The Chosen Family I Never Expected

When a severe health diagnosis splintered my marriage, a kind stranger filled the cracks.

By Kristina Grish Published: Sep 18, 2025 1:50 PM EDT

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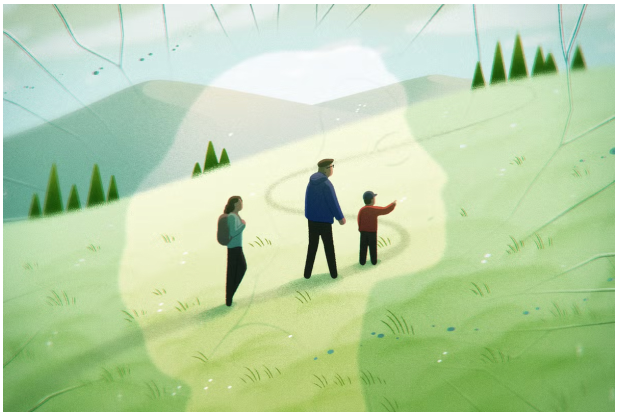

MAGGIE CHIANG

The first time I met Hassan, he pulled up in a sleek, black Navigator. He was smartly dressed in suit pants and plaid shirt, with a wool cap covering his shaved head. I was newly divorced, but Hassan wasn't my date. He was a driver I'd hired to help me run errands and make it to doctors' appointments on time. To get my nine-year-old son Julian to playdates and trampoline parks.

This makes me sound fancier than I am.

In a six-month period in 2018, I endured a hysterectomy, an infection from a Lyme disease relapse, and chemical exposure in my home. This perfect storm severely dysregulated my nervous system, and less than two years later, my husband served me divorce papers. We went from being a cute family to a repelling statistic: Marriages are more likely to end when the wife is ill than when the husband is. In one study, men fled seven times more often than women. Some doctors even warn women about this after delivering a serious diagnosis.

Despite my mom duties and shared custody, I couldn't grasp my Jeep's steering wheel without sending shocks of pain into my hands and a burning sensation throughout my body. I never knew where the pain would extend or when it would stop—its location and severity were different every time—but it could quickly cover my scalp and entire upper body, make the inside of my mouth and throat burn, tighten my breathing, and radiate down my legs and into my feet.

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In medical terms, these sensations resembled a very severe small- and/or long-fiber neuropathy or a centralized pain syndrome, though doctors don't use these diagnoses. They say it’s simply what happened to my nervous system when the aftereffects of surgery, an infection, and chemical exposure collided. If I ignored my symptoms, they’d graduate to vomiting, migraines, and jaw pain until I was forced to play Wack-a-Mole with supplements to calm things down. I needed reliable help to do essential tasks. I’d used Hassan’s service to get to the airport before, so I called him directly to ask if he could drive me and Julian to Whole Foods between his runs to LaGuardia.

Hassan told me to pay what I could, when I could. Whatever the Muslim version of a mitzvah is, my son and I were his.

At first, Hassan made only formal small talk on our rides. *What music did we want to hear? Was the temperature OK*? But as he learned more about our situation and listened to Julian rattle on about his Legos and skateboarding lessons, the more he warmed up to us—and us to him. Hassan shared what it was like growing up in Agadir, a Moroccan city near the Atlantic Ocean where he rescued injured birds for fun and worked in his father’s wholesale market. He had graduated from university, where he studied art and linguistics. He was 54, unmarried with no kids, though he dated an Italian woman for nine years. They broke up because “you cannot make a person happy, if they’re not a happy person.” As he said this, Hassan raised an eyebrow at me through his rearview mirror.

At first, my ex and I did our best to make the divorce easier for our son by spending “family time” together. Hikes were our go-to—we’d enjoyed a good trek before the split, and not having to look each other in the eye was a plus. We’d force conversation as Julian marched ahead. On our second trek, Julian invited Hassan to join us. My ex shot me a confused look, but since our hikes were all about making Julian happy, he didn’t object. Hassan began keeping his hiking boots in the trunk. If we noticed Julian’s feet dragging, Hassan would launch into a fun story, like the time his brother wanted to camp on the beach, and overwhelmed by blankets and pillows, lucked upon a donkey who’d wandered in from the forest. He loaded up the animal with cargo and led him to the campsite, where he unpacked his goods. “When you need help, God will send it,” he told Julian.

Over time, my ex began dating. I was in no place to meet a partner, but it became clear that rebuilding my family meant embracing the donkey God sent us. I’d watch Julian’s shoulders relax as he climbed into the oversized SUV and drank the bottle of water Hassan put in the cupholder for him. Hassan also doubled as my second brain. He’d keep protein bars in his glove compartment for Julian’s blood sugar crashes and would notice, and turn the car around, when Julian forgot his glasses at his dad’s house. If Julian got snippy with me, Hassan would gently interject. “It says in the holy book to obey your parents,” he’d say, having been raised Suni Muslim. “I’m sure it’s the same in the Bible.” Hassan knows we’re Presbyterian, since he drives us to church.

