

The other side of deportation: An American struggles to prepare for life without husband

By [Eli Saslow](#), Published: May 24 [E-mail the writer](#)

Lawrence, Kan. — Each ordinary moment now seemed worthy of preservation, so Madina Salaty, 45, turned on her cellphone camera and hit record. “Four days left,” she said, her voice and the video both shaky as her husband leashed the dog and headed toward their front door. He walked past the framed picture of their wedding in 2011, past the University of Kansas flag on their porch, past the perennials they had planted together in the garden. He led the dog onto the wide sidewalks and manicured lawns of downtown Lawrence, where the lampposts were painted red, white and blue.

“We are going on a walk,” Salaty said, narrating the video, focusing the camera on her husband, Zunu Zunaid, 37. He turned back to her and smiled.

“Hi, baby,” he said.

“Hi, baby,” she said.

For the past five months, she had been documenting the gradual unraveling of their lives, in moments both mundane and monumental: the first visit to their home by immigration officers, the delivery of Zunaid’s deportation orders, his final trips to eat American ice cream and watch American basketball. Now only four days remained before he would be sent off to Bangladesh, a deportation that would upend not just one life but two. Zunaid would be forcibly separated from the United States after 20 years; his wife, an American citizen, would be forcibly separated from her husband.

It is the latter of those separations that has increasingly become the focus of attempts to overhaul the country’s immigration policies, since more than 100,000 American citizens lose a spouse or parent to deportation each year. President Obama has asked the Department of Homeland Security to review the “humanity” of its deportation procedures. At a time when nearly one-fourth of undocumented immigrants have children or spouses who are citizens, the government now faces a choice between two priorities: Deport undocumented immigrants who have broken the law? Or protect the citizens those immigrants so often provide for?

“When you’re gone, I will look at this video and pretend I’m on a walk with you,” Salaty said now, still filming, as they turned onto a cobblestone street. “We’re going to miss you.”

“Try to be strong, baby,” Zunaid said.

“I *am* trying,” she said.

Zunaid stuffed his hands into his pockets and surveyed the neighborhood. He had come to Kansas on a student visa in 1994 to study petroleum engineering and stayed illegally for more than 15 years after his visa expired. He had been making an annual salary of nearly \$60,000 as the manager of a Best Buy when he was pulled over for a DUI in 2009, which began his slow procession toward deportation. Now he was relearning Bengali, scheduling immunizations against common Third World diseases and searching for a place to live with relatives in Dhaka, many of whom he hadn't spoken to for decades.

What he worried about most was his wife, a preschool teacher who had lived in Los Angeles and New York before moving back home to quiet and trustworthy Kansas, because she thought it offered the version of America she liked best. Now she had been diagnosed with acute insomnia and situational anxiety, and she kept a book on her nightstand called "Full Catastrophe Living." She was seeing a therapist for the first time in her life and had started taking an anti-anxiety medication and an antidepressant, neither of which had halted the anxiety rashes spreading across her hands and arms.

She had tried to calm herself by using breathing exercises and doing yoga, but her preferred coping mechanism was to chronicle every vanishing moment on video, even now, as the dog circled a tree, sniffed a patch of dirt and began to lift its leg. "Oh, here he goes," she said.

"This is always his favorite spot," Zunaid said as the camera continued to record him.

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Salaty had started documenting their last months together at the suggestion of the therapist, after Zunaid's deportation became all but certain during the last days of 2013. "Immigration Nightmare," she had titled a new journal, because even though she had seen nothing of Bangladesh beyond the photos of rickshaws and textile factories in their coffee-table book, this deportation felt at least half hers.

She had met Zunaid late one night at her favorite bar in Lawrence. He was tall and handsome and called everybody "buddy." She was talkative and emphasized her points by touching his shoulder. He told her he was undocumented and facing deportation, but she said that didn't matter. "We can deal with it," she told him, and she surprised him at their wedding by arriving in a sari and henna tattoos. She helped him quit smoking; he volunteered to do yard work for her 71-year-old mother. They bought tickets to watch professional soccer and took a road trip to Texas. They were just beginning to research adoption when he learned that his final appeal had been denied. His case did not meet the government's dismissal standard of "extreme hardship," since he had a signed removal order, no children at home and a recent DUI. At that point, their lives became a countdown to May 17.

