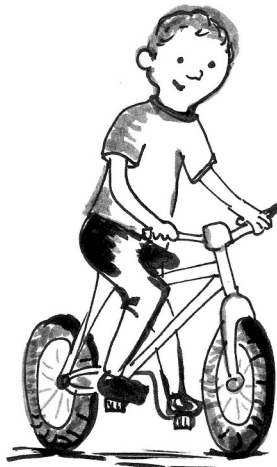


# Abdul

By Emily Maguire



## ***Forward and Acknowledgements***

A very special thank you to Abdul Ahad Momand (pseudonym) for sharing his story with me. I am very grateful to him for his generous collaboration. This short book, "Abdul," is an account of his personal experience as an Afghan child whose schooling was interrupted by armed conflict, yet he never gave up in his pursuit for education. This book has been written for middle school students, but it is my hope that any who read this will be inspired by his story, as I have been.



## **Chapter 1**

### ***In the Beginning, You Couldn't Tell There Was a War***

In 1986, Abdul began kindergarten. He was four. He liked to play with friends and bike around his neighborhood in Kabul, Afghanistan. The Russians occupied Afghanistan at this time, but in these early days, you couldn't tell there was a war in the city.

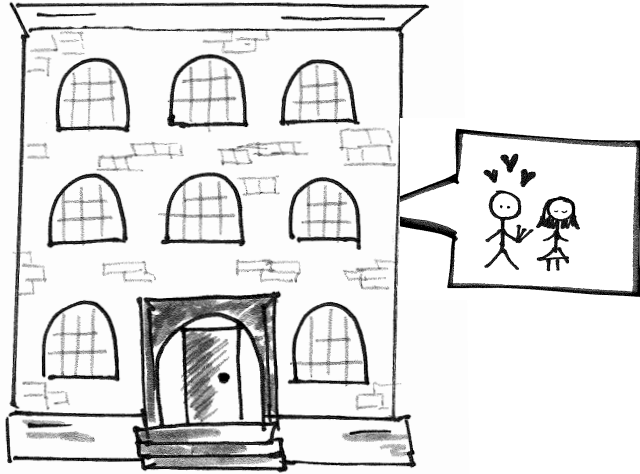
On his first day of school, Abdul didn't want to go inside the school, and he cried until his mom showed him the teddy bear art on the wall. After seeing this, Abdul quickly began to like school.



He liked that all the children had the same pajamas with their names written on them for nap time. Abdul learned to take turns serving lunch to his classmates and being served his food. One time, a TV crew came and filmed his class singing a children's song for a national broadcast.

After kindergarten, Abdul started going to primary school across the street from his home. This building housed the secondary school as well, where his mother was a teacher. Abdul walked to school with his friends, passing a market and ice cream shop along the way. Abdul's teacher, Razia, looked like his grandmother. Some days, they would go to a classroom with traffic signs and learn what each one meant. It was colorful and his favorite classroom.

Abdul's uncle, who had emigrated to Japan in the 1970s, sent toys and art supplies from Japan to Abdul. Sometimes he brought his colored pencils to school and gave them to a girl he liked, saying, "You don't even need to return them."



It was mostly peaceful, but Abdul began hearing rumors of fighting outside the city. One day, Abdul heard that an employee from his school died when she was hit by a Russian tank in a convoy going to the countryside. Slowly, Abdul realized a war was going on. The power would cut out. His neighborhood would only have electricity at night.

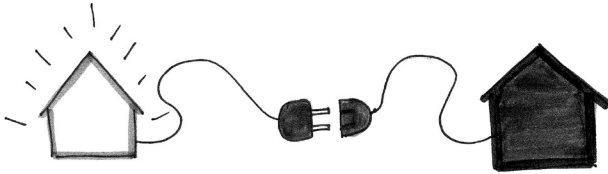
On the weekends, Abdul would go to his grandparents' house. They lived on the other side of Kabul in an apartment building that had full electricity, hot water, and tv. Abdul loved going there to take warm showers under the tap and to watch cartoons. There was only one national TV station, which was state owned, but his grandparents got Russian TV too. On Fridays, a program called "Colors" played music from all over the world.



