

The Science Prize

San Francisco, December 2001

My stomach knots as I glance at an audience of more than seven thousand people gathered in the grand ballroom at the Marriott in San Francisco. This year, I've been selected by the American Geophysical Union to receive a prestigious science medal. Thank God I'm not alone up here on the stage. Men in dark suits or tuxedos are seated to my left and right, waiting for their turns to speak.

The notes for my speech are crumpled inside a vintage beaded gold purse I purchased at an antique shop last week to match a navy-blue-and-gold St. John suit that I had bought earlier for this occasion. My husband will likely raise an eyebrow when he sees our credit card bill next month, but for now, he appears cheerful, chatting with my parents in the front row—Baba in a dark tailored suit and Mamman in a flowing lavender silk dress that she wore to our wedding eight years earlier.

A few days after my parents learned of this award, they sent me a large bouquet of flowers. Hidden in between the stems and the leaves, I saw a note written in Baba's meticulous handwriting: *To our lovely, amazing daughter. You have made us all proud to be Iranian.* His words brought tears of pride to my eyes as I remembered my adolescent years when life seemed like a burden unworthy of the wait to become an adult.

Back then, every morning, I reluctantly dressed in a dark cloak and a long headscarf and headed for school, came home, and waited with my family for Iraqi planes to once again bomb Tehran—bombs that kept us all hidden in our dark, damp basement until dawn. Through those dark hours, I often thought, *What on earth am I here for?*

As I look up from the stage, the glint of Baba's gold Rolex watch catches my eye. He purchased it last year to attend a ceremony at the White House, an occasion he often brags about. I took him along with me as my guest of honor to receive a presidential award, a half-million-dollar grant from President Clinton's

office to continue my research on polar stratospheric clouds—a special class of clouds that naturally form over the poles but can interact with chemicals humans release to produce a hole in Earth’s ozone layer. This layer, located in the lower stratosphere, absorbs most of the harmful UV radiation that is incident upon our planet. Even minute amounts of ozone degradation within this layer translate into copious amounts of UV radiation reaching Earth’s surface, posing a threat to the survival of all living organisms.

Baba, touched by the president’s generosity, vowed to vote democratic in the next election, but then he changed his mind. He voted for Bush instead of Gore, and that broke my heart, since Al Gore has always been the most recognized and outspoken advocate for environmental research, my area of specialty. My father, I believe, will never cast a vote for a Democrat, for in his mind, President Carter is the reason Iran became the “Islamic Republic of Iran” in 1979.

The moment I’ve dreaded is almost here. My heart beats fast as I hear, “It’s my great pleasure to introduce Dr. Azadeh Tabazadeh ...” Once again, an honor that I am grateful and humbled to receive comes at a cost of facing my worst fear. I’d rather kiss a snake than take center stage in front of all these people.

Minutes later, I’m standing behind the podium, head down, rummaging through my tiny gold purse to retrieve my crinkly notes inside. The microphone is on, so the audience can hear me scrambling behind the scenes to get ready for my talk. With notes in hand, I take a deep breath, thank a few colleagues, and begin.

Once my daughter, Dionna, asked me, “What do you do at your work?”

“I am a scientist,” I told her.

“What’s that?”

“I study the clouds, rainbows, and many other interesting things that you often like to paint.”

“Well, I also like to paint dinosaurs, and I don’t think I want to be a

scientist. I want to be a bone collector when I'm all grown up."

Luckily, what she meant was to take all of her friends to a desert to dig for dinosaur bones. She also tried hard to convince me not to worry too much about the clouds, because they are always there in the sky for everyone to see, whereas dinosaur bones are hiding in the sand waiting for "little" people to find them.

At last, I told her, "If you work really hard, someday you will be the most famous grown-up bone collector on the Earth."

I pause for a moment to look at the audience: row upon row of faces glowing under crisp chandelier lights. Laughter fills the air as I tell the story of the chemistry kit that my uncle gave me as a present when I was eight—a kit that got me hooked on science early on but also caused my mother to snap at me from time to time.

Before closing, I look directly at my parents' gaze. This may be my last opportunity to thank them in front of such a large crowd.

Nineteen years ago, a few years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, it was just a dream for a young woman to even think of pursuing a career in science ... It is because of my parents' unselfish sacrifices that I am living today the life of my dreams ...

Drenched in sweat and slightly shaking, I walk back to my seat with my hands wrapped around a small mahogany box presented to me after my talk. Inside the box, a large silver medal is inscribed with my name, the date, and a citation that reads: For Significant Contributions to the Geophysical Sciences by a Young Scientist of Outstanding Ability.

The words instantly boost my ego and soothe my nerves. I can finally breathe a sigh of relief and even laugh in my head at the sight of my name—Azadeh Tabazadeh—listed on *Wikipedia* among a sea of Richards, Davids, Johns, and Michaels, the previous recipients of this award. I know it will happen sooner or later; a curious web browser will click on my name, expecting to see a

picture of a nerdy-looking guy from a strange country with a name that's either difficult to pronounce or impossible to place on the map. Instead, a photograph of me—an unveiled woman from an estranged but now well-known country—fills the screen. The browser may pause for a moment and puzzle over my appearance.

A short trip to a shopping mall is not the reason that I appear Westernized in that photograph. In 1982, my brother, my cousin, and I, all teenagers at the time, fled Iran by crossing a vast barren desert to reach the borders of Pakistan and beyond. For thousands of miles, the scorching sun burned our faces raw as we traveled by foot, on crowded mopeds, and in the back of rusty pickup trucks, putting our lives in the hands of Pakistani smugglers who were now trafficking people, instead of drugs, out of Iran. My life has changed a great deal since then, but the world, it seems, has remained the same—countries at war or in the midst of bloody revolutions with no political resolution in sight.

A week after the award ceremony, I set out to buy a chemistry kit for my daughter, Dionna, at a Toys “R” Us near my work at NASA in Moffett Field, California, hoping that the gift may entice her to pursue science and stay away from world politics of any kind.

In the store, I find the section where the science kits are stacked, but nothing interesting catches my eye. The professional-looking kit of the 1970s, which I got as a kid, has now become just another cartoonish-looking box lost in the land of Toys “R” Us.

Disappointed, I leave the store empty handed, wondering how many little girls will miss the opportunity I was given at age eight to find myself.