

Citizen Gain

BY SHIRLEY GRACE, MA

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At 1:10 a.m. on June 11, 1963, I became an American citizen. I didn't have to sign or promise anything to convince some official of my sincere patriotism. Actually, my mother did all the work. Special treatment? You bet. I was the cutest American born that year. Mommy said so. But what if you're foreign-born, and, for whatever reason, you choose to switch teams and join the ranks of the free and the brave?

If you do, you'll be honored in a ceremony, during which President George W. Bush will take time to offer congratulations to you — well, via videotape, but to you, nonetheless. He'll give you the big-eyes (nicely) that attaining U.S. citizenship is a "defining event in your life," and that "today, the United States is not only your home; it is your country."

President John F. Kennedy failed to welcome me like that back in 1963, but I probably would've cried or napped through it anyway. No, I earned my place in our great democracy just by being born — debunking the myth that New Jersey has nothing to offer — but truly, the credit goes to my Cuban, Irish, and German immigrant ancestors, who readied my cushy suburban cradle with their faith, hope and hard work.

Across the nation, roughly 460,000 people became naturalized U.S. citizens in 2003, including 17,000 in the Washington metropol-

itan area alone. Fifty-eight of those candidates took the oath down to the Fallon Federal Building in Baltimore on October seventeenth. One of them was my Iranian mother-in-law, Afsar Hossein-Khayat - known to all who love her as Maman Afsar.

American. She can ditch her Green Card and all its hassles.

I had unwittingly supplied this opportunity: At age twenty-two I had married my handsome, Iran-born college sweetie, Mashaallah. As the U.S. government had re-classified his student visa to the

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First petitioning for citizenship in 1997, the government denied her request because she'd failed the five-year residency requirement — she'd gone to Iran to seek affordable medical treatment for her rheumatic joints, and had stayed too long. Finally, after years of form-filling, attorney fees, and waiting to re-establish eligibility, all is in order. With her new U.S. citizenship status, she possesses all the rights and privileges of any loyal

deportable "non-resident alien," our marriage immediately provided him access to a Green Card. In a way, I gave him his citizenship as a wedding present. My unbeknownst dowry? A cleared path for *his* direct relations also to apply.

I understood little of this at the time, and when the issue of my mother-in-law seeking U.S. citizenship arose in the mid-1990s, I balked. Why? I harped at my husband. What did she care about

being American? She's always going on about how the fruit is bigger, the people politer, the houses cleaner in Tehran. Travel is hard on her, he explained. U.S. citizenship will allow her to travel between Iran and America at her discretion, when she's feeling up to it. Green Cards have annual re-entry deadlines. She can use whichever passport works best at the border. Jarred awake, my dozing inner-patriot fumed. Travel? Why kind of hypocritical reason is that? Isn't she just using the system? Using me?

My non-confrontational husband never voiced the logical counterpoints: Why did I care? What's this newfound pride in my nationality? I'm still not sure, actually. I certainly did feel a swell of patriotism after Al-Qaeda debuted in 2001, but I steer my car clear of jingoistic magnets or bumper stickers, sorry. I came of age during the yawning, nebulous 1980s with the rest of the Me-Me-Me-Generation as Vietnam, protest rock, and do-your-own-thing was switched out for Reaganomics, flashdance, and do-the-same-hair-do. But I do know I felt a bit like somebody else's springboard to a better life. My citizenship suddenly smacked more of a commodity than a birthright.

As the years passed, though, I softened: Is it Maman Afsar's fault that her six children, seventeen grandchildren, and great-grandson are split between Iran and the U.S.? That eight thousand miles and even wider political gaps separate the two countries? That rheumatoid arthritis is a painful traveling companion? She, like any other matriarch, wants to witness the births, marriages, and other events that

mark time in families, no matter where they live; who can fault her for that?

In the spring of 2003, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services approved Maman Afsar's second petition. Six more months dragged by before the letter scheduling the oath ceremony arrived;

We park the car in an underground lot on that day. The weather is October cool but not raw — a typical low-50s with low humidity. Maman Afsar's knee joints ache as she treks up one flight of stairs to the outside world. "I'm a falling apart American," she says in Farsi.

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her life revolved around the mailbox: "Everyday, I wait until the mailman comes," she said in Farsi. "Then I go look. Everyday, nothing." Finally, something. We all rejoiced, even me.

My husband and I, along with two of our children, served as Maman Afsar's citizenship entourage. I had attended one oath ceremony a dozen years previous for Mashaallah's naturalization, but, saddled with our newborn son and truculent two-year-old daughter, I'd had to peep in from the courthouse hallway. This time I wanted to see what I'd facilitated.

Finally, we reach the mouth of the Baltimore courthouse, which is, of course, braced with all of the security orthodontia now attached to all federal buildings. Security signs prioritize their taboos: No weapons! No cameras! Law-abiding goody-two-shoes that we are, Mashaallah schleps back to the car to dump our Toshiba digital.

"Mom! It's Monsieur Mansour!" my son, Cameron, exclaims, pointing to a neatly dressed, obsidian-black Senegalese man standing in the main hall. His name is El-Mansour Ndaiye, a teacher at Robert Goddard French Immersion

School, where our kids attend. We bonjour and ça va each other. He's there to renew his Green Card. We explain our citizenship appointment. "Oh yes, very good. That's the last step," he congratulates my mother-in-law.

