



When she arrived in the US as a 10-year-old refugee, **Dina Nayeri** found it hard to fit in. But that all changed when she hatched a plan to get into Harvard - by becoming a taekwondo champion

'Kick first, kick hard, kick fast, kick last!'

Illustrations by RYAN INZANA

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hen I was 13, three years after arriving in the US with my mother and brother, I devised a plan to get into the Ivy League. I was a refugee kid with no money and I lived in Oklahoma, where university means Tulsa or Stillwater or, if you're smart, somewhere in Texas. My mother, who had been a doctor in Iran, was now a single parent working in a factory. My father, who was a dental surgeon, had stayed in Iran and rarely sent money. Our sponsors, conservative Reaganite Christians who thought public assistance was a slippery slope to a lifetime of sloth, discouraged us from applying for temporary relief. It took all our energy just to continue living, working and studying. I didn't have tutors or advisers. No one was bribing coaches or hiring consultants on my behalf. But I did have a vague notion that I needed more than good grades and test scores - I needed to transform into someone the books called "a high achiever". Information was hard to come by at first. It was the 1990s, so whatever



I knew about Harvard and Yale I got from 80s movies set in a muted and stylised 1950s for the super-rich. My adolescence was all Dead Poets Society and School Ties, so fantasising about getting into a top university meant that I imagined myself as a well-heeled white boy from a good family (with brief interludes to go dancing in Nazi Germany a la Swing Kids. Basically, wherever Robert Sean Leonard went, I was there.)

One day, in my first or second year in the US, as I sat in Edmond public library reading Judy Blume to beef up my English, I spotted a book lying open near the YA fiction rotary display. It was an old edition of a college admissions book, complete with rankings, statistics, test score minimums and advice on activities and essays. The name at the top of the list, Harvard, was the only one any Iranian would recognise, so it took about three minutes for getting admitted there to become my entire life's purpose. The book told me that if I wanted to get into the best universities, I couldn't just be gifted at maths or writing. I would have to win medals and trophies. I would have to be sporty, arty or a genius at something. A national championship wouldn't hurt.

I admit the notion that sport trophies got you into university in America struck me as bizarre for exactly one second before I gave myself up to it, incorporating it into my fantasy life the way a buzzing alarm clock gets incorporated into dreams. I was raised in the extreme academic tradition of Iranian medical households - to get into Tehran University, my parents had beaten thousands of their peers in a daunting exam called the Konkour. Still, this was the US and, so far, everything had been weird - iced tea and fruited yoghurt, ground meat in crunchy shells made of the same material as snack chips, people in commercials grinning about anal disease and heavy-flow periods, a fitness show called Sit and Be Fit - I had learned to suspend disbelief and just roll with stuff.

I decided to give it a try. I could be sporty. Why not? When we were asylum seekers, my mother had taught me to swim in the scorching Emirati sun. And back in Iran, she had done horse-riding and tennis. But then the revolution happened, and her sporty body was draped and forgotten. Banned from public exercise, she took to pounding her ass against walls to get that chic, saddle-flattened effect of the late 70s. Sometimes I joined her. (It didn't work, because our asses, like the rest of our bodies, were Iranian.)

I wanted to try swimming or tennis, but in Oklahoma those sports were the province of rich girls with private coaches. Every one of them was 10cm taller than me, with fat blonde ponytails that slapped you as you tried to get past and thighs that could strangle a small goat. Then, my best friend, a fellow book nerd, mentioned that she had joined a martial arts club that had no other girls from our school. The absence of those girls was an unspoken preference in our misfit circle - so I agreed to visit.

Taekwondo is a Korean martial art focused on strong legs and cardiovascular fitness. Unlike karate - a calmer, more physically balanced combat style - in taekwondo, you do a lot of jumping around and kicking. It is a perfect sport for teenage girls, and yet there were almost none in this dojang, probably because all the glory came from bloodying and being bloodied - and you could really mess up your face.

It was a strange place: a Protestant fighting school called Kicking Christian Soldiers (KCS) run by Kerry, a white man with a Navy Seal body, and his scary Thai girlfriend, Cheri. She was KCS's first selling point: those blonde bitches had nothing on this lady. Her thighs were torpedoes.

