

# Who tells your story?

**Nabeela:** My name is Nabeela, and I am from Pakistan. I come from a middle class family. We had a family of six in our household. I had four siblings and two parents, and I'm the second oldest. My father was the only provider, and he had four children, but he still wanted us to have an education. My dad said that we needed to work hard to get scholarships, and I remember we struggled so hard to pay our fees and had to apply for scholarships. After 10th grade, it was college, and it was really difficult to go because me and my siblings had to pay. He said to study, but I had no one to guide me. I felt like I could not make friends because we had to focus on our school work. I learned that from my older sister. But once I was in the undergrad, I realized I could still make friends and enjoy other activities instead of just studying all the time.



My older sister and I have a bittersweet relationship. We would always end up fighting about random things. One time we wanted to save money for our favorite snack, so instead of taking the bus we walked home. It had felt like such a short distance on the bus that we thought it would be the same if we started walking. We ended up walking home for three hours. My mom was so worried. Now that I think of it, we were crazy!

I loved Christmas because my mom would start preparing our house in December. She would paint our house every three years when it was almost Christmas time. We would always go shopping and we would dress up. It was the only time when we got new clothes. Otherwise we would have used clothes. My mother always made a lot of food, like three desserts and main dishes, and we had enough food till the new year.

After college I was working as a marketing executive. I was managing a sales team at a corporate firm. It was a private company that deals with industrial equipment. I technically was the manager. I was the person making sure we had enough sales. I liked this job because there was so much room for growth and learning. I could see my future in this job.



Then I met a guy named Zashien through one of the programs of scholarship that our church was putting on.

**Zeeshan:** I thought "She is too young for me. I like her, but she is too young." That's what I thought when I first met Nabeela.

**Nabeela:** I thought he was too serious, a workaholic and boring. Zeeshan asked me out, but I blocked him for 48 hours. Then I decided I would go on a date with him.

**Zeeshan:** Our first date was at a Subway. Her brother was there because of our Pakistani culture. He was eating a Subway sandwich inside while we were sitting outside. How romantic.

I said “let's date for six months, and we can decide then.” She said “If you like it, you have to put a ring on it.” She also said “If you really like me, you have to meet my parents, which means the deal is sealed.” I met her parents, and my parents were upset because it is normally the parents who meet each other first in our culture. I said “Please don't be mad because I don't want to put anything on Nabeela parents.” The six months were over and we got married!

**Nabeela:** After we got married, I thought that I would have the same experience as my sister in her marriage, fights and arguments every morning over small things. My experience was totally different from my sister's. In Pakistan, when you get married, you are marrying a whole family. You are moving in with the family and not only with that one person. In our culture, the wife has to do all of the cooking and cleaning. I never had experience with cooking and cleaning, but Zeeshan's mom didn't push me for anything. She did have some expectations, and I thought it was too much, but then I compared it to my sister and my mom. I felt like it was smoother because I was only cooking on the weekends, and Zeeshan's mom was doing everything during the week. But eventually we all adapted, including me.



In Pakistan we are very family-oriented. I love my parents and Zeeshan. My parents and I had a really strong bond, and that was one of the reasons we used to visit them every other week and eat one meal together. Those are the most important people in my life. In Pakistan I moved in with Zeeshan's parents because that is what you do in our culture. The boy is responsible for taking care of their parents after they retire.

**Zeeshan:** In Pakistan it is so easy because your parents take care of everything. Pakistan was very crowded. The food was amazing, the culture was rich, and people were welcoming. You would feel loved. But there were also problems.

I was working at the church. We would handle cases all the time of people who had been facing religious persecution. We had this one guy who was from the southern part of Pakistan, and he worked for a Christian magazine, and a group of Muslim extremists came to their office and killed everybody. The man only survived because he played dead. He was the only one alive after 13 people got killed.