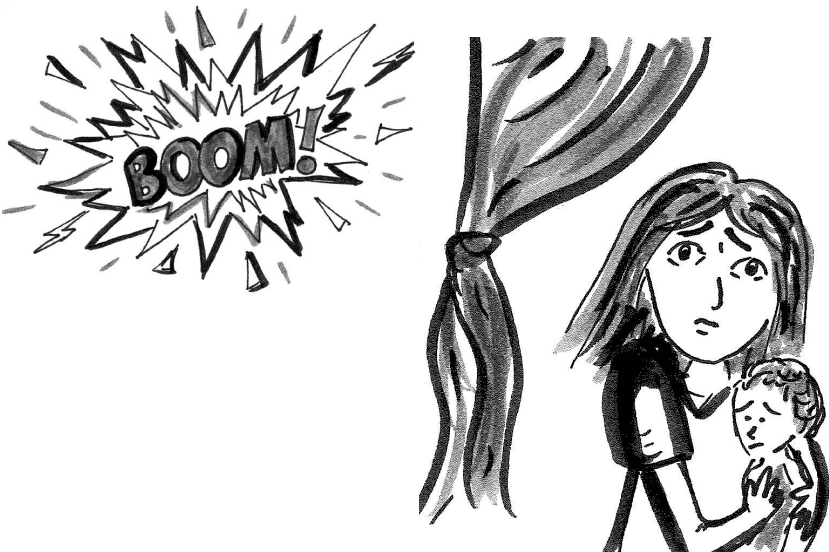
## Chapter 2

### War Comes to Kabul

Things got bad in 1988. Abdul was 6, and his neighborhood wasn't safe. Skirmishes broke out as warlords tried to dominate neighborhoods and push out the Russians. Rockets exploded in loud "booms" all over the city. At night, people stood on rooftops to guard against thieves and looters. The power went out frequently, and at times didn't come back on for weeks or months. Sometimes only one side of the street would have power, so neighbors would run long extension cords to help each other.



One day, Abdul was shopping with his mother when a rocket hit nearby. Everyone ran into a movie theater to take cover. Smoke was everywhere. Chaos. Yelling. Crying. Another night, Abdul's parents got a phone call. His uncle had been hit by shrapnel. He said he was bleeding but thought he would be ok. He died. Abdul's parents went to his funeral while Abdul stayed home with his younger sisters. Abdul was young, but he kept thinking, "I live in a crazy dangerous time."



Still, Abdul crossed the street every day to go to school until one day armed mujahideen, militia fighters, came in during class. Everyone panicked, but the militia talked to the principal and said they were not there to hurt anyone. They just wanted to use the school as their operating base. All the kids left the school before lunch time. They never went back. The mujahideen turned the school into a prison.



Before the fighting came to Kabul, Abdul had loved to bike around his neighborhood. His first bike was yellow with orange wheels. His second bike was blue and beautiful. His dad had brought it back from a trip to India, and Abdul loved it. When the war took over, Abdul wasn't allowed to go for bike rides. Instead he read books at home. He colored. He painted. He listened to battery operated radio. His mom and dad tried to keep him busy with story books, but he dreamed of riding his bike.



## Chapter 3

### Internal Displacement

Abdul's family decided to leave Afghanistan in 1989. Abdul was 7. His father and uncle piled two bikes with food and supplies, and the family walked from one end of Kabul to the other. It was a dangerous trip. The mujahideen didn't want families to leave neighborhoods. Abdul could hear gunfire. It was a long walk, so Abdul would take turns riding on the bike to rest his legs. While sitting on the handle bars, his leg became numb, so he didn't feel one of his sandals fall off. His mom was walking several yards behind carrying his newborn sister. His mom had lost sight of those ahead. When she saw Abdul's sandal on the ground, she panicked, thinking something bad had happened to him.



On the other side of the city, it was calmer, and Abdul's family stayed with his uncle. Abdul tried to make friends in the new neighborhood, but the other kids didn't want to play with him. The parents weren't welcoming either. A woman from another floor called them refugees and yelled at his mom while she was hanging laundry to dry, saying they were making the neighborhood ugly. His mom cried. Abdul thought back to his other neighbors who had shared their electricity and he thought, "In war, you see the kindest side of people. And the ugliest."

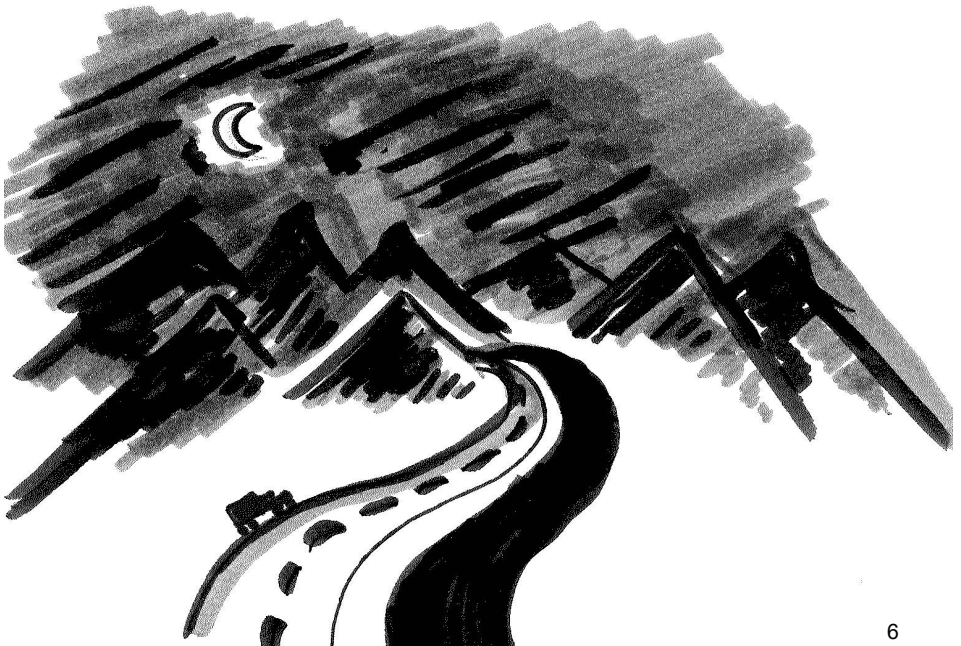


## **Chapter 4**

### ***Seeking Refuge: Leaving for Pakistan***

Soon, none of Kabul felt safe. The mujahideen fighters had worked together to push out the Soviet Union, but once the Soviets were gone, the mujahideen divided back into separate ethnic and tribal groups. They fought each other instead of the Soviets. Foreign countries like Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Iran all supported different groups. The fighting got worse. Abdul's family decided to leave for Pakistan.

Abdul, his parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins piled into a truck with everything they could fit. It was a beautiful night when they left. Stars filled the night sky as they drove along Mahibar "flying fish" highway which wound through the mountains following the path of a river. It felt like an adventure. Abdul's uncle played music on a cassette player. In the checkpoints, mujahideen searched to see if anyone was hiding in the truck, but this area of the countryside was firmly under their control so it felt peaceful. There was no fighting here, and Abdul's family stopped for dinner along the roadside. Abdul was happy they had decided to leave and that they were going to a place with no more war, no more rockets.





## **Chapter 5**

### ***A Summer in Peshawar***

At the border with Pakistan, Abdul saw lines of trucks with families like theirs leaving the country. Their truck was checked again by border guards, and then Abdul and his family were led to a refugee camp. In the camp, 20 or so aunts, uncles, cousins and other family crammed into two small rooms. After a couple of weeks in the camp, Abdul's family decided to move to an apartment in Peshawar. During the move, Abdul's dad got in a fight with the driver who didn't want to transport so much baggage. After the fight, his fist was bleeding.



Abdul lived in Peshawar with his family for several months. Peshawar had electricity and ice cream. But Abdul was bored. He missed school. He missed his friends from Kabul. He listened to the news every night with his family. When they announced a ceasefire, his mom and dad decided their family would go back to Kabul. Abdul's aunts and uncles and their families stayed in Peshawar, but Abdul's dad had a pharmacy that had survived the bombing, and he wanted to go back to work.



