

Naan in the Afghan Village

As we entered the Afghan village, my sister, Amy, turned to me and said, “Hide your face.” My cotton chadar scratched my nose as I secured it, while my mother tugged the top down over my bangs to hide my hair. After a week in country, I had gotten used to wrapping the chadar over my head to hide my pale, young face, an oddity here that attracted too much attention in public. I had a glimpse of the village—the dirt, the mud huts, the empty graveyard, the mountains beyond—and then I turned my head away from the window. The Afghans with us murmured to each other in Pashto. The chadar made it easier to breathe—blocked out the dust. My mother slipped her hand around mine in my lap and squeezed. My pulse pounded behind my eyes.

My parents always told me to love others. I doubt when they said it to their small blond girl, they imagined I would one day grow out of my curls, don a chadar, and fly to Afghanistan. My older sister had been working in country for four years, but I had never been able to visit before. Due to my father’s position in the military, he could not come, and my mother had accompanied me instead. We had come thousands of miles, through airports clogged with men in turbans and past guns nearly as long as I was tall. At every stage of the journey, I found myself thinking, *I could turn back now*. But something pushed me forward. In a way I couldn’t explain to my skeptical friends at home, I had to go. I had heard the stories—now I wanted to see them. I wanted to bring a little bit of healing to the people, though I had no idea how I would do it.

As I sat in the van, an almost palpable silence fell over us. The very air of the place was thick with horrors that I have heard about but still three years later cannot imagine.

For over a year before my visit, Amy worked in this village teaching women about health and childbirth. One day during class she learned that a young woman had just thrown herself into a well. By the time Amy and her American coworker arrived, the girl was being set limply on the dusty ground. Amy took the girl's gray, swollen wrist in her hands and felt a faint, rapid pulse.

"Okay, we are doing this," her friend, Cheryl, said as she used a knife to saw off the dying girl's necklace, a cord around her engorged neck. "We are doing this."

Cheryl breathed into the unconscious girl's mouth. Amy worked on compressions, trying to pump water and vomit out of the girl's lungs, trying to keep her heart beating while their driver rushed them down Jalalabad road, a highway choked with soldiers and barricades and infamous for roadside bombs. The clinic was nearly a half hour away.

When they arrived, the girl had no pulse.

Sometime later, a letter was delivered during the night. It came from the Taliban and warned Amy and her friend to stop their lessons in the village. Cheryl never saw the classes resume.

While Amy came home on furlough several months later, Cheryl, the woman who had tried to breathe life into the dead girl's mouth, left for another remote village. She and her team were massacred on their way back to the capital. Her body was found by a river, one of nine killed.

Amy retreated with my family to a cabin in Georgia the week after the attack. In an attempt to investigate what she wanted for her birthday, only a little while away, and raise her spirits, I jokingly asked her, "If you could have *anything* in the world, what would you want?"

I felt a darkness come over her, an abyss of grief that was frightening. She pretended not to hear me, and we talked a little about something else. Then she raised her bloodshot eyes to mine and said in a simple, empty voice, “I feel sad.” She buried her head in her arms. It took me a moment to realize she was crying.

I knew that Amy was thinking about the mixed horror and grief as we drove deeper into the village, which had only recently welcomed her team back. She will never be able to forget the girl’s disfigured face, that flickering phantom of a pulse, their driver shouting at the soldiers, “We have a girl dying in here! We are going to the clinic!” She will never forget the phone call, the daily reminders of her smiling friend and mentor. My sister will always live with the trauma. Yet that darkness only made up one day in the life of an Afghan.

No one knew why the girl threw herself into the well. Some said she was ill, some said she was disgraced. I wondered if the oppressive darkness of this place found its way into her soul, and she stopped trying to shut it out. At nineteen, the teenage girls I knew held shadows and sadness, too, but not like this. Theirs could be relieved in a hateful blog entry, a trip to the mall, a few hours of ranting and crying. But here it was a weight shrouding everything. I closed my eyes, held my chadar tighter, and felt every bit how small I was.

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist, once wrote, “The Afghans have [...] been affected by one of the greatest tragedies of this century—the longest running civil war in this era which has brought untold misery.” This civil war—the conflict with the Mujaheddin and later the Taliban from 1989-2001—left over 2 million people dead and devastated the country. Yet those wars, and Operation Enduring Freedom, were only a few in a history full of conflict. Since 1818, peace in Afghanistan has not lasted longer than the 40 years between 1933-1973. These

unending wars fought on Afghanistan's soil have left wounds that can be seen in the drastic gaps in education between generations, the bullet holes in mosques, and the scars on the survivors. I studied this before I came to the country, yet since arriving I began to comprehend how very little I knew about suffering or healing.

