

OUTCASTS UNITED

*A Refugee Soccer Team,
an American Town*

WARREN ST. JOHN

Spiegel & Grau
New York
2009

Table of Contents

Other Books By This Author

Title Page

Dedication

Introduction

Part 1 - Changes

Chapter 1 - Luma

Chapter 2 - Beatrice and Her Boys

Chapter 3 - “Small Town ... Big Heart”

Chapter 4 - Alone Down South

Chapter 5 - The Fugees Are Born

Chapter 6 - Paula

Chapter 7 - “Coach Says It’s Not Good”

Chapter 8 - “They’re in America Now—: Not Africa”

Chapter 9 - Get Lost

Part 2 - A New Season

Chapter 10 - “I Want to Be Part of the Fugees!”

Chapter 11 - Figure It Out so You Can Fix It

Chapter 12 - Meltdown

Chapter 13 - “How Am I Going to Start All Over?”

Chapter 14 - Alex, Bien, and Ive

Chapter 15 - Trying Again

Chapter 16 - The Fifteens Fight

Chapter 17 - Go Fugees!

Chapter 18 - Gunshots

Chapter 19 - Getting Over It

Chapter 20 - The “Soccer People”

Chapter 21 - Playing on Grass

Part 3 - Full Circle

Chapter 22 - Who Are the Kings?

Chapter 23 - Showdown at Blue Springs

Chapter 24 - Coming Apart

Chapter 25 - Hanging On at Home

Chapter 26 - The Dikoris

Chapter 27 - “What Are You Doing Here?”

Chapter 28 - Halloween

Chapter 29 - The Fifteens’ Final Game

Chapter 30 - My Rules, My Way

Chapter 31 - Tornado Cup

Epilogue

Author’s Note

A Note on Sources

For More Information

Reader’s Guide

About the Author

Copyright

Introduction

On a cool spring afternoon at a soccer field in northern Georgia, two teams of teenage boys were going through their pregame warm-ups when the heavens began to shake. The field had been quiet save the sounds of soccer balls thumping against forefeet and the rustling of the balls against the nylon nets that hung from the goals. But as the rumble grew louder, all motion stopped as boys from both teams looked quizzically skyward. Soon a cluster of darts appeared in the gap of sky between the pine trees on the horizon and the cottony clumps of cloud vapor overhead. It was a precision flying squadron of fighter jets, performing at an air show miles away in Atlanta. The aircraft banked in close formation in the direction of the field and came closer, so that the boys could now make out the markings on the wings and the white helmets of the pilots in the cockpits. Then with an earthshaking roar deep enough to rattle the change in your pocket, the jets split in different directions like an exploding firework, their contrails carving the sky into giant wedges.

On the field below, the two groups of boys watched the spectacle with craned necks, and from different perspectives. The players of the home team—a group of thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys from the nearby Atlanta suburbs playing with the North Atlanta Soccer Association—gestured to the sky and wore expressions of awe.

The boys at the other end of the field were members of an all-refugee soccer team called the Fugees. Many had actually seen the machinery of war in action, and all had felt its awful consequences firsthand. There were Sudanese players on the team whose villages had been bombed by old Russian-made Antonov bombers flown by the Sudanese Air Force, and Liberians who'd lived through barrages of mortar fire that pierced the roofs of their neighbors' homes, taking out whole families. As the jets flew by the field, several members of the Fugees flinched.

“YOU GUYS NEED to wake up!” a voice interrupted as the jets streaked into the distance. “Concentrate!”

The voice belonged to Luma Mufleh, the thirty-one-year-old founder and volunteer coach of the Fugees. Her players resumed their practice shots, but they now seemed distracted. Their shots flew hopelessly over the goal.

“If you shoot like that, you’re going to lose,” Coach Luma said.

She was speaking to a young Liberian forward named Christian Jackson. Most of the Fugees had experienced suffering of some kind or another, but Christian’s was rawer than most. A month before, he had lost three siblings and a young cousin in a fire at his family’s apartment in Clarkston, east of Atlanta. Christian escaped by jumping through an open window. The smallest of the dead children was found under a charred mattress, an odd detail to investigators. But the Reverend William B. J. K. Harris, a Liberian minister in Atlanta who reached out to the family after the fire, explained that during Liberia’s fourteen years of civil war, children were taught to take cover under their beds during the fighting, as a precaution against bullets and mortar shrapnel. For the typical American child, “under the bed” was the realm of ghosts and monsters. For a child from a war zone, it was supposed to be the safest place of all.

