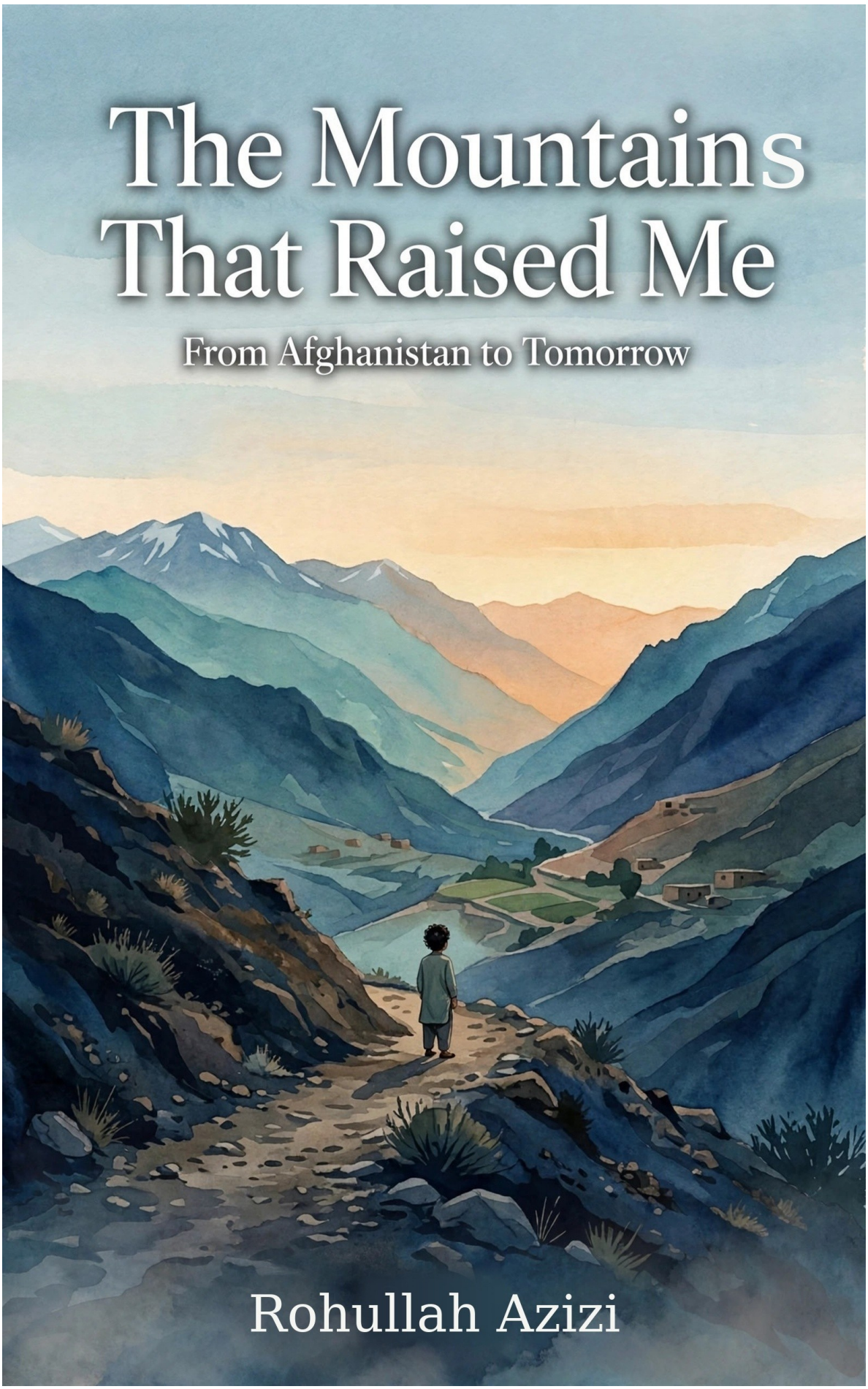
The Mountains That Raised Me

From Afghanistan to Tomorrow



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Dedication

To my children, whose questions started this book and whose kind hearts keep it going. You wanted to help children far away, and that is how all of this began.

To my wife, whose love and strength have carried me through every part of our life together.

And to the children and teenagers in Afghanistan and places like it around the world, who keep learning, growing, and hoping even when life is hard. Your courage is the light this book follows.

This book is for all of you, with love.

Preface

Dear Young Reader,

This book began with my children's questions at bedtime. They wanted to know about Afghanistan, where I grew up, and about their grandparents' lives there. Night after night, as we read together, they asked me what my life was like, and what it was like for the people around me, especially when it came to getting an education, which was never easy.

Why is this book called The Mountains That Raised Me? The mountains that raised me are the mountains that surrounded me as a child. It is also my father, who was calm and strong like a mountain. And it is all the people in these stories who stood firm like mountains, in their power, their resilience, and their gratitude. Afghanistan is a mountainous country. It is defined by its mountains. I belonged to that place as a child, and I belong to this new country now, here in the United States. The mountains raised me, and they are still with me. But I belong to more than one place, or two. I belong to the whole journey, to every country I have been lucky enough to see, to all of humanity, and to this beautiful planet that is our home. I love the places that raised me deeply, and I love the wide world they opened for me.

When I started writing this book, I had two children. Now we have a baby girl too, and her story will be the last one in this book.

Then one day, my children were raising money for their school, and they started to understand how hard it is for children in Afghanistan to go to school at all. They didn't just feel sorry. They wanted to do something. So they had an idea: we would write my story together. The whole purpose of this book is to help children and their education. Anything it earns will go to that. That matters most for girls in Afghanistan, who today are not allowed to continue school past the early grades,

and whose chance to learn has been taken from them.

My three children are my little helpers. Their questions started these stories, and their ideas helped bring this book to life.