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We live about an hour north of Manhattan, so the three of us get creative with after-school and weekend activities. We've taste-tested the best soup dumplings in Chinatown and munched Paul Rudd's face off a Rice Krispie treat in Rhinebeck. We've taken golf lessons at an apple festival in northern Connecticut. We eat most holiday meals together, once at a movie theater on Christmas while seeing “Migration.” Though Julian and I loved it, Hassan fell asleep with his hand on his Icee. Once, when I paid $120 for us to hike with a herd of goats, Hassan lost his mind. “At home, there are goats everywhere! You feed them and they follow you! For free!”

Hassan likes to play up our cultural differences—sometimes for a laugh, other times, a lesson. He's asked if we want to chase wild turkeys with plastic bags, like he did back home, but on the lawn of a prestigious financial corporation where they happen to roam. Anytime he sees a dead deer on the road, he begs us to pull over to check if it's a male with a musk gland: “If it's the right breed, we sell it to France for a lot of money!” And approaching the end of this past Ramadan, Hassan invited us to drive upstate with him to buy a sheep to slaughter and roast; he planned to give most to the poor. Julian politely declined. Couldn't we get one at a farmer's market instead?

Hassan has taught Julian bits of Arabic, like *salam* for hello and *boqal,* which is slang for fool—plus sweet aphorisms like, “When you're in love, the moon looks romantic. When you're hungry, the moon looks like pita bread.” Julian taught Hassan how to have “skibidi toilet rizz.”

Hassan cheers for my son at baseball games, referring to him as “Prince Julian,” while Julian calls Hassan “a chill guy.” When Hassan slid him a $50 bill for his birthday and taught him to fish, Julian used part of the money to buy Hassan a hat that said, “I'd rather be fishing.” During rush hour every Wednesday, stressful rides to Julian's vision therapy have turned into lessons on harmonizing to Toto's “Africa.” Julian is black and was adopted, and I'm white, so he thinks it's cool that Morocco is in Africa, and they (sort of) share an ancestry.

In the meantime, Hassan drives me to various health practitioners—and no longer guards his tongue, like when we first met. He makes sure I eat, then complains when my chicken salad costs too much. He thought a hyperbaric chamber looked like the Titan submarine that imploded, a sign that I should reconsider the treatment. He questions my meds, suggesting honeys and plants instead.

Most meaningful of all, Hassan carted me all the way to Ohio from Connecticut to see a specialist every two months for a year. I could tell he enjoyed the seven-hour road trips—each way!—for their rolling hills and farmland. All the while, we listened to podcasts, ate rest-stop pizza, and played music for each other that we loved as kids (Nena's “99 Luftballoons” didn't make it to Morocco, but Sting sure did). Those rides were as much an escapade for Hassan, who'd never seen that part of America, as they were a medical lifeline for me. My doctor happened to be Syrian, so they'd say hi with a common Arabic exchange.

“Hello, God willing, you're good. Let God keep you in good health,” the doctor would say.

“Amin,” or Amen, Hassan replied.

Just as my nervous system began to stabilize, our roles shuffled like a Rubik's Cube. Last winter, Hassan was diagnosed with cancer in his thymus, a gland that makes T-cells and fights infection. He kept it a secret for a month, long enough to make a care plan, afraid to scare us with the news. I demanded a second opinion. By now, I was a pushy expert in navigating the medical system; perhaps this is what I'd been training for, all along.

Hassan asked me to manage Julian's delicate feelings instead. I assured my son that Hassan would be OK, even though I was terrified he'd die. I'd been the patient for so long that I'd almost forgotten Hassan was human, that his body could break too. We discussed how life sent us Hassan when we needed him most, and now, we'd be there for him. We got our whole tribe to pitch in. Julian bought Hassan a stuffed animal and green tea, which my ex dropped off at his home. My sister and parents sent rent money, since Hassan couldn't work while recovering. I called regularly and helped arrange follow-up appointments.

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Today, our ride-or-die is in good health. On my desk is a photo of Julian throwing his arms around Hassan, the first time he saw him after surgery; his face, pure sunshine and relief. Often when we're in the car, Hassan's grandmother, Jadadi, calls to check on him and say hi. At 110 years old, Jadadi drives a donkey-pulled cart to see friends in town. She makes a mean Harira, a hearty Moroccan soup, and homemade bread in a clay oven. She kills scorpions with a machete.

At my 49th birthday lunch, when two friends cancelled at the last minute, Hassan set up a Facetime with his mom, cousin, and Jadadi. They sang me "Happy Birthday." I worried that Julian and I lost our family during the divorce, but really, we gained one 3600 miles away. And though my health has vastly improved, I still don't drive. Life is better with Hassan behind the wheel.