"Crying, shortness of breath, panic attack," Salaty wrote in her journal one day in February.

Then, the next day: "I feel the anxiety like a tight helmet on my head. I feel it in my eyes and my teeth."

Then, after a doctor diagnosed her with a sudden spike in blood pressure: “More Lorazepam in the middle of the night, on more nights. Mind just races and races . . . UGH UGH UGH.”

She tried explaining Zunaid’s case to five lawyers, spending \$10,000 on legal fees, only to learn there was nothing left to do. A 1996 change to immigration law had made it so that marriage to a U.S. citizen no longer canceled out many kinds of immigration violations. She tried talking with her congresswoman, meeting immigration activists in Kansas City, Mo., and working with a lobbying group called American Families United. When none of that worked, she started approaching strangers at the grocery store to enlist their help, telling them not only her story but about all of the families with children who had it so much worse. She asked so many people to e-mail their politicians that Zunaid finally pleaded with her to stop.

“Let these people live their lives,” he told her, with two days left. “You will drive yourself crazy. I need you to be okay or we will both come apart.”

“You’re my husband,” she said. “I’m supposed to just let go?”

She left him watching basketball in the living room and went into their office, signing in to an Internet support group for family members of undocumented immigrants. She had come to the site dozens of times with questions about how to handle their upcoming separation: How had other spouses dealt with the sudden loss of more than half of their family income? Did anyone have advice on finding mortgage assistance or signing up for food stamps?

This time, what she wanted to know about were the particulars of Zunaid’s deportation. Because of a new DHS effort to save money, the government had given him a choice: be detained in an immigration jail and then placed on a flight, or pay for his own commercial airfare and spend his last days at home wearing an ankle-monitoring device. He had chosen the latter, cashing out his IRA to buy a non-refundable ticket for \$1,072 so he could spend a few extra days with his wife. Now it would be her job to take him to his flight, one way out of Kansas City on May 17.

“Did anyone here have to drive their husband to the airport?” she wrote to the support group, and in a country with more than 1 million families living separately because of deportation, the responses came fast.

“I collapsed when he went through security,” wrote one woman. “That was back in 2005.”

“I was at the bustling Atlanta airport with all the craziness,” wrote a mother of four. “I stood as close as I could to security to get another peek.”

“I used to call it the rip/tear, because walking away was a nightmare.”

“It was the worst day of my entire life. I still get upset when I drive up there, to the last place that I saw him.”

Salaty read the replies and felt her eyes begin to well. “Breathe,” she reminded herself. She had thought about moving to Bangladesh with Zunaid, but what about the fact that she was a born-

and-raised Kansan who spoke no Bengali, with an aging mother nearby, a sister, nieces, a job that she loved and a house with her name on the deed? This was the place where they had fallen in love. This was the place where they had plotted their future. A few friends had suggested that Zunaid could go into hiding, but how long would that last? He already had been given a 10-year ban before he would be allowed to reenter the United States, and Salaty had hired a lawyer to file waivers and appeals in an effort to bring him back much sooner. “There are no guarantees,” the lawyer had told them before correcting himself: If Zunaid failed to show up for his scheduled deportation flight, the lawyer said, he was certain to be banned for life.

Now Zunaid called to Salaty from the living room. “What are you doing, baby?” he asked.

She would drive him to the airport. She would get him there on time.

“Nothing much,” she called back.

* * *

They chose the same restaurant for their last night together as they had chosen for their first date, a sushi place in downtown Lawrence. She wore his Adidas jacket and he ordered their usual three rolls from memory.

“How are you doing?” she asked him as they waited for their food.

“I’m good, baby,” he said.

“But really?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m trying not to go there.”

He preferred to think of his deportation not in the terms of radical change but instead as a compilation of logistics, a to-do list on the refrigerator. “Pack.” “Research international cell phone.” “Set up Skype.” It was only when his mind wandered beyond the list into his uncertain future that a wave of nausea began to rise from his stomach to his throat. Dhaka. Tomorrow. How many people lived there now, anyway? Five million? Fifteen? Could he get an Internet connection at home so he could communicate with his wife? Who would hire a recent deportee with no local knowledge and rusty Bengali? Would his family accept him back after 20 years away?