Not long before the fire, Luma had kicked Christian Jackson off the Fugees for swearing at practice. Swearing was against her rules. She had warned him once, and then when he swore again, she told him to leave and not to come back. That was how Luma ran her team. Not long after the fire, Christian showed up at the Clarkston Community Center field where the Fugees practiced, and watched quietly from behind a chain-link fence around the playing area. Under normal circumstances, Luma might have ignored him—she gave second chances, but rarely third. But Luma summoned Christian over and told him he could rejoin the team so long as he understood that he was on probation. If he swore again at practice or during a game, he was gone for good. No exceptions. Christian said he understood. This was his first game back.

Luma shouted to her players to gather around her and gave them their position assignments—Christian was told to play striker, on offense—and they took the field. Forty or so parents had gathered on the home team’s sideline to cheer on their boys, and they clapped as their sons walked onto the pitch. There was no one on the Fugees’ sideline. Most of the players came from single-parent families, and their mothers or fathers—usually mothers—stayed home on weekends to look after their other children, or else worked, because weekend shifts paid more. Few had cars to allow them to travel to soccer games anyway. Even at their home games, the Fugees rarely had anyone to

cheer them on.

The referee summoned the Fugees to the line to go over their roster and to check their cleats and numbers. Luma handed him the roster, and the referee wrinkled his brow.

“If I mispronounce your name, I apologize,” he said. He ticked through the names awkwardly but respectfully. When he got hung up on a syllable, the boys would politely announce their own names, then step forward to declare their jersey numbers.

A few minutes later, a whistle sounded and the game began.

The head coach of the North Atlanta team was a screamer. From the outset, he ran back and forth on his sideline, barking commands to his players in a hoarse bellow: “Man on! Man on!” “Drop it! Drop it!” “Turn! Turn! Turn!” His words echoed over the quiet field like a voice from a public address system. Luma paced silently on her side of the field and occasionally glanced over at the opposite sideline with a perturbed look on her face. She was all for instruction, but her method was to teach during practice and during the breaks. Once the whistle blew, she allowed her players to be themselves: to screw up, to take chances, and to create. All the shouting was wearing on her nerves.

When North Atlanta scored first, on a free kick, the team’s coach jumped up and down on the sidelines, while across the field parents leaped from their folding lawn chairs in celebration: more grating noise. Luma pursed her lips in a tiny sign of disgust and kept pacing, quietly. She made a substitution on defense but otherwise remained silent.

A few moments later, Christian Jackson shook himself free on the right side, dribbled downfield, and fired a line drive into the top right corner of the net: goal. Luma betrayed no reaction other than to adjust her tattered white Smith College baseball cap and to continue pacing. The Fugees soon regained possession; they controlled the ball with crisp passes and moved into range of the goal. A Fugees forward struggled free of traffic to take a shot that flew a good twenty feet over the crossbar and into the parking lot behind the field, and soon after, let loose another that was wide by a similar margin. Luma paced. Meanwhile, with each of his team’s shots the North Atlanta coach shouted more instructions to his players, ever more adamantly. He was getting frustrated. If his players had followed his instructions to the word, they

could've scored on Manchester United. But as it was, they ended the first half trailing the Fugees 3–1.

A 3–1 lead at halftime would have pleased most soccer coaches. But Luma was seething. Her head down, she marched angrily to a corner of the field, the Fugees following behind sullenly. They could tell she was unhappy. They braced themselves for what they knew was coming. Luma ordered them to sit down.

“Our team has taken nine shots and made three—they’ve taken two shots and made one,” she told them, her voice sharp and strident. “You’re outrunning them, outhustling them, outplaying them—why are you only winning three to one?”

“Christian,” she said, looking at the boy who sat on the grass with his arms around his knees, his eyes downcast. “This is one of your worst games. I want it to be one of your best games. I want to sit back and watch good soccer—do you understand?”

At that moment, the voice of the North Atlanta coach—still screaming at his players—drifted down the field to the Fugees’ huddle. Luma pulled up and turned her narrowed gaze toward the source of the offending noise.

“See that coach?” Luma said, tilting her head in the direction of the screamer. “I want him to sit down and be quiet. That’s when you know we’ve won—when he sits down and shuts up. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” her players replied.

When the Fugees took the field for the second half, they were transformed. They quickly scored three goals—an elegant cross, chested in with highlight-reel grace by a Sudanese forward named Attak, followed by a cannon shot from Christian from ten yards out. Moments later Christian dribbled into the box and faked to his left, a move that left the North Atlanta goalie tangled in his own limbs, before shooting right: another score. The opposing coach was still yelling—“Man on! Man on!”—so the Fugees kept shooting. Another goal. And another. When the frustrated North Atlanta players started hacking away at their shins and ankles, the Fugees brushed them off and scored yet again.

At 8–2, the North Atlanta coach, hoarse now nearly to muteness, wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, quietly wandered over to his bench, and sat down, flaccid and defeated. The Fugees tried to stifle their smiles. If Luma felt any sense of satisfaction, it was difficult to discern. She

remained perfectly stone-faced. The referee blew his whistle three times to signal the end of the game. The final score was 9–2 Fugees. Christian Jackson had scored five goals.