We part ways, him to holding pen 101, us to 103, and settle in. Mashaallah rejoins us camera-less. Right across the aisle, an attractive, dark-haired woman takes out her camera and snaps a picture of her companion. Only ten minutes later — defying bureaucratic traditions with this promptness — a court officer enters, outlining the day's mechanics. Citizenship candidates must sit in the first three rows, everyone else behind them. We elevator up in huddled masses like a modernized "bring me your tired, your poor" Ellis Island reenactment to room 750 on the seventh floor.

Adjudications Officer Mary-Margaret Anozie greets us. Cute and petite, her undulating butterscotch-tipped Afro directs the incoming traffic. Camera Woman snaps a picture. My mother-in-law takes a front row seat. Our family of rule-followers dutifully sits two-thirds back. Most other people sit where they feel like sitting. Mashaallah finally breaks ranks and snags an open seat next to his mother.

A Sousa march kindles patriotic thoughts from a boombox. Camera Woman eats a mint and snaps another picture. Nobody cares. My husband, at once impressively and horrifyingly un-shy, asks to borrow Camera Woman's camera to snap a few pics since we don't have ours, and hey, would she mind emailing them back to us later?

The processing begins: the room is cattle-called by sections to double-check this, affirm that, broken record-style. Surrender your Green Card, please, so we can shred it. Think about the time period between your laaaast interview with us and todaaay: Have you

Snorting Man fumbles his to the floor. Freudian? his companion wonders aloud. A half-hour later, a blond, gum-chomping clerk abruptly snaps off the recording of Singer Lee Greenwood in mid-insistence that he's "Proud To Be An American."

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become married, divorced, or widowed? Broken the law in any way, even traffic laws? Have you traveled outside the U.S.? Joined the Communist Party or any other subversive group?

"Communist party! That's forty years out of date!" snorts an older man near me. His companion snickers agreement.

The processing drones on ad nauseum as strains of "Amazing Grace" fill the room. Hmm. Lovely to my Christian ears, but what about separation of church and state? Anyway, here's some paperwork to sign and your first American flag. On his turn,

Supervisory District Adjudications Officer Barbara Johnson enters, congratulatory smile in place. She leads the fifty-eight candidates in the Oath of Allegiance. Well under five feet tall, a head-scarfed Maman Afsar is barely visible from my seat at the back of the room. I see her right hand — casted from recent surgery to restore function to her arthritis-wracked fingers — peeping up between other people's shoulders. A gap opens and I see her facial muscles moving in speech. Just marginally conversant in English, she's trying to honor the federal mandate that the words be spoken out loud.

I wonder about those words. "I will absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen," states the first clause of the poetically wordy oath. This implies — demands — sole loyalty to the U.S. But is this the reality? Many countries, such as France, accept dual citizenship with laid-back realism. A spokesman at the French Consulate, informative despite his snippiness, stated that dual French-American citizens are French when in France, and American when in America (so in Uganda...?).

But really, isn't the oath prose just a tad extreme? Officer Anozie agrees that "it very well might be," but she defends the intent of the words, if not the words themselves, claiming they "uphold the integrity of citizenship." In her position, she says, she cannot advocate that people be dual nationals, but she's well aware that it goes on.

The new Americans pledge allegiance to the flag. Our daughter, Roshanne, is thrilled when Officer Johnson asks her to lead it, but she stumbles on the words — due to her immersion schooling she recites it more comfortably in French than English. While Johnson explains about registering to vote, Maman Afsar suddenly turns back toward me, smiles, and waves her flag. I connect with eyes that show triumph, relief, and yes, pride. I smile back, mostly happy for her, and just a tiny bit relieved about the pride thing.

Still, is a naturalized citizen truly one of us now? Other than the

preclusion of applying for Bush's job, Maman Afsar is now ostensibly as American as my own New Jersey nativity makes me. She's free. To practice her religion. Bear arms.

video homily. The certificates are distributed as Officer Anozie, with impressive confidence in her pronunciation, calls up each new American by name. A celebratory

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- MARY-MARGARET ANOZIE, ADJUDICATIONS OFFICER

Speak out against the government (ours, anyway). Peaceably assemble. Vote. And yes, undeniably, travel with greater ease.

Officer Anozie admits that Immigration continues to track naturalized citizens for varying amounts of time post-oath, depending on circumstances. "We might not continue to run the person's fingerprints regularly," she says. "But if he gets in trouble with the law elsewhere, those authorities will definitely contact Immigration." There's always Big Brother, apparently. And real or imagined, tattling threats certainly sparked an influx of people seeking citizenship post September eleventh. Officer Anozie claims that a greater diversity of cultures certainly now applies. "I think since nine-eleven a lot more people that perhaps hadn't put U.S. citizenship on the front burner [do] now," she speculates.

Fifty-five minutes after the affair began, President Bush does his

atmosphere infuses the room. Even I turn around impulsively to congratulate the man behind me. He's from Peru. He smiles back shyly, tears glinting.

The ceremony ends. "There," Mashaallah says to his mother of the countless trips made to Immigration over the past six years, "now you don't have to come to Baltimore anymore." Maman Afsar smiles and shrugs with trademark Middle Eastern fatalism. Like Lion King's baboon shaman, Rafiki, says, it doesn't matter; it's in the past. And other than the incessant waiting, the process wasn't too bad; in the end, her hailing from a country officially blackballed by the U.S. government didn't stop her quest. She's grateful.

"I love Iran and America," she says in halting English. "America never did anything bad to me." A moment passes. Back to Farsi. "When can we go to the passport office?" she asks. "This afternoon?"