## **Chapter 6**

### ***Back to Kabul: A Dark Year***

They returned to Kabul. It was 1990 now, and Abdul's neighborhood changed. Families moved out, and new ones moved in. Abdul woke up each day and heard about other friends who had left overnight. Abdul felt anxiety, darkness, meanness. He was angry a lot and would get into fights. He was 8 years old and missed his friends. He missed biking through his neighborhood. He missed being in school. Across the street, the school was still a prison. Fall came. Winter came. It remained a prison.

In the spring of 1991 when Abdul was 9, the ceasefire ended. Violence started again. At night, explosions sent Abdul and his family running to the basement. It was cold and dark with the sound of crying.



One day, Abdul saw smoke coming from across the street. He wondered what was happening. Then he saw the full blaze of a fire. His school was burning down. Prisoners were still inside. Abdul's mom was crying. She used to teach there.



That night, Abdul was coloring a yellow lion. When he showed his drawing to his aunt, she noticed Abdul's hands shaking. It was the first time anyone observed this tremor. It would become more pronounced when he got stressed and diminish when he relaxed, but it never went away.

## Chapter 7

### Leaving Kabul Forever

Abdul's family decided to flee to Pakistan again in 1991, joining six million other Afghan refugees displaced by the war. Leaving Afghanistan this time did not feel like an adventure. Abdul's family took a bus. They left behind everything they couldn't carry. The fighting was more intense now, and checkpoints were stricter. Armed mujahideen questioned the passengers and tried to prevent families from leaving. Abdul's mom lied, saying she was a widow trying to go to her village with her children.

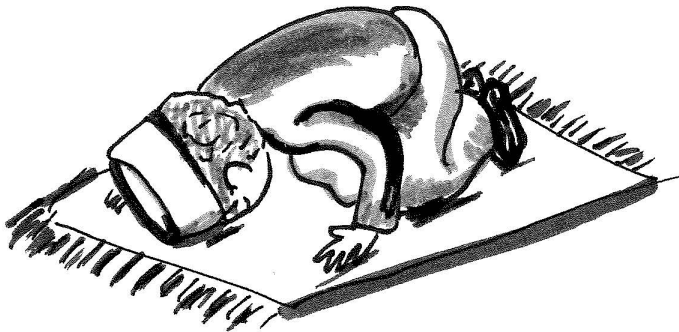
Once they got over the border in Pakistan, Abdul's father left the family to arrange transportation to a village. His dad asked him, "How many eyes do you have?" Confused, Abdul asked, "What do you mean, don't I have two eyes?" His father responded, "No, you have four eyes, two in the front and two in the back. Be super alert and keep watch." Nine-year-old Abdul stood guard over his family and their belongings, on the lookout for criminals and kidnapers.



## **Chapter 8**

### ***Adjusting to Village Life***

Instead of moving to Peshawar, Abdul's family decided to stay in a village. The village was safer and less expensive. Abdul's father had left his pharmacy in Kabul and opened a fabric shop to earn money. Abdul's uncles who had emigrated to Japan and Germany sent money to help too. The village wasn't happy about Abdul's family's arrival. They accused them of not being proper Muslims and said they drank alcohol. In Kabul, the government had been communist, and religion had not been important to Abdul's family. Now in Pakistan, religion was strictly enforced. Abdul learned to pray five times a day, waking up at 4am every morning for morning prayers and going to the mosque on Fridays.



The village didn't have any schools for Afghan refugees. In some of the cities there were madrasses, free religious schools, but many of the jihadi warriors fighting in Afghanistan came from these schools. Abdul's parents feared that they'd have to pledge allegiance to one of the warring groups if they sent their children to these schools. They had left Afghanistan to distance themselves from the conflict, not become more involved with it. So rather than sending Abdul to a madrassa, they asked one of their neighbors, a teacher, for help.

The neighbor agreed to let Abdul come shadow him in the classroom. Abdul rode on the back of his neighbor's bike, going to and from school with him every day. In Afghanistan, Abdul had learned everything in Dari, but here everyone spoke Pashto. During the day, Abdul would listen to his neighbor's lessons in Pashto, trying to understand them, and at night he would practice in schoolbooks his parents gave him.