The teams shook hands and the Fugees quickly ran to the bench for water and oranges, which awaited them in two white plastic grocery bags. A few moments later, the referee approached. He looked to be in his late fifties, white, with a graying mustache. He asked Luma if he could address her players. Luma hesitated. She was uncomfortable handing over her team's attention to anyone, especially a stranger. A little warily, she summoned her team, who gathered in front of the referee some ten yards from their bench.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I'd like to thank you. You played the ball the entire game, and you didn't take any cheap shots. They got frustrated and started hacking, and you didn't retaliate. So I'd like to commend you on your sportsmanship." The referee paused for a moment and swallowed hard. "And that was one of the most beautiful games of soccer I've ever seen," he said.

THIS WAS THE first time I'd ever seen the Fugees play. I'd shown up knowing little about the team other than that the players were refugees and the coach a woman, and that the team was based in a town called Clarkston. In a little more than a decade, the process of refugee resettlement had transformed Clarkston from a simple southern town into one of the most diverse communities in America. And yet few in Atlanta, let alone in the world beyond, had taken notice. Mention the "refugees of Clarkston" and even many Atlantans will ask first if you're referring to those who had arrived in town from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Next, they'll likely ask, "Where's Clarkston?"

I came away from that first game intrigued. I had just seen a group of boys from a dozen war-ravaged countries come together as a team and create improbable beauty on the soccer pitch. How? Their coach, an intense and quiet presence who hid beneath the brim of her Smith College baseball cap and emerged only to dole out ferocious bits of inspiration or wisdom, presented another mystery. There was a palpable sense of trust and camaraderie between the players and their coach, and an equally powerful sense of fragility in all the tension and long silences. In fact, things with the Fugees were more fragile than I could have realized that day. The team had no

home field, owing to the myopia of local politicians who felt threatened by the presence of these newcomers. The players' private lives were an intense daily struggle to stay afloat. They and their families had fled violence and chaos and found themselves in a society with a completely different set of values and expectations. Luma herself was struggling to hold her team—and herself—together. She had volunteered—naively, as she would admit—to help these boys on the field and off, unaware of the scope and intractability of their difficulties: post-traumatic stress, poverty, parental neglect in some cases, grief, shattered confidence, and, in more than one instance, simple anger at having to live the way they did. Luma, I would learn, had no particular background in social or human-rights work. She was just a normal woman who wanted, in her own way, to make the world a better place, and who, it turned out, was willing to go to extraordinary lengths to see that mission through. Luma had vowed to come through for her players and their families or to come apart trying, and on several occasions it seemed the latter outcome was more likely.

But more than anything that day, it was the surprising kinship of these kids from different cultures, religions, and backgrounds that drew me into the story and made me want to understand and tell it. One moment in the game underscored this for me more than any other.

THERE WAS A player on the Fugees who was plainly less gifted at soccer than his teammates—a tiny defender from Afghanistan named Zubaid. In retrospect, it seems he might have been farsighted. When the soccer ball rolled his way, he would draw his foot back, swing his leg with all his might, and as often as not, miss the ball entirely, with all the awkward, unalloyed zeal of a batter swinging for the fences and whiffing. After this happened a third or fourth time, I asked Luma what the boy's story was; his presence on the field was so awkward that it required some sort of explanation. Luma didn't seem the least bit offended. In fact, she seemed especially proud that Zubaid was on the field. He had never missed a practice or one of the afternoon tutoring sessions Luma required of her players, she explained. He was on the field simply because by the standards she'd established for the Fugees, he deserved to be.

That was the background, but the specific image that stuck in my mind that day was this: every time the ball rolled Zubaid's way, his teammates, faster and more agile than he was to a player, never interfered or snuck in to take it away

from him. Instead, two or three members of the Fugees would drop in five or so yards behind him, just far enough out of the way so as not to seem conspicuous, to form a protective cordon between Zubaid and the goal. When he missed the ball with an ungainly swing of the leg, they were there to cover for him, but always subtly, and never in a way that demeaned him or his effort.

Eventually, late in the game, one of the North Atlanta forwards got loose with the ball on Zubaid's side of the pitch, and he rushed upfield to defend. He extended his leg, and the ball locked between the tops of the two players' forefeet with a loud thwump. The ball stopped, and the North Atlanta player tumbled forward onto the turf: a perfect tackle. Much to his surprise, it seemed, Zubaid found himself alone, still standing and with possession of the ball, which he quickly passed toward a teammate at midfield. At the next lull, when the ball went out of bounds, Zubaid was set upon by his teammates as though he'd scored the winning goal.