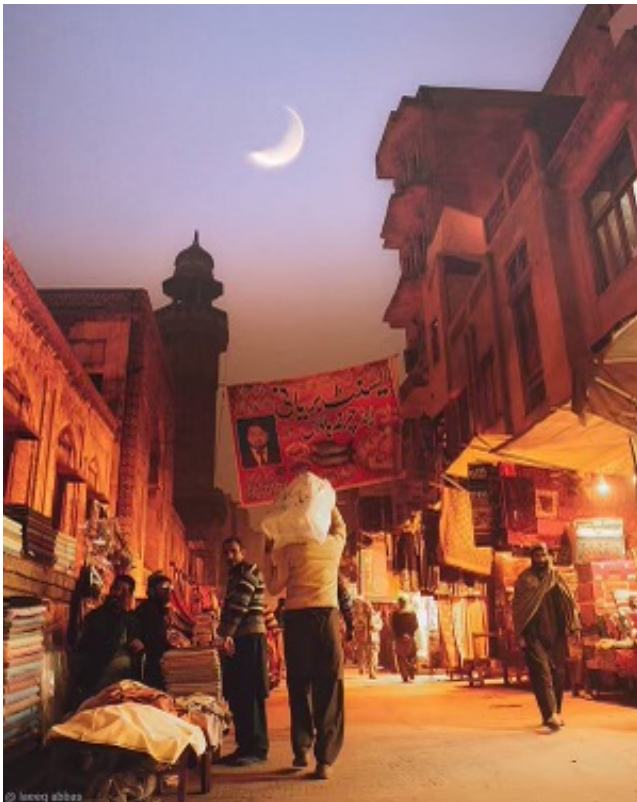
We hid him until he found a way to go to Australia, because these people still wanted to kill him. Our church tried to set up a way to help people from the church to stay away from the bad people. But because we were helping people, we were put on a death list.

We were accused of evangelizing Muslims, and we were attacked for our religion. Pakistan has a long history of violence in religion. If you change your faith, you will die. We got on the death list of really bad people, and they wanted to attack us. One day we hid in our house, and then the next day we went to another house, and so on. There was a bishop who helped us in a different city and some friends, but only for a short time. We stayed in each place for like two days, and then we would move on. Nabeela was pregnant, so that made this time even scarier. **It was only through God's grace that we did not die. We were hiding for a couple of months, and then we decided to leave the country. Nabeela and I did not plan on going to America; it was a life and death decision. We got on the death list, so we had to leave or risk being killed.**

It was at night when we came to the United States. Our first concern was going to the airport and not getting harmed.

**Nabeela:** When they stamped our passports they did mine right away, but for Zeeshan they would not let him go through. They took him away to go into questioning. When people asked us the smallest things at the airport like, “excuse me,” we would panic so much.

**Zeeshan:** We did not relax until the plane went into the air because no one could get to us. We were still a little scared because they could still send us back.



We wanted to go where no one knew us, so we chose Denver, Colorado in the United States. We did not have any money, so Denver Rescue Mission gave us some money and help. That helped us a lot.

**Nabeela:** We met some friends at the Denver Rescue Mission and asked if we could stay at their house for seven days, but we ended up staying there for three months. She said, “You have to stay because you are pregnant.” That was how we made friends here in Denver. **Immigrants do need some money to help but, what they miss is the community, so just offering friendship to an immigrant and to have a friend that can listen means a lot to us.**

**Zeeshan:** It took me 8 months to get a good job. My first job in Denver was Chick-fil-A. I worked there for 8 months until I got a good job. I also did not see my family often because I would come home and they were asleep, and when I woke up

they were asleep. That was really difficult for me and my family.

When I found out that I was going to be a dad of a baby girl I was scared and excited. You know that the person you love will be in pain and you can't do much about it. The baby was going to be so fragile, and I was scared that I would hurt her. I always wanted to name her Maya because it meant “faith.”

**Nabeela:** I was in labor for 30 hours, and I was thinking “I do not want to have a baby anymore,” but when I saw her all of that went away. Maya and Zeeshan were crying and they looked the same, but Zeeshan was crying a little too much. I was just laughing. This family means a lot to us. We can't imagine what our life would be like without this family.

My hobbies these days are watching Maya. Otherwise, I enjoy watching web series. I'm not good at reading. That is one thing I am trying to learn, and I like crazy dancing, not a specific dance form. That is something I love. I am a stay at home mom. I do work part time but I work from home for a church.

I am proud of everything that I have right now. I came here with just two bags, and now I have a family, a house, a good job and everything we need to provide for our family.

*Note to readers: The names of the people in this story have been changed to protect their identity. Many immigrants are forced from their country due to danger and persecution, just like Nabeela and Zeeshan in this story. They have agreed to tell their stories anonymously in hopes of spreading awareness about the struggles that immigrants face.*

story told by: Charlie