## Chapter 9

### Starting School Over

After a few months in the village, Abdul enrolled in a Pakistan government school in the village. Even though he was 9 and would have been in the fourth grade in Afghanistan, Abdul started at the first grade again in Pakistan.

The classes were taught in Pashto, and Abdul studied Urdu as well. One day in his Urdu language class, he made a mistake translating the word “تاس” which is “7” in Urdu but is pronounced the same as “100” in Dari. He had to stand with the other kids who got the wrong answer, and the teacher beat their backsides. It hurt so much he couldn’t sit. When he came home, his mom cried too, asking, “What is this? Why is this happening?”



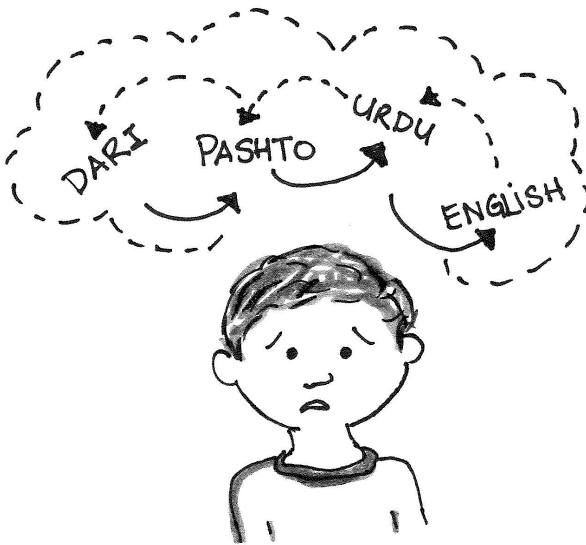
Abdul gradually learned, though, becoming fluent in Pashto over the next three years. He made friends in the village and started adjusting to his new life. He completed first, second, and third grade in this school.

## Chapter 10

### Moving to Peshawar

After three years in the village, Abdul's parents decided to move to Peshawar where his father's fabric business would have more customers. Abdul was 12 and lost his friends all over again. He started at a new school. Now everything was taught in Urdu, not Pashto. The other students excluded him at first, but he learned to copy their accents and made some friends. At night, he studied English. He read stories about American families from books and listened to English language cassettes.

Then, after the fifth grade, Abdul's school ended. Again, he had to go to another new school. This new school was taught in English. He skipped sixth grade, going right to seventh. He was 14 and had a hard time making friends. He was bullied and hated this school. He wanted to leave, but his dad refused to let him.



By the time he was 15, Abdul had learned how to adjust. He made friends. He saved enough money to buy a bike. One day, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, Independence Day, he biked over an hour to the other end of Peshawar with a friend on the back of his bike just to eat ice cream and watch the fireworks.





Abdul worried about his future in Pakistan, though. It was 1997, and Pakistanis wanted refugees to go back to Afghanistan. They said the Taliban had ended the civil war and it was time to leave. But while the Taliban had gained control of Kabul and much of Afghanistan, they had introduced a harsh ultra-conservative Islamic law. Many Afghans, including Abdul's family, feared returning.

But Afghans faced frequent discrimination in Pakistan. They would stand in line to buy basic supplies like flour, but shops would only sell to those with a Pakistani ID card. One day, Abdul saw a shopkeeper take a woman's money to buy bread, but when she couldn't show a Pakistani ID, he refused to give her the bread but kept her money.



## **Chapter 11**

### ***Moving to Islamabad***

Abdul's father moved the family to Islamabad in 1998 when Abdul was 16. Again, Abdul started a new school, skipping eighth grade and starting in ninth. He tried to make new friends, but life in Islamabad was challenging. In Islamabad, Afghans needed to carry papers at all times and had to reapply for a Pakistani visa every six months. The renewal took two weeks, during which time Abdul and his family had no papers. They feared going outside and being stopped by the police. Without papers, they would be forced to pay a bribe or get beaten up. By the time he was 17, Abdul spoke more Urdu than his parents, and he often went out by himself to manage his family's errands. He preferred



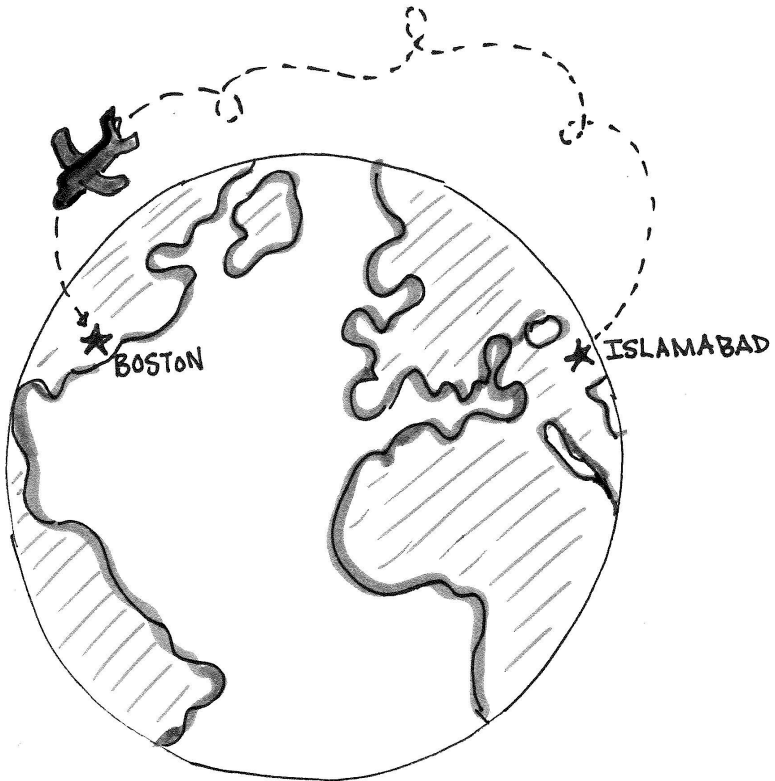
going by himself because sometimes his father would get frustrated and angry and would start a fight. Police threatened and harassed Abdul too, assaulting him when he didn't have money for them and making fun of his shaking hands.

At the end of 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2000, Abdul took a one-week long standardized "metrics" exam. He passed.

## **Chapter 12**

### ***Moving to the United States***

When he was 18, Abdul's family considered fleeing to Indonesia and from there making their way to Australia by boat, but in 2000 Abdul's mom applied for asylum through the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Abdul and his family went through a process of interviews, medical exams, application paperwork, and embassy interviews. His family was matched with the United States, and they left Islamabad in August 2001. They arrived in the United States just before September 11, 2001.



Being an immigrant in the United States wasn't easy. When people asked Abdul, "Where are you from?" He didn't know how to respond. He thought, "This question doesn't apply to me." As a refugee in Pakistan, Abdul "hadn't been Muslim enough." Now in the US, he felt "too Muslim."



As he had done in the past, Abdul gradually adjusted. He worked hard for several years to help his family save enough money for a down payment on a home on the north shore of Massachusetts, a state he had long ago learned about in his English language classes.

He took community college classes, which accepted his high school certificate from Pakistan. In 2007, with the help of a coworker, he applied to and was accepted to a four-year college under the condition he pass his General Education Development (GED) test. He took the test and passed.

## **Chapter 13**

### ***A Bright Future***

Abdul chose a college close to home so he could go home every day to help his younger siblings with their schoolwork and attend their parent-teacher meetings. Despite fears that he may not be able to finish college when the United States entered a recession, Abdul nonetheless persevered. He continued to work and go to school.

The summer before graduating, he got an internship in Kabul, returning to his childhood city for the first time in twenty years.

The next year, at 26, he graduated with his undergraduate degree. Two years later, he earned his MBA.



## Epilogue

Today, Abdul is a counterterrorism operative in Afghanistan. He works for peace in a country that has been embroiled in conflict his entire life. He is grateful to his parents, who persevered despite adversity and never gave up on his education. He still dreams of a time when, one day, all children in Afghanistan will have the freedom to learn in schools and to bike through the streets, free of fear.