SOON AFTER THAT first game, I resolved to pull up stakes in New York and to move to Atlanta to tell the story of the Fugees. I saw a great deal of soccer over the next few months, but the most moving moments for me—and the most instructive and insightful—came not on the sidelines but over hot cups of sugary tea, over meals of stewed cassava or beans and rice, or platters of steaming Afghan mantu, on the sofas and floors of the apartments of refugees in Clarkston. And yet I also found that the game of soccer itself provided a useful framework for trying to understand how this unlikely group of people had come together. Unlike basketball, baseball, or football, games that reset after each play, soccer unfolds fluidly and continuously. To understand how a goal was scored, you have to work back through the action—the sequences of passes and decisions, the movement of the players away from the action who reappear unexpectedly in empty space to create or waste opportunities—all the way back to the first touch. If that goal was scored by a young refugee from Liberia, off an assist from a boy from southern Sudan, who was set up by a player from Burundi or a Kurd from Iraq—on a field in Georgia, U.S.A., no less—understanding its origins would mean following the thread of causation back in time to events that long preceded the first whistle.

Relatively quickly, it became clear that the story of the Fugees was also the story of a place, and that place offered as many intriguing mysteries as the

boys and their coach. Until relatively recently, Clarkston had been a homogenous, white southern town, situated on 1.1 square miles of Georgia clay about thirteen miles east of downtown Atlanta. The town's motto spoke to its humble origins: "Small Town ... Big Heart." But the resettlement process, which had the effect of cramming perhaps a century's worth of normal migration patterns into roughly a decade, had tested the sentiment behind Clarkston's motto. Adding to the complication: the newcomers in Clarkston were not a homogenous linguistic or cultural group of, say, Somalis, whose appearance had transformed some small American towns like Lewiston, Maine, but a sampling of the world's citizens from dozens of countries and ethnic groups. The local high school in Clarkston, once all white, now had students from more than fifty different countries. Cultures were colliding in Clarkston, and the result was a raw and exceptionally charged experiment in getting along.

When I first decided to write about the Fugees, I wasn't sure how, or even if, the story of the remaking of Clarkston and the story of a refugee soccer team there would explicitly overlap. But about a month before I planned to leave New York to head to Clarkston to follow the Fugees, I got a clue that the stories were more intertwined than I could have realized. A dispute erupted between the mayor of Clarkston, a retired heating and plumbing contractor named Lee Swaney, and a group of young Sudanese refugees who were playing casual games of soccer on the only general-use field in the town park. The local paper, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, got wind of the dispute and asked the mayor to explain his stance.

"There will be nothing but baseball down there as long as I'm mayor," he told the paper. "Those fields weren't made for soccer."

The mayor's proclamation had a direct impact on the Fugees, who had recently lost their home field after a dispute with their hosts at the local community center. Luma had hoped to relocate the Fugees to the town park—the very park from which Mayor Swaney had banned soccer. And so with only a few weeks to go before tryouts, she found herself scrambling to find her team a home.

The mayor's decree hinted at tensions that went well beyond issues of turf management. In Clarkston, soccer, it seemed, meant something different from what it meant in most places. It was the international game in a town that had

had its fill of international influences. The experiment in getting along, it seemed to me, was apparently very much ongoing, and the results would have relevance well beyond Clarkston. The question of how to cope with cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity—that loaded concept—is a pressing one. As the author Mary Pipher wrote about refugees who had been resettled in Nebraska in her book *The Middle of Everywhere*, “The refugee experience of dislocation, cultural bereavement, confusion and constant change will soon be all of our experience. As the world becomes globalized, we’ll all be searching for home.”

WHEN I THINK about Clarkston, I sometimes visualize the town as a lifeboat being lowered from a vast, multilevel passenger ship. No one aboard chose this particular vessel. Rather, they were assigned to it—the refugees by resettlement officials they never met, the townspeople by a faraway bureaucratic apparatus that decided, almost haphazardly, to put a sampling of people from all over the world in the modest little boat locals thought they had claimed for themselves. In an instant, the boat was set upon a roiling sea, its passengers left to fend for themselves. Everyone on the boat wanted the same thing: safety. But to get there, they would first have to figure out how to communicate with each other, how to organize themselves, how to allocate their resources, and which direction they should row. I imagine their heads bobbing in and out of view between the troughs and crests of the wind-whipped sea as they begin their journey. And I wonder: What will they do? What would I do in that same situation? And: Will they make it?