Twenty-eight people had taken him to the airport when he left Dhaka for the United States, a goodbye celebration befitting an only son who had aced his math placement tests and earned a chance at a college degree. But during Zunaid’s junior year, his father ran out of money and stopped making tuition payments, and Zunaid dropped out of school and started working at Best Buy. He stopped calling home and drank hard on the weekends. When his father died, he didn’t find out until a few months later, over e-mail. Now he was going back to Bangladesh with no degree and less than \$2,000 in cash, leaving the rest with Salaty. Deported from one country and a disappointment in another, that was how he sometimes felt. “What is happening with you?” his

mother had asked, but the answer was complicated, and he no longer possessed the energy or the Bengali to give it.

“I canceled the car insurance today,” he told Salaty, eating his sushi, going once more through the checklist in his head.

“Good,” she said.

“I deposited my last paycheck,” he said. “You should have enough to pay the mortgage for at least three months.”

“Okay,” she said.

“The tomatoes are planted and good to go,” he said. “The gutters are cleaned. Your Skype is set up.”

The only item remaining on his list was to buy presents for relatives, so they left the sushi restaurant and drove to Best Buy to use his employee discount. “Do these things even work over there?” Zunaïd wondered, picking out a Bluetooth headset for his uncle. “Will they understand this?” he said, choosing a DVD for the nieces and nephews he had yet to meet. He put the items into a bag and brought the bag home, stuffing it into his suitcase. His flight was scheduled to leave in 10 hours.

“Well, I guess I’m ready,” he said.

* * *

He awoke at 3 a.m., and she awoke at 4. He rolled back into the pillow and tried to quiet his thoughts. She turned on her phone, and her mind started spinning. She logged into her support group, took an anxiety pill, e-mailed a lawyer, put on makeup, considered a second anxiety pill, and checked her congresswoman’s daily schedule. “Do you think I could somehow talk to her today?” she asked Zunaïd as they walked to the car for their trip to the airport.

“I think you should try to slow down,” he told her before they got in. “Maybe I should drive.”

He said goodbye to the dog, and she took out her camera to record a video. He loaded his suitcase into the trunk, and she recorded it. He stopped at McDonald’s for coffee, and she recorded that, too. “This is actually happening,” she said, and for the next 35 minutes she continued to narrate.

“We need another Rosa Parks-type figure for immigration,” she said as Zunaïd reached over for her hand and squeezed it.

“Think about my dad, a Russian immigrant, a professor — how many people were better off because he came to this country?” she said as Zunaïd traced circles with his fingernails on her back.

They parked at the airport, and he brought his luggage to the counter, 20 years divided into three suitcases. He had photos from their wedding, a suit to wear for job interviews, a small Kansas Jayhawk statue, and a copy of a written decision made by an immigration judge. "Ordered removed," it read.

He checked in for his flight, and Salaty paced the terminal. She took a picture of his gate and rechecked his flight time on the airport monitor. An hour left. Thirty minutes. Twenty. "It's time," he said, finally, and she took out her camera to film again. "Look at me," he told her, and so she put the camera down. For a moment there was nothing to do and no one to see other than her husband, leaning down to rest his forehead against hers. She grabbed the strap of his backpack, holding on.

"We will be okay," he told her. "I want you to say it."

"We will be okay," she repeated.

"We will be okay," he said, slower this time.

"We will be okay," she said.

She waved to him as he walked through security, watching until he turned a corner and disappeared from her view. She stood for a few moments longer, not sure what to do, until eventually a text message arrived on her phone.

"We will be okay."

By then he was on the plane, in a seat near the back. He pressed his head against the window as the plane gained altitude, picking out the places that were familiar to him: a park, a soccer stadium, the river, some big-box stores, the cornfields outside Kansas City. "Twenty years," he said as the plane continued to climb. He would go first to Washington, then to Dubai and finally into Dhaka, where his mother had said she would be waiting. "I hope she recognizes me," he said.

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