That is how this book was born.

The stories in it are from my life: things that happened to me, things I saw, things I learned from my parents. They are not just stories from the past. They are about the things that helped me keep going: hard work, learning, kindness, and not giving up when life is difficult.

I hope you enjoy reading them. And I hope they remind you that even a small idea, like the one my children had at bedtime, can grow into something that helps people far away.

I also hope these stories remind you that every person who comes from far away carries a story like this one, and their stories are often beautiful. There are challenges along the way, but like the mountains, people keep standing and working hard. Many of us, in one way or another, came from somewhere else. Remember what those who came before you went through, build on it, help each other, and see the good in people.

With love and gratitude,

Rohullah Azizi

A note: these stories are from my own life. I used AI tools to help put them into words, but the memories, the lessons, and the voice are mine.

The Well in the Yard

In our village, there was no plumbing. No taps, no pipes. Before the well, we survived on a stream close to our house. In summer it was full of water, and we fished and swam in it. But its water wasn't healthy, and in winter it froze. Then the village well was our only source, about 200 meters (650 feet) from our very old house.

It was open water, running through many villages, so animals and anything else could get into it. It was clean enough to wash things with, but it was not clean enough to drink. Drinking water was a huge problem, and it still is in many countries, so it is a good idea not to waste it.

Every day, we walked there, filled two large buckets, hung them from a wooden yoke called a Bangi across our shoulders, and carried them home. Then we went back, again and again, until we had enough for the day.

A Bangi is a piece of wood with ropes on two sides. You hang something heavy from each end and rest the wood on your shoulder, so it balances like a scale as you walk. Carrying one bucket was not efficient, and carrying two in your hands was too difficult, so this was our local solution.

In winter, that walk was dangerous. Snow was everywhere, the ground was slippery, and there was no path. We had to clear one ourselves. The fog made it hard to see, and far away, we could hear wolves howling. The big old trees stood dark around us, some of them a hundred years old, with bullets inside them from the war. Everyone accepted the danger. No one pushed for change. But the water had to come home.

The war damaged everything, not only people, but animals, the land, and even the trees. On some trees you could see the wound where something had gone inside, and the tree had healed around it, but the wound was still there. Once, when we cut an old tree down, two people sat on two sides of a very big hand saw and pulled it back and forth together, and so many times we could see a bullet hit the saw. All the trees were like that. Imagine how dangerous it was when the war was at its worst.

Our house was very old, maybe a hundred years old, made of clay, with walls about a meter and a half (five feet) thick and heavy wooden doors it took two people to open. Four or five families lived there in different corners: our family, my uncles' families, and a farmer who took care of the land and the orchards.

Our village was beautiful, in the middle of farmlands, with two streams nearby, a river far away, and mountains in front of us and behind us. It was all green. In the orchards we had fresh apples and other fruits, and my job was to walk under the trees very early in the morning and collect the fruit that had fallen. I washed it in the stream and brought it home. I loved that job.

The rooms all faced one backyard in the middle, and that was where our well had once been. In winter, out there in the middle of nowhere, it was dark and cut off from everything. No electricity, and no way to know what was happening beyond our village.

We used a traditional lamp. You poured in fuel and lit it, and it gave enough light to see and walk, but not if you were far away from it. Nights were difficult, but they were fun too. Sometimes, on a special occasion, we lit a candle and sat around it, playing and talking in the darkness without seeing each other very clearly. That was the fun of dark and light.

Our parents told us there had been a well there before. But it had collapsed, because nobody had looked after it, and back then there was no concrete to make it strong.

“Probably we shouldn’t do it again,” they said.

But my brother and I said, why don’t we make it again? He was one year older than me, and we were classmates in the same classroom. We were the same height, and some people even thought we were twins. And we did it anyway.

It took us about a week.

It was the summer break, and we used every tool we had. We had no experience at all, and the beginning was difficult. The hard soil slowly became softer as we worked, and our experience and our commitment grew stronger too.

We dug and dug, not very deep, eight meters (26 feet) at most, and we learned as we went: how to climb in and out, how to dig, how to finish the job.

The work was fun too. Sometimes we made a kind of camp down there, and when the hole grew deeper we sat inside it and drank our tea. Inside a round, dark hole you lose track of direction, so we played a game. My brother would shout from the top, “Which way is our home?” and most of the time we got it wrong, because inside it is round and dark and you cannot tell which way you are facing.

At the very end, we broke through with the pickaxe, and the water slowly came out. I was so excited.



My brother and I dug until the water came, and everyone believed.

Then the grown-ups got interested. They came and gave us their advice and their skill, and slowly we built it properly. We bought round concrete rings and set them inside the well, so the mud walls could not collapse again.

People were making the rings locally by then. Our parents and the whole community bought them, and so many people carried them here by hand. We set them in one by one, carefully, digging a little more and putting in another one. It was huge teamwork, and the rings protected the well from erosion. The water was slightly better than the stream water, but we still had to boil it and take precautions before we drank it.

In the end, everyone believed in our dream. The well is still there, and people are still using it. It was so much better, and so beautiful, because we did not have to go outside for water anymore. Everyone could get it right there, in front of their own room.

Nobody had found a way to solve the problem. They thought it would not work, or

they had given up, or they did not have the time.

Everyone was busy, or they thought it was okay for now. Maybe tomorrow things would change, maybe the war would end, and we would go back to our city house, where we had water and all the things we needed. But someone had to take the first step, and we were the children who took it.

But sometimes you have to really try, and dig, and find a solution. Don’t get used to it. The answer might be right beneath your feet.



This sample ends here.

The Mountains That Raised Me by Rohullah Azizi — 29 stories, 41 illustrations — is coming in December 2026.

For an advance copy, or to share your thoughts:
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