IT’S HARD TO know exactly where to begin the story of the Fugees. The violence that led young Grace Balegamire from Congo to Clarkston in the early twenty-first century had its origins in the 1870s, when King Leopold II of Belgium established the Free State of Congo, a corporate state that pillaged the region around the Congo River of its natural resources, terrorized the population, and gave way over time to a collection of politically unstable nations divided by ethnic tension. The tribal violence that drove Beatrice Ziaty, a Liberian refugee whose sons Jeremiah and Mandela played on the Fugees, from Monrovia to Clarkston grew ultimately from the decision of a group of Americans in the mid-nineteenth century to relocate freed slaves from the United States after emancipation, a process that created a favored and much-

resented ruling tribe with little or no organic connection to the nation it ruled. The story might begin in 1998, when Slobodan Milosević decided to unleash the Yugoslav army on the people of Kosovo and gave his soldiers the go-ahead to rampage through villages in Kosovo such as Kacanik, where Qendrim Bushi's family had a small grocery store that Serb soldiers torched—though that conflict too had beginnings in age-old political and ethnic tensions in that region. Or one might start near Clemson, South Carolina, where Lee Swaney—the future mayor of Clarkston, Georgia—was born in 1939, well before integration changed the South.

For now, though, let's begin the story amid the nineteen hills of the ancient city of Amman, Jordan, where Luma Mufleh grew up and where she learned to love a game that would create so much joy and cause so much trouble years later in a little town in Georgia, half a world away.

Luma

The name Luma means “dark lips,” though Hassan and Sawsan al-Mufleh chose it for their first child less because of the shade of her lips than because they liked the sound of the name—short, endearing, and cheerful—in the context of both Arabic and English. The al-Muflehs were a wealthy, Westernized family in Amman, Jordan, a teeming city of two million, set among nineteen hills and cooled by a swirl of dry desert breezes. The family made its fortune primarily from making rebar—the metal rods used to strengthen concrete—which it sold across Jordan. Hassan had attended a Quaker school in Lebanon, and then college in the United States at the State University of New York in Oswego—“the same college as Jerry Seinfeld,” he liked to tell people.

Luma’s mother, Sawsan, was emotional and direct, and there was never any doubt about her mood or feelings. Luma, though, took after her father, Hassan, a man who mixed unassailable toughness with a capacity to detach, a combination that seemed designed to keep his emotions hidden for fear of revealing weakness.

“My sister and my dad don’t like people going into them and knowing who they are,” said Inam al-Mufleh, Luma’s younger sister by eleven years and now a researcher for the Jordanian army in Amman. “Luma’s very sensitive but she never shows it. She doesn’t want anyone to know where her soft spot is.”

As a child, Luma was doted on by her family, sometimes to an extraordinary degree. At the age of three, Luma idly mentioned to her grandmother that she thought her grandparents’ new Mercedes 450 SL was “beautiful.” The next day, the grandparents’ driver showed up at Hassan and Sawsan al-Mufleh’s home with a gift: a set of keys to the Mercedes, which, they were told, now belonged to their three-year-old daughter.

Hassan too doted on his eldest child. He had high expectations for her, and imagined her growing up to fulfill the prescribed role of a woman in a prominent Jordanian family. He expected her to

marry, to stay close to home, and to honor her family.

From the time Luma was just a young girl, adults around her began to note her quiet confidence, which was so pronounced that her parents occasionally found themselves at a loss.

“When we would go to the PTA meetings,” Hassan recalled, “they’d ask me, ‘Why are you asking about Luma? She doesn’t need your help.’”

Sometimes, Luma’s parents found themselves striving to please their confident daughter, rather than the other way around. Hassan recalled that on a family vacation to Spain when Luma was ten or eleven years old, he had ordered a glass of sangria over dinner, in violation of the Muslim prohibition against drinking alcohol. When the drink arrived, Luma began to sob uncontrollably.

“She said, ‘I love my father too much—I don’t want him to go to hell,’” Hassan recalled. He asked the waitress to take the sangria away.

“I didn’t drink after that,” he said.

Luma encouraged—or perhaps demanded—that her younger sister, Inam, cultivate self-sufficiency, often against Inam’s own instincts or wishes.

“She was a tough older sister—very tough love,” Inam said. “She would make me do things that I didn’t want to do. She never wanted me to take the easy way out. And she wouldn’t accept me crying.”

Inam said that she has a particularly vivid memory of her older sister’s tough love in action. The al-Muflehs had gathered with their cousins, as they often did on weekends, at the family farm in a rural area called Mahes, half an hour from Amman. Inam, who was just seven or eight at the time, said that Luma took her and a group of young cousins out to a dirt road to get some exercise. The kids set off jogging, with Luma trailing them in the family Range Rover. It was hot and dry and hilly, and one by one, the kids began to complain. But Luma wouldn’t have any of it. She insisted that they keep running.

“She was in the car, and we were running like crazy,” Inam recalled. “Everyone was crying. And if I would cry, she would just look at me.”

That withering look, which Luma would perfect over the years, had the stinging effect of a riding crop. Despite the pain, little Inam kept running.