And here was the second selling point: I learned that they handed out trophies by age, belt and weight, almost every weekend at local

competitions that led up to statewide, then national contests. That meant I could starve myself into a lower category, beat up a bunch of scrawny green belts and write my ticket to Harvard - a totally logical way of becoming a doctor or professor or supreme court justice.

I had just one little problem: as it happened, while I was busy fantasising about being a mid-century prep-school boy, my mother had met another Iranian immigrant and quietly married him. So now this guy lived with us. My new stepfather, Rahim, a conservative Christian immigrant, was on my back about everything, all the time. He also happened to have a third-degree black belt in taekwondo (which just meant he was a deadlier, more experienced blackbelt), and because of that, he was also deep into local Korean culture.

This strikes me as an insane coincidence now, but it didn't then. It was just an irritating obstacle. He would never let me join. Not in a million years. "It's not a sport for girls," he said, the first time I brought it up. "Daniel can join. You can find something else." My brother, Daniel, was also mildly interested in the sport, as he was in most sports, but he was less intense about it than I was; his entire future didn't depend on a plan that would take years and most likely fail.

Meanwhile, Rahim marinated Korean beef bulgogi and sealed another jar of his own special kimchi. His obsession with all things Korean made sense if you followed the loneliness trail: I found taekwondo because I was desperate to get into Harvard, where I was sure friendship and love awaited me. Rahim came to taekwondo because, some 15 years earlier, having left his family in Iran for the blindingly homogenous American south, he spent every meal alone until he found the Korean community of Oklahoma City. He had arrived at 19 or 20, slept outside the admissions office of one of the state universities until they offered him a place and, as a way to meet other immigrants and keep fit, he had enrolled in a taekwondo class.

Soon, he fell in love with the food, the sport, the ritual, even the sounds of Korean conversation and music. He loved to cook Iranian food and he began offering his dishes to his new friends, learning their cuisine, and combining recipes. Korean ribs on fluffy, buttery basmati rice, a staple of my childhood, was his masterwork because, as Rahim used to say - a cigarette dangling from his lips - basmati is always better.

Despite his devotion to taekwondo and the role it had played in creating his new identity, Rahim refused to relent on the issue of my joining. I called my father in Iran for help convincing my mother. I explained that it was necessary for college and that he must foot the bills, a monthly cost equivalent to six or seven impacted wisdom teeth. (My father, the dental surgeon, calculated all costs according to root canals and caps and fillings.)

"Why are you going to sport college?" he said. "Go to medical school! You can't make a living on sport degree!"

"This is for the best university, Baba!" I whined. "Trust me! I know this system."

"It makes no sense, Dina joon. A real college won't make you learn fighting to be a doctor."

"Believe me, it's a real thing."

Baba never sent the money but, in the end, I convinced my mother with a two-pronged argument about self-defence and sexism. Weren't she and Rahim converted Christians? Wasn't their struggle in Iran all about equality, the veil and fighting the oppression of women? Also, didn't they know how many rapists hang out in the US? I should learn to injure the rapists.

I signed up for three classes a week.

Until I found taekwondo, assimilation had been a constant struggle.



The summer we arrived in Oklahoma, my mother enrolled us in a church etiquette class. The instructor was so cloying, and her rules so obvious and patronising, that I raised my hand and asked if it was OK to lick our plate after a meal. My mother giggled. The teacher assumed this is what we do in Iran.

As for American pleasures, they were many, but they came with a price. My first bottle of conditioner was a marvel; I kept it away from everyone else's bath things. And yet I missed those hours with my mother or grandmother, sitting still as they brushed tangles out of my hair in our big Iranian hamam.

In those early years, I was so overcome by gratitude for my freedom, shame at my Iranian-ness and fear of being sent back that I found it impossible to say no to Americans. During a lice epidemic at our school, when a classmate asked to borrow my brush, I was so moved by her gesture of friendship that I relented, then put the brush in a plastic bag and ran home to have my mother disinfect it. We were never comfortable. We kept squirming inside our own skin, trying to find a way to be ourselves while satisfying all the people who wanted us to transform instantly into them.

But I loved taekwondo from the first day. I was comfortable in the dojang, where we all wore the same clothes and smelled like

sweat, where no fineries were allowed, cheap and expensive hair was pulled into functional buns, and chit-chat discouraged, where American, Iranian, Mexican, Thai and all other cultures fell aside and we behaved as if we were in Seoul. I loved working up a hard sweat, using my powerful legs, which were so much stronger than my arms.

Now and then, Rahim came 10 minutes early to pick me up from the studio. He stood smoking just behind the glass doors, glaring inside. "Why you're paired with that man?" he said one night on the ride home.

"What man?" I said.

"That other student; the 40-year-old adult man you're practising choke-holds with."

"I'm learning to disarm him," I said. "There are no women there. What am I supposed to do, disarm a six-year-old girl?"

He let it go for half an hour. He liked Kerry, the instructor, who was robotic and soldier-like, exuding zero sexuality despite his general physical perfection.

Later at home, as my mother was sniffing the bowl of raw chicken dakgalbi (another brightly marinated Korean meat), muttering "what on Earth is this?" and sneaking a spoonful of sugar in, Rahim started up again. →

“Show me how you practise the hold on that man,” he said.

“What?” I said. “Leave me alone. I’m going to shower.”

“Show me. Right now.” He was getting into a half-squat, shortening himself so I could get my arm around his neck.

I knew what he was getting at. I swung an arm around, pressing my forearm into his Adam’s Apple, arching to keep my breasts as far from his back as humanly possible - because this was, after all, the only thing he was checking. He twisted my arm quickly around, pinning it to my back. “You shouldn’t be paired with a man,” he said, squeezing my arm until I winced. I hated him in such moments - not only for the aggression, but for not believing in me, for trying to stand in the way of my dreams.

Now and then, as my skills improved, Rahim and I practised kicks in the garage - Rahim’s second home after the kitchen. A huge punching bag hung from the ceiling beside his red Mercury Cougar, the bonnet of which was always propped open. He hugged the bag in place and yelled out instructions as I kicked. Although he was constantly criticising my technique, he saw that I could be good, and he stopped questioning my right to practise.

I began visiting the dojang every day, staying for one class, then two or three at a time. Between classes, during the 10-minute break, I would jump on the Stairmaster in the corner of the room to burn off extra energy. I grew slimmer, harder. After I got my yellow belt, I started competing in small local events. I won a trophy, then another. My thighs became dangerous, like the sporty girls I had admired.

About a year after I started competing, Kerry invited me to join the demo team, a group that performed choreographed fight routines with actual bo staffs (like Donatello in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles) during basketball halftime shows and insurance company Christmas parties. We did this unironically, to a fog machine and songs like Total Eclipse of the Heart.

I won more tournaments and advanced to a higher belt. Once or twice, I had my nose bloodied. I didn’t mind - it wasn’t the pretty European nose that I wanted, anyway. On weekends, we ran laps at a local track. I learned to break boards. Kerry showed me how to put together a board-breaking routine that would win medals at tournaments: girls, he told me, hardly ever compete in board-breaking. This was a real chance to clean up. It seemed my incentives were aligned with this strange, quiet man with his buzz cut and his weird Christian ass-kicking morals: the more trophies I won, the better his dojang’s stats. “Try this one,” he said. “First one with your elbow. Then knife-hand right into the second board. Then side kick. Three. Axe kick. Four.”

That routine got me a box full of gold medals. I didn’t hang them. I wrote their names on my resume, a scrap of handwritten paper that I kept in my backpack to type out later. After a while, Kerry started offering me other tips. “Dina, don’t run like that. What’s wrong with you? Lift your feet! ... Dina, featherweight won’t be sustainable for you, but it won’t be that hard either. You’d be surprised at how full you can feel on egg whites and baked potatoes.”

When I was 15, Kerry invited me to compete at state, the Oklahoma-wide competition to qualify for nationals. Every day after school, I kicked until my soles bled, until the balls of my feet were shredded. The dojang was covered in a rough carpet - a brutal surface on which to pivot, but Kerry didn’t take excuses. Faster, he yelled, holding a stopwatch. We had a motto that we chanted at the beginning and end of each practice session: Kick first, kick hard, kick fast, kick last!

Some nights I would wake up and cry in my mother’s arms. “I’ll never get into Harvard. I’ll die ordinary and forgotten.”

“You won’t!” she said. “You’re already not ordinary.”

“I’m not Harvard-worthy,” I’d weep. “Look, my knees are a mess.”

She snorted. “Oh God, Dina,” she said in English. “You’re crazy but very proudable! You get in. Please eat something.”

