Interview

DINA NAYERI

"Being a former refugee is so much a part of who i am"

AUTHOR DINA NAYERI WAS A CHILD REFUGEE FLEEING POST-REVOLUTION IRAN. AN ARTICLE SHE WROTE FOR 'THE GUARDIAN' ARGUING REFUGEES HAVE NO NEED TO FEEL SHAME OR POSTURE GRATITUDE WAS SHARED MORE THAN 100,000 TIMES. SHE SPOKE TO US IN A LONDON CAFE ABOUT HER PAST, PRESENT AND

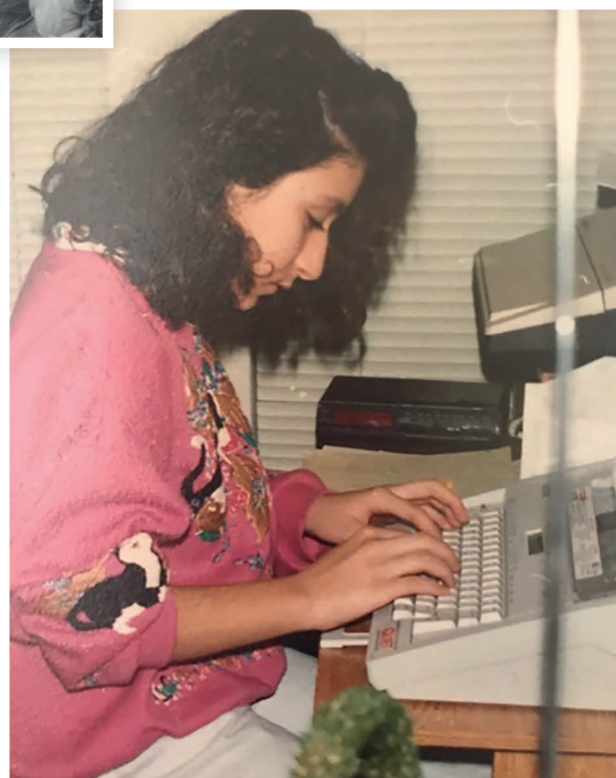
Op mijn 15e, op de dag dat ik Amerikaans staatsburger werd.

21 jaar was ik hier, met vrienden in Londen.

Mijn ouders met vrienden op een picknick in Ardestan, voordat ik geboren was.

Op een verjaardag, met mijn vader.

NAME: Dina Nayeri
BORN: 1979, Tehran, Iran
EDUCATION: Dina is a graduate of Princeton University, Harvard Business School, and the Iowa Writer's Workshop.
CAREER: Writer. Dina began her career working as a consultant for McKinsey and then as a strategist for Saks Fifth Avenue. Dina started acting on her ambition to become a writer in her late twenties, and her debut novel, A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea, was published in 2013 when she was 33. It has been translated into 14 languages. She has written a second novel, Refuge, and her first non-fiction book, The Ungrateful Refugee, will be published later this year. She lives in London with her aughter, Elena and her



Op mijn 13e in Oklahoma, tikkend aan een werkstuk.

Als kleuter, in een chador gemaakt door oma.

PAST

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Time jumbles together in the years before school started. My *Maman* was a doctor and my father, *Baba*, a dentist. We would often go back to the village where my father grew up, which was very provincial, very old Iran—so I know what it is like to run around with the village children, digging up dirt and eating off the trees, and watching a lamb get slaughtered. That's not the life we had, however, in the city. At home in Isfahan, a city in Iran, my family had everything that we needed. We had a nice house with yellow spray roses and a pool.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979, the year I was born, had brought massive change to our country, veiling women and limiting their rights. My parents were among a group of educated Iranians who had college degrees, so we had a lot of scholars and activists in our circle. My mother would never call herself a feminist, but I think she is. She hates it when I say that! But she was progressive in a lot of ways. Trapped in the Islamic Republic, she craved rebellion, freedom.

School is a huge early memory. Going from a very kind nursery, and a warm, comfortable life with my parents and my brother Daniel, who is three years younger than me, to a government-run, Islamic public school, was a culture shock. Post-revolution, Islamic law became mandated in school, so school was the first time in my life that I had to hide things. It was the first time I had to bear a lot of daily discomforts every single day, and the biggest thing was the enforced hijab, the veil.

When you're young, being put under the veil for the first time is so restrictive and oppressive, especially if you don't have religious roots. I think that there are probably many little girls who, at six or seven when they're put under this scarf, maybe feel it is a part of them and their culture, a way to relate to their mother. But I didn't have a mother who was into hijab. In my home, everyone shed the hijab at the door, and they put it on half-heartedly to go out.