Luma’s drill-sergeant routine at Mahes became a kind of family legend, recalled to rib Hassan and Sawsan’s firstborn for her tough exterior. The family knew another side of Luma—one that others rarely encountered—that of a sensitive, even sentimental young woman with a deep concern for those she perceived to be weak or defenseless. Luma laughed along with everyone else. She enjoyed a good joke and a well-earned teasing, even at her own expense. But jokes aside, Luma’s tough love had its intended effect.

“I wanted to prove to my sister that I could do anything,” she said. “I always remember that my sister pushed me and I found out I was able to do it.”

THE AL-MUFLEHS WERE intent on raising their children with their same cosmopolitan values. They sent Luma to the American Community School in Amman, a school for the children of American expatriates, mostly diplomats and businessmen, and elite Jordanians, including the children of King Hussein and Queen Noor. Luma learned to speak English without an accent—she now speaks like a midwesterner—and met kids from the United States and Europe, as well as the children of diplomats from all over the world.

Luma’s childhood was idyllic by most measures, and certainly by comparison to those of most in Jordan. She went to the best school in Amman and lived at a comfortable distance from the problems of that city, including poverty and the tensions brought on by the influx of Palestinian and later Iraqi refugees. But her maternal grandmother, Munawar, made a point of acknowledging and aiding the poor whenever she could. Beggars regularly knocked on her

door because they knew that on principle she would always give them alms. And when relatives would tell her she was being taken advantage of because of her generosity, Munawar would brush them off.

“She would say we had an obligation because we were so privileged,” Luma recalled. “And she would say, ‘God judges them, not us.’”

Munawar’s home abutted a lot in Amman where young men played soccer in the afternoons. As a kid, Luma would climb a grapevine on the concrete wall behind the house and watch the men play. She eventually got the nerve to join in, and she would play until her grandmother saw her and ordered her inside on the grounds that it was improper for a young woman to be around strange men.

“She would have a fit if she saw me playing soccer with men,” Luma said. “And then she’d say, ‘We are not going to tell your father about this.’”

At the American Community School, Luma was free from the strictures of a conservative Muslim society and at liberty to play sports as boys did. She played basketball, volleyball, soccer, and baseball with the same intensity, and stood out to her coaches, particularly an African American woman named Rhonda Brown.

“She was keen to learn,” Brown said. “And no matter what you asked her to do, she did it without questioning why.”

Brown, the wife of an American diplomat at the U.S. embassy in Amman, coached volleyball. She had played volleyball in college at Miami University in Ohio and, when she found herself bored in the role of a diplomat’s wife, had volunteered to coach the women’s varsity volleyball team at the ACS. When she showed up to coach, Brown said, she was disappointed at what she found.

“These girls were lazy—incredibly lazy,” she said.

Luma was the notable exception. Though Brown didn’t know much about the Jordanian girl, she noticed her dedication right away and felt she was the kind of player a team could be built

around. Coach Brown asked a lot of her players, and especially of Luma. She expected them to be on time to practice, to work hard, to focus, and to improve. She believed in running—lots of running—and drilling to the point of exhaustion. Brown challenged her players by setting an example herself. She was always on time. She was organized. When she asked her players to run five kilometers, she joined them, but with a challenge: “Because you’re younger I expect you to do it better than me,” she told them. “If I beat you, you can expect the worst practices ever.”

“They ran,” Brown said.

Brown’s coaching philosophy was built on the belief that young people craved leadership and structure and at the same time were capable of taking on a tremendous amount of responsibility. She didn’t believe in coddling.

“My feeling is that kids have to have rules,” Brown explained. “They have to know what the boundaries are. And kids want to know what their limits are. It’s important for them to know that people have expectations of them.”

Brown was resigned to the fact that her players might not like her at first. But she took a long view toward their development and their trust in her. She was willing to wait out the hostility until her players broke through.

“I’m stubborn,” Brown said. “I don’t give in a lot. You can come across as mean, and until they see what kind of person you are they might not like you.”

In fact, Luma didn’t like Brown at all. She felt singled out for extra work and didn’t appreciate all the extra running. But she kept her mouth shut and didn’t complain, partly, she said, out of a suspicion that she and her teammates would benefit from the harsh treatment.

“I knew my teammates were lazy—talented but lazy,” Luma said. “And part of me was like, Maybe I want the challenge. Maybe these very harsh, very tough practices will work.”

Over time, the practices began to have an effect. The team

improved. They were motivated, and even the slackers on the team began working hard. Along the way, Luma started to pick up on a seeming contradiction. Though she told herself she disliked Coach Brown, she wanted desperately to play well for her. “For the majority of the time she coached me, I hated her,” Luma said. “But she had our respect. She didn’t ask us to do anything she wouldn’t do. Until then I’d always played for me. I’d never played for a coach.”