Our van came to a stop, and the five of us got out: Amy, her two female Afghan coworkers Zarmina and Maliha, my mother and myself. Several mud huts and a large wall surrounded the courtyard, which provided privacy for the women and protection against an attack. A woman in a black chadar stepped from her doorway. "Salam aleykum," she murmured, taking each of our hands in turn. *Peace be upon you.* I could feel the raised scars and calluses on her fingers. We kissed three times on the cheek—right, left, right. I saw piles of plants that looked like green tumbleweed—coarse and painful—resting near the wall. Amy told me that this woman, a widow, climbed a mountain every day to gather the shrubs, which she would sell as fuel to the village women. She had tried to help my sister save the girl from the well.

She ushered us into her house. We slipped off our shoes, stepped around a clay oven and into what Westerners might call the living room. In Pashto, it is called the *melman khana*—the guestroom. The mud walls had straw poking out; the only furnishings in the room were worn out cushions—*toshaks*—along the walls where we could sit. A single, glassless window, fairly high up, let in light but kept out the heat. The widow gave us the place of honor farthest from the door. According to Pashtun tradition, this is so the hosts can protect guests should anyone attack. Once a Pashtun has accepted a guest, they will protect the guest with their life.

The woman told us that the others might not come for their health class that day. There had been a shooting in the graveyard, a quarrel over land, and many of the men had left to sort it

out. But the village women came despite the danger and soon the room filled up. They gossiped loudly in Pashto about the incident. Amy told me that suffering and death have become so commonplace to these women that they cannot afford to express grief in a vulnerable way. Months earlier, when they heard of Cheryl's death, they factually asked Amy, "How many times was she shot? Was it at close range? Could you still recognize her face? Did you bury her or burn her?"

"Well, *you're* alive," they all said to her.

An ancient woman with a few rotten teeth and gnarled hands entered the room. The pit of my stomach twisted as I rose, knowing that I had to kiss her cheeks. Sweaty grime covered her face and hair, and I could see under her loose clothing that her breasts hung to her belly. She smiled at me with her empty gaps of gums and brown teeth. I returned the smile, told myself strictly that I would kiss her and I would mean the blessings I murmured, and then did it—right, left, right. As she went on around the room, I sat again. It occurred to me that this woman was one of the very few so old here. She had survived the Great Saur Revolution, the Soviet Invasion, the Mujaheddin, the Taliban and the U.S. Invasion. She eventually took her place on the far wall with us, honored for her age in a land where most people will not live past the age of 44.

I curled into a corner, careful to keep the soles of my feet hidden, feeling sick and hot. The walls radiated coolness, and I leaned my head against them. The Pashto language swirling around me made me dizzy. I looked at the chattering women. Dirt caked them from chadar to bare feet. They smelled like mud and meat and sweat.

My mind slipped back to another time, another living room. This one was in the heart of hospitable Mississippi, two years before my journey. A gray-haired couple from our church sat

comfortably on their couch in the cold air-conditioning while Amy told them about her work. 1 in every 8 mothers are expected to die from pregnancy-related causes in Afghanistan, and Amy longed to raise awareness and support so that she could continue her courses with the women. I glanced around at the various American flag pillows and cross-stitched scripture on display in the room as I listened. “*Love your neighbor as yourself,*” read one. “*Faith, Hope, Love,*” read another.

When Amy had finished speaking, the husband looked her in the eye and asked, “Why would you want to help *those* people? Don’t they deserve to suffer, after what they did to us?”

I remember on an October night in 2001, when I was a little girl in my family’s big red van. I looked out the window and saw the Pentagon, the place my father had worked, torn open by a plane. Desks and walls, paper and computers, all sorts of items that were terrifyingly normal bled out of the gaping hole. For many years I could not imagine something more terrible than that sight. That was the only day of my life that I felt unsafe in my own country—the only day when war was before my face.

Yet I found myself in a village among the Pashtun, an ethnic group that forms most of the Taliban. These people are hurting, lost, and ill. They are not the faceless murderers of innocents. They are human. I felt that I had to try to love them.

The widow prepared and handed out cups of tea. Normally little hard candies were passed around, too, which could be popped in one cheek and sucked on to sweeten the bitter taste. But the widow could not afford such luxury. I sipped the tea, trying to ignore my nausea and be a good guest by taking three cups. After a while, a small Afghan girl came to the doorway and peered in at the women’s health class, staring at me curiously. I smