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
I admit the notion that sports trophies got you into university in America struck me as bizarre for exactly one second before I gave myself up to it, incorporating into it 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 a 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 back in Iran, she had done horse-riding and tennis. I wanted to try swimming or tennis, but in Okla...
“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 couldn’t punch him. 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 I could. After all, I was the only thing he was checking. He twisted my arm quickly around, gathering it in his fist, and with a man, he said. I squeezed my arm until I twisted it. He hit me in such moments — not only for the aggression, but for trying to stand on the way of my training. Now and then, as my skills improved, Rahim and I practised kicks in the garage — Rahim’s second home after the kitchen. He had a stopwatch. We had a motto that we chanted at the beginning and to pivot, but Kerry didn’t take excuses. Faster, he yelled, holding a bag in place and yelling out instructions as I kicked.

The joys of those early days of taekwondo linger. 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 didn’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.

“Never be more than Korea,” he said. “So you don’t really know, do you?”

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

“I am 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 make things better,” he muttered.

“Cultures working together. What’s with the colonialism, or how the Arab invasions improved things for us?” he said, gazing that day, albiately. “That’s because of the Han Dynasty.”

“I’m not eating anything,” he said, actually.

“Eat something,” he said that day, although it pained him to see me harming the body. That's all he was. The joy of those early days of taekwondo linger. A man who lived next door.

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 was thinking ahead. How to do this out of control? How to fill five or six hours in the studio, I struggled to keep up straight as, then in the garage, I was marinating in the minimum for Harvard. Meanwhile, Baba still didn’t get it: “Dina, go somewhere academic.”

“But Harvard is up there, being yourself,” I told him. “I don’t know how to explain it. They want you 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...