When Luma was in high school and still playing for Coach Brown, the junior varsity girls’ soccer team at the American Community School found itself in need of a coach. Luma volunteered. She emulated Brown—putting the team through five days a week of running drills and pushing the young women to work harder and to get better. Luma loved it. She liked the way the daily problems of the world seemed to recede once she took the field, the subtle psychological strategies one had to employ to get the best out of each player, and most of all the sense of satisfaction that came from forging something new out of disparate elements: an entity with its distinct identity, not a collection of individuals, but a new being, a team. And she wasn’t afraid to admit she also liked being in charge.

But as she got older and accustomed to the liberty she had as a woman at ACS—where she could coach and play sports as she pleased—she began to feel at odds with the Jordanian society in which she had grown up. She wanted to be able to play pickup games of soccer with whoever was around, without regard to gender. She wanted the liberty to be as assertive in her daily life as Coach Brown had taught her to be on the court. Her family’s social status created additional pressure for her to follow a more traditional path. There were obligations, as well as the looming threat that she might be pressured into marrying someone she didn’t love.

“When you come from a family that’s prominent, there are expectations of you,” she said. “And I hated that. It’s a very patriarchal society. and as modern as it is. women are still second-

class citizens. I didn't want to be treated that way."

Coach Brown picked up on Luma's yearning. At a team sleepover, the players and coach went around the room predicting where everyone would be in ten years. Coach Brown joked that Luma would be "living illegally in the United States." Everyone laughed, including Luma. But she disagreed.

"In ten years, I'll be there legally," she said.

"I knew from even our brief time together that she wanted something else for her life," Brown recalled.

Toward the end of Luma's junior year, she and her parents decided she would attend college in the United States. Hassan and Sawsan wanted their daughter to continue her Western education, a rite of sorts for well-to-do Jordanians. But Luma was more interested in life in the United States than she was in what an education there might do for her in Jordan. "America was the land of opportunity," she said. "It was a very appealing dream of what you want your life to be like." Within the family, Luma's grandmother alone seemed to understand the implications of her going to college in the United States.

"If she moves to America," Munawar told the family, "there's a chance she won't come back."

Luma's first trip to the United States came when she enrolled at Hobart and William Smith College, a coed school in the Finger Lakes region of New York, not too far from where her father had gone to college. She played soccer her first fall there, but midway through the season injured a knee, sidelining her for the rest of the year. Luma liked the school well enough, but winter there was colder than anything she had experienced in Amman, and the campus was remote. She wondered if she had made the right choice in going so far from home. Luma decided to look at other schools, and soon visited Smith College, the women's school in Northampton, Massachusetts. The campus seemed to perfectly embody the setting Luma had envisioned for herself when she left Jordan for America. It was set in a picturesque New England town

with a strong sense of community and security. And as a women's college, Smith was focused on imbuing its students with the very sort of self-reliance and self-confidence Luma felt she had been deprived of at home. Luma fell in love with the place and transferred for her sophomore year.

At Smith, Luma had what she described as a kind of awakening. She was taken by the presence of so many self-confident, achieving women, and also by the social mobility she saw evident in the student body. Her housemate, for example, was the first in her family to go to college, and there she was at one of the preeminent private colleges in the United States. That would never happen in Jordan, Luma remembered thinking to herself at the time.

Luma's friends at Smith remember her as outgoing and involved—in intramural soccer and in social events sponsored by the college's house system. Few understood her background; she spoke English so well that other students she met assumed she was American.

“One day we were hanging out talking about our childhoods and she said, ‘I’m from Jordan,’” recalled Misty Wyman, a student from Maine who would become Luma's best friend. “I thought she'd been born to American parents overseas. It had never occurred to me that she was Jordanian.”

On a trip home to Jordan after her junior year at Smith, Luma realized that she could never feel comfortable living there. Jordan, while a modern Middle Eastern state, was not an easy place for a woman used to Western freedoms. Professional opportunities for women were limited. Under Sharia law, which applied to domestic and inheritance matters, the testimony of two women carried the weight of that from a single man. A wife had to obtain permission from her husband simply to apply for a passport. And so-called honor killings were still viewed leniently in Sharia courts. As a member of a well-known family, Luma felt monitored and pressured to follow a prescribed path. A future in Jordan felt limited, lacking suspense, whereas the United States seemed alluringly full of both uncertainty and possibility.

Before she left to return to Smith for her senior year, Luma sought out friends one by one, and paid a visit to her grandmother. She didn't tell them that she was saying goodbye exactly, but privately, Luma knew that to be the case.

"When I said goodbye I knew I was saying goodbye to some people I'd never see again," she said. "I wanted to do it on my own. I wanted to prove to my parents that I didn't need their help."

Luma did let on to some of her friends. Rhonda Brown recalled a softball game she and Luma played with a group of American diplomats and expatriates. When the game had finished, Brown went to pick up the leather softball glove she'd brought with her from the United States, but it was gone—stolen, apparently. Brown was furious. She'd had the glove for years, and it was all but impossible to get a softball glove in Jordan at the time. Luma had a glove that she too had had for years. She took it off her hand and gave it to her coach.

"She said, 'You take this glove,'" Brown recalled. "'I won't need it. I don't think I'm coming back.'"

Brown—who soon moved to Damascus, and later to Israel with her husband and family—lost touch over the years with her star player, but she kept Luma's glove from one move to the next, as a memento of the mysteriously self-possessed young woman she had once coached. Fifteen years later, she still has it. "The webbing has rotted and come out," Brown told me from Israel, where I tracked her down by phone. "That glove was very special to me."

IN JUNE 1997, a few weeks after graduating from Smith, Luma gave her parents the news by telephone: She was staying in the United States—not for a little while, but forever. She had no intention of returning home to Jordan.

Hassan al-Mufleh was devastated.

"I felt as if the earth swallowed me," he said.

Hassan's devastation soon gave way to outrage. He believed he

had given every opportunity to his daughter. He had sent her to the best schools and had encouraged her to go to college in the United States. He took her decision to make a home in the States as a slap in the face. Luma tried to explain that she felt it was important for her to see if she could support herself without the social and financial safety net her parents provided at home. Hassan would have none of it. If Luma wanted to see how independent she could be, he told her, he was content to help her find out. He let her know that she would be disinherited absolutely if she didn't return home. Luma didn't budge. She didn't feel that she could be herself there, and she was willing to endure a split with her family to live in a place where she could live the life she pleased. Hassan followed through on his word, by cutting Luma off completely—no more money, no more phone calls. He was finished with his daughter.

For Luma, the change in lifestyle was abrupt. In an instant, she was on her own. "I went from being able to walk into any restaurant and store in the United States and buy whatever I wanted to having nothing," she said.

Luma's friends remember that period well. They had watched her painful deliberations over when and how to give her parents the news that she wasn't coming home. And now that she was cut off, they saw their once outgoing friend grow sullen and seem suddenly lost.

"It was very traumatic," said Misty Wyman, Luma's friend from Smith. "She was very stressed and sick a lot because of the stress.

"There was a mourning process," Wyman added. "She was very close to her grandmother, and her grandmother was getting older. She was close to her sister and wasn't sure that her parents would ever let her sister come to visit her here. And I kind of had the impression from Luma that she had been her father's pet. Even though he was hard on her, he expected a lot from her. She was giving up a lot by not going home."

So Luma made do. After graduation, she went to stay with her

friend Misty in Highlands, North Carolina, a small resort town in the mountains where Misty had found work. Luma didn't yet have a permit to work legally in the United States, so she found herself looking for the sorts of jobs available to illegal immigrants, eventually settling on a position washing dishes and cleaning toilets at a local restaurant called the Mountaineer. Luma enjoyed the relative calm and quiet of the mountains, but there were moments during her stint in Appalachia that only served to reinforce her sense of isolation. Concerned that her foreign-sounding name might draw unwelcome attention from locals, Luma's colleagues at the Mountaineer gave her an innocuous nickname: Liz. The locals remained oblivious of "Liz's" real background as a Jordanian Muslim, even as they got to know her. A handyman who was a regular at the Mountaineer even sent Liz flowers, and later, sought to impress her by showing off a prized family heirloom: a robe and hood once worn by his grandfather, a former grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan.

"I was so shaken up," Luma said.

After a summer in Highlands, Luma kicked around aimlessly, moving to Boston then back to North Carolina, with little sense of direction. Her news from home came mostly through her grandmother, who would pass along family gossip, and who encouraged Luma to be strong and patient with her parents. Someday, Munawar said, they would come to forgive her.

But for now, Luma was on her own. In 1999, she decided to move to Atlanta for no other reason than that she liked the weather—eternal-seeming springs and easy autumns, with mercifully short and mild winters—not unlike the weather in Amman. When Luma told her friends of her plan, they were uniformly against it, worried that a Muslim woman from Jordan wouldn't fit in down in Dixie.

"I said, 'Are you crazy?'" Misty recalled.

Luma didn't have much of a retort. She knew next to no one in Atlanta. She had little appreciation for how unusual a Muslim woman with the name Luma Hassan Mufleh would seem to most

southerners, and certainly no inkling of how much more complicated attitudes toward Muslims would become a couple of years into the future, after the attacks on September 11. Luma arrived in Atlanta with little mission or calling. She found a tiny apartment near Decatur, a picturesque and progressive suburb east of Atlanta anchored by an old granite courthouse with grand Corinthian columns. She knew nothing yet about Clarkston, the town just down the road that had been transformed by refugees, people not unlike herself, who had fled certain discontent in one world for uncertain lives in another. But like them, Luma was determined to survive and to make it on her own. Going home wasn't an option.