affected communities like Afghanistan, has been published on platforms like The New Quarterly and Teen Vogue. Her short stories have been recognized by the Peter Hinchcliffe Fiction Award and the CBC Short Story Prize. She is the founder of Compassion First, a consultancy focused on cultural understanding and human rights. Mina is currently working on a book of short stories which includes 'Asylum'.

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