I loved winning at a male sport. I was still angry about so many things - hijab, the Islamic Republic, the fat old church men who made high-school football players feel like gods while they shamed women who dared to want too much. I survived on egg whites and water-packed tuna doused in vinegar and mustard, salted baked potatoes and watery fruit. I had to give up Rahim’s beautiful Korean barbecues - the biggest sacrifice of all.

I became a block of muscle. My thighs stopped touching, my breasts disappeared and I stopped menstruating.

Rahim chided me for my diet. “This isn’t how they do it in Korea,” he said one morning, as he was marinating more meat. (I don’t want to belabour this point, but truly this is my primary image of the man. He was either marinating meat, chain smoking or in the garage at 2am, fixing his car.)

“You’ve never been to Korea,” I said. “So you don’t really know, do you?”

“Athletes need to eat. This Kerry isn’t teaching you the right discipline. Real taekwondo masters eat enough food. They eat meat and vegetables, not egg whites.”

“I’m not trying to be a master. But if you want to get technical, they don’t put their bulgogi on top of a mountain of butter basmati either,” I said.

“Cultures working together makes things better,” he muttered.

“You mean like with colonialism, or how the Arab invasions improved things for us?” I loved goading that man until he blew up.

“Eat something,” he said that day, although it pained him to seem concerned.

“That smell is making me sick,” I said. “I’m going to bed.”

At night I tightened a back brace under my clothes to soothe the ache of my empty stomach and did homework until early morning. I caught up with American history, calculus, chemistry. After my daily five or six hours in the studio, I struggled to keep up straight As, but there was no question of letting the grades drop. Perfect scores were the minimum for Harvard. Meanwhile, Baba still didn’t get it: “Dina joon, go somewhere academic!”

“But Harvard is academic,” I told him. “I don’t know how to explain it. They want to know you can suffer, I guess.” Strangely, that made sense to Baba.

At 15, after winning two medals at state, I decided it was time to compete in nationals in San Antonio - it was in summer and I would be 16 by then. If I won, I would have my trophy and I could move on to becoming someone, somewhere far from this hot, inhospitable place my family had landed.

Six months before nationals, I pinched a spinal nerve. I could hardly walk, and twisting or lifting a leg sent a sharp pain through my body. I signed up for the tournament anyway - I had to. This medal was already a part of my future identity. In college, when my new classmates quizzed one another for the reason they got in, I wouldn’t be “the refugee” or “the Iranian”. I would be the girl who kicked serious ass at a national championship.

I stopped practising, but swam every day. At night, my mother held my feet in her lap as I strengthened my core. I barely ate. My lips turned blue. When I returned to the studio, the pain was bearable.

At the weigh-ins for the nationals in San Antonio, I stripped down to my underwear. Getting into the featherweight category was, in my

twisted mind, pretty much a determining factor for Harvard. If I was the lightest in a weight category, no matter how few girls had signed up, I would lose. I didn’t drink water for a day. I shaved my body and had laxatives tucked in my gym bag, just in case. I made it into the lower weight class by 0.01lb.

Daniel had signed up, too. For a 13-year-old boy, winning the nationals was a much tougher prospect - every rich boy in Oklahoma did martial arts. And he had nothing at stake. He ate normal foods, practised an hour or two a day, had friendships and hobbies. At nationals, he completed his fights and waited around with his friends.

Daniel and I weren’t close and moments of sibling kindness were rare. But when I stumbled away from my last fight, having just beaten a fast, angry girl by a single point to secure the gold medal, Daniel rushed to my side with an ice-cream bar - Dove, the most expensive kind. I was bleary with hunger and joy and disbelief. I had done it. I had won an actual gold medal at nationals, the very thing the admissions books said I needed. And here was Daniel holding an ice cream, saying “Congrats sis”. He had spent his own money, and although it looked like poison, I ate it for his sake.

I spent the next hour in the bathroom enduring the violent protests of a body that hadn’t digested fat, sugar or dairy for over a year. I managed to make it to the winner’s block and then went back home. Having accomplished my goal, I quit taekwondo and returned to eating normally. Kerry was dumbstruck - had I lost my passion for the sport?

“What passion?” I said. “I’m not an athlete. This was about Harvard.”

There are people who never question their place in the world. They feel part of their homeland, while newcomers struggle to remake themselves, putting on a mask until they learn. But in that crucial moment, just as I was trying to shed my Iranian-ness, when I might have started to bow down or posture, I was accidentally immersed in Korean culture instead. Somehow, this practice made it easier to become American. Like my classmates, I now had a sport. My body became something familiar to them - toned, sleek. I gained the confidence to get a lifeguard licence and a job at a local pool. I found the courage to make friends, to say no to hairbrush borrowers. By ignoring American culture in favour of another during my formative years, I became too occupied elsewhere to care that I was different. Taekwondo made me a fully realised person, with a passion and skill entirely separate from my Iranian roots. And that was vital, not for assimilating, but for becoming who I am, regardless of where I go, or who lives next door.

For years, before and after I quit taekwondo, I toiled in advanced courses. To round out my resume, I volunteered at the food bank, bagging crunchy peanut butter for the poor. I organised a citywide



Liberty belt Dina Nayeri takes to the dojang at a junior taekwondo event in the US

tutoring programme. I worked several jobs. I hardly slept. On quiet Saturdays, I watched Rudy, a movie about a boy with zero chance of playing football for Notre Dame, who nevertheless does.

Sometimes I felt like a fraud, trying for something that wasn’t meant for me. The movies were clear: Harvard was for pretty white boys with money. Even my counsellor didn’t believe I would get there. But of the many things taekwondo taught me, the most vital was that every habit becomes easy with time. Kerry always said that it takes three weeks of hard work to begin transforming into anything you are pretending to be. And if you throw yourself into the practice of it, no one will call you a fraud.

And, in the end, we did assimilate (if that’s what you want to call it) - mostly by accident, and because of the people who loved us. We followed the rules. No family of four logged fewer hours of sleep: a typical midnight found my mother reading health policy textbooks, me doing calculus, Daniel writing poems, Rahim taking out an engine or marinating more bulgogi. I began to imagine that one day I would grow into a person whose past didn’t define her every step. That one day I would have time to care for my body, to mend my bloody feet, to let the calluses on my fingers heal.

Twenty years later, I moved to London and had a daughter of my own. Last Christmas, my partner gave me a strange gift: an hour of practice with a world champion taekwondo coach. Two decades after I had last set foot in a dojang, I was no longer the skinny block of muscle I had been. I now had breasts that bounced, thighs that touched, an authentic Iranian ass that no wall could flatten. I was afraid to try it again. I had been so disciplined in my younger days, but my eyes had been on a different goal. I hadn’t stopped to take joy in being good at something and now my skills were gone.

But, in that hour, my body’s memory astonished me. The joys returned one by one: the sweat, the way I instinctively shouted and grunted with each kick, the popping of my foot against the clap-pad, the satisfying give of the kick-bag. I had spent months fighting stress and tension, the many anxieties of starting again in a new country and of becoming a mother. Three years in this new life and I was still battling. But, in one hour, my body relented and I was 16 again, a displaced oddball trying to remember Korean numbers. It was such a simple and powerful remedy. It’s funny, the stubbornness of the universe: the harder you try to belong to a place, the more it pushes you away, enfolding you only when you look another way.

In the end, I didn’t get into Harvard. I got into Princeton instead. I found that I didn’t care. Princeton was the same and was featured in just as many glossy films. I had no loyalty to Harvard; and in fact, my loyalty was transferred instantly and for ever by the simple fact that a great institution had said: “We want you. We had our choice of American students, and you, Dina Nayeri, are one worth having.” How I craved to be claimed. If I couldn’t have a country, I would have something equally indestructible. Princeton would be my home. Academia would be my home. The week after my high school graduation, a surgeon cut me a European nose - I begged Baba for the money. Again, I insisted to his great bafflement that this, too, was necessary for an American education.

I didn’t take up taekwondo in college. Given my history of bloody noses in competition, my new nose came with conditions. It didn’t matter to me. I was American now - I wouldn’t question that again for another decade or more, when I’d grow weary and sceptical of national identity, the many consequences of birth place and time.

One day, before I left for Princeton, Rahim gave me a card. “I’m proud of you,” he wrote. “You’re a real fighter, and I didn’t see that before.” I packed the card away with my childhood keepsakes. I watched the bruises around my nose heal. I dyed my hair chestnut in the bathtub. Sometimes as a reward, I ate secret spoonfuls of cream.

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