Behind closed doors, we were a family with Western clothes and Western hair, and my family was all about books and education. I remember being angry about wearing a hijab, even at the age of seven. Your hair was always stuck to your head at the end of the day. You were covered with sweat, you felt gross, and yet you had to keep it on.

At that time in Iran, it was very easy to become disillusioned as a woman. I don't think my mother could make the jump from being a Muslim to being an atheist feminist, like I am, but she could make the jump to Christianity. She started passing Christian tracts out to her patients. The morality police noticed. Apostasy—abandoning your faith—is a crime punishable by death in Iran. We endured three nightmare years before the day of our escape. Three years of arrests and threats, of armed revolutionary guards slipping into the back seat of our car at traffic stops, bursting in to Maman's medical office.

An airport security agent my father knew snuck us onto a cargo plane to Tehran that had stopped only to refuel. From there, we fled on a plane to Dubai. Dubai was an anxious and confusing time. We were undocumented immigrants—'illegals', as we would have said back then. We were so unmoored it was hard to fathom a next step. We next moved to Italy, to a refugee camp called Hotel Barba. Italy felt safer than Dubai, because the government had put us somewhere. They might have put us in the lowest place that they could, but they had taken responsibility for us, and said, 'While you are in Italy, no one's going to kill you. And then there will be a moment where some country will accept you, and until that point, you're here'.

Many refugees were from tea-drinking countries—Russia, Afghanistan—so we sat around telling stories and drinking a lot of tea, because tea is cheap. In a refugee camp, stories are everything. Everyone has one, having just slipped out from the grip of a nightmare. I read English books and became obsessed with having a home again, with ending the wandering days. I craved everyone's stories; I was becoming some later version of myself. >

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After Italy, we arrived in Oklahoma, in the US, and were eventually offered citizenship. We had left Baba behind in Isfahan. I began to understand, bit by bit, that I would never live with my father again. As a Muslim, wealthy Iranian dentist, he and our other family members were safe in a way my mother, branded an apostate, wasn't. He was too attached to his life to follow us, and he remarried and had a new family.

As a teenager growing up in Oklahoma, because I was an immigrant kid having lost my social status and my father, I was all about security. I wanted to be able to support myself and I never wanted to be dependent on a man. I thought, 'Okay, well that means I have to go to law school or I have to go to business school or I have to become a doctor'.

I was all about doing what everyone else thought was best. In the US, it seemed like there was such a clear set of things that you could do to get from one step to the next, to succeed. I had seen universities like Harvard and Princeton in the movies, and I got into Princeton. I have very few regrets in my life, but one of my regrets is studying economics instead of literature at Princeton. Later, at Harvard Business School, there were so many things my business classmates took for granted; there were so many things that were patriarchal and racist. The was an assumption that you were going to just give yourself up to banking and making a ton of money. I was always the dissenting voice in class.

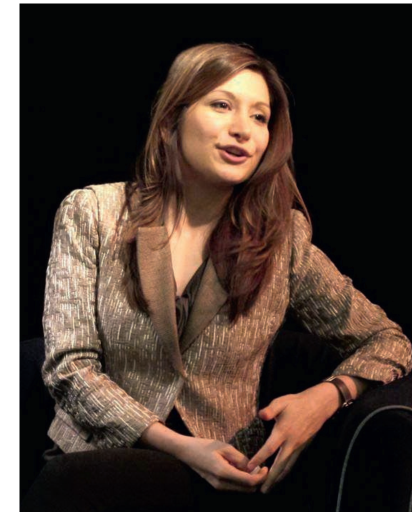
My husband and I met at Princeton. Much of our 20s were then spent in New York, and were all about getting the right job, the right apartment. Everyone at Princeton was trying to work for a company called McKinsey, so I made that my goal. At McKinsey, all the best people there had gone on to study again at Harvard Business School, so I followed them. We then moved to France, so my husband could go to graduate school. We lived in Paris, and then we bought a canal house in Amsterdam, because my husband's career was there. I had given that hungry immigrant girl everything she wanted.

From the age of about 28, I started writing feverishly; I was also reading about 50 books a year. I called book stores in Iran and bought picture books from particular regions. The seeds of my first novel were kind of being scattered. I was learning a lot about writing, but I didn't know how to make sense of it all, and I had nothing to show for it. I didn't know how to articulate the things I was learning and apply them to my work. I wrote a lot of garbage. Living in Amsterdam, I became obsessed with the story of Kambiz Roustayi, an Iranian asylum seeker who died after he set himself on fire in Dam Square.

I was an over-achieving person, with an over-achieving husband, but it literally looked like I just spent my days hanging around in cafes. I was getting frustrated. My view of the world was changing, my view of who I am was changing. By this point, I was 32 and I wanted to be a serious writer. I didn't want to play second fiddle and I didn't want to be in this very traditional marriage. I had also fallen out of love with my husband. He was my best friend, and he was somebody I could have been friends with for the rest of my life—but I shouldn't have married him. The things we wanted were very different. I didn't have the capacity to picture our future. I felt like I had failed in a big, big way.

It was at this point that I applied to Iowa Writer's Workshop, a creative writing programme in the US. It was a total pipe dream, and I didn't think I would get in. But when I did, my husband and I both agreed that I should go. I think that's also where our marriage ended. >

Vier generaties: met mijn dochter, moeder en grootmoeder.



Tijdens een tour in Duitsland.

Op een literair festival in Venetië.

'Schuilplaats', over het leven van de Iraanse Niloo, speelt zich onder meer af in Amsterdam.

Met Elena.

FUTURE

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There were a lot of stories I didn't feel okay to talk about, or to tell until I was in my 30s. Living in Iowa, I threw myself into the craft of writing and into learning what I want to say, and how I want to use my voice for the world, and I think that was really important.

While I was in Iowa, I secured my divorce and my first book was published, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*. I graduated my writing course, got in a truck, and moved to New York City. After two years there, I went to write at an arts colony in New Hampshire. That was where I met a British man called Sam and fell instantly in love with him. And then we quickly got pregnant with my daughter, Elena.

We moved to Europe, because Sam's family is all here. It was 2017, and it felt like this was the moment to articulate my experiences. I had a new baby and the world felt like it was changing: This was just as Trump was elected and Brexit happened. I felt like I had a stake in the future because of Elena.

So I wrote an article in *The Guardian*, 'The Ungrateful Refugee', that changed everything and was the genesis of my new book. It took a lot of years of trying to put how I feel about things in novels and experimenting in that safe space before writing it. I wanted to argue that refugees do not have a lifelong debt to their new country; that they need friendship, not salvation. I wanted to show refugees as they are, the full arc of their story, in ways that we've hidden from the native-born out of a misplaced sense of gratitude. The article went viral; it was shared online more than 100,000 times. I think it came at a moment that was politically really important.

When it comes to thinking and talking about refugees, people think that it's all about food and shelter and getting to a new place—but actually, it's not. The biggest impact of being a refugee is trying to deal with shame and a lack of dignity and the things that you've lost. Those are the things that are in the psyche that continue to affect people for decades and decades and decades. The things they're going through are so, so familiar. Try to imagine yourself in a place of complete loss of dignity. What would you want done? How would you want people to react to you?

For two decades, our escape from Iran defined me. It dominated my personality and compelled my every decision. Nowadays, there's no trying to escape something, because I am living the life that I wanted. I'm in the juicy part of it all; I feel like I'm in my prime.

Elena is three now, and I'm about to turn 40. I can't go back to Iran; the refugees among us would never risk it. My mother remained in the US, and I've seen my father only four times since we fled. I know that Baba will never live in the West with us. It would end him, his big personality, his glorious sense of himself. Instead, my daughter is my repatriation. She is my taste of home. I can grow with her, carry her with me wherever I go. Writing is a repatriation for me, too, a way toward home. We live in London now, but next year the plan is to move to Paris, as Sam has family in France. I have nothing left to escape, and yet, I still kind of get a kind of palpitation to keep going.

When I think of my identity now, being a former refugee is so much a part of who I am, and I'm okay with that. There are things about myself that I wish I could change, but actually, none of them are things that the refugee part of me put there. The refugee part of me is all about empathy, and storytelling, and all the things I've worked hard in life to achieve. I think, maybe, I've stopped trying to outrun that part of myself. ●

INTERVIEW **OLIVIA GAGAN** VERTALING **RACHEL LANCASHIRE** FOTOGRAFIE **ANNA LEADER** (OPENINGSBEELD), **ALICIA BOCK** (BLADEREN), **©BASSO CANNARSA/OPALE/LEEMAGE/HOLLANDSE HOOGTE** ILLUSTRATIE **SHUTTERSTOCK**