



## Eyelashes

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Makeup artist

When the two men arrived at the door of our house in Afghanistan, I was only eight, but I knew something was wrong. The anguish on my mother's face told the story. That was the day my family — myself, my parents, three brothers and six other relatives — began our escape from the country we called home. It was the early 1980s, and the Soviet invasion had just begun.

"There is no way we can take the van," the men told my parents. "The Russians are watching the roads. Our only hope for escape is by foot." They were professional smugglers who made their living getting people out of the country. We'd hoped to make it to Pakistan and, ultimately, to the United States.

My mother had only enough food for the two days it was supposed to take to drive through the back roads — a bag of hard-boiled eggs, some cookies and some water. There was no time to get more food for the twelve of us. The men made it clear that either we left at that moment or we would be caught.

You couldn't leave Afghanistan just because you wanted to. After the invasion, you were always watched, and if anyone suspected that you were planning to escape, you would be killed immediately.

So for the next ten days, my family walked in darkness through the mountains. The fog was so thick that if you took one wrong step, you could fall into deep canyons. During the daylight hours we hid in little villages,



hardly moving or speaking.

It was freezing cold at night and sweltering hot during the day. Everyone had blisters on their feet. My little brother, who was five, suffered from severe dehydration. One night we came upon a puddle of water. The top was covered with moss and scum, but my mother scooped the water from the bottom for each of us to drink, saying that we were going to die one way or another anyway.

By some miracle, we made it over the border into Pakistan. We paid the smugglers — and others, too, who later helped us reach America — with money my mom had put in bags and sewn underneath her dress, along with my father's college diploma.

My dad had gone to school years before in the United States. He spoke fluent English, so that helped our transition. Although the rest of us didn't speak one word of English, we adjusted well in our new country, eventually settling in Los Angeles.

Working in Hollywood happened completely by chance. After high school, I studied dental hygiene because I love beautiful smiles. One of my friends happened to be working part-time for a makeup line and thought it would be fun if we did makeup together. I told her I had no experience with it, but the next thing I knew, I was working for Lancôme.

That led to a job working with the stars I'd dreamed of in school. I became a makeup artist on some small TV shows, and I loved it. In fact, I rejected an offer from *American Idol* for season one because I was working on other shows. I kicked myself when I saw what I'd turned down, but they gave me another chance on season two. That time I said yes immediately, and I've been with *Idol* ever since.

I feel incredibly fulfilled working with the contestants. I get to take these kids — many of whom come from farms, the inner city or small towns — and transform them right before their eyes.

I remember the time I met Jennifer Hudson. She had never worked with a makeup artist before. She sat down in my chair and asked, "Can you make me look like Beyoncé?"

I told her, "Sweetheart, Beyoncé is amazing, but you are Jennifer Hudson and you can be as big as Beyoncé. You just have to believe in that."

I never want to make these kids look like someone they're not. When one of them asks me to make them look like Beyoncé or Pink or Christina Aguilera, I tell them, "No, I'm going to make you look like *you*. When you're true to yourself, you'll really be happy. Then you can step on that stage and make others happy."

One of the most rewarding parts of my job is watching contestants when they look in the mirror after getting made up and they love the way they look. I have to tell them not to cry, or we'll need to start all over again. Then, when their moms and dads see them, they tear up, too. We have to keep a lot of tissues handy!

It's still amazing to me that I get to do what I love and make a good living, too — one of the many perks of living in America!

I'll always be grateful to my parents for the courage they had to give their children a life of freedom in this country. The remarkable irony of my life is that if my family had stayed in Afghanistan after the Russian invasion and the Taliban takeover, not only would I never have been able to wear makeup, but I would have been living my life under a burka with my entire face covered. Women in my country can be killed if they walk outside with their faces showing.

And here I am, making up the faces that are seen on television by more people than any other faces in the world.

Perhaps my mother had an intuition about my destiny. Mezghan, the name I was given at birth, means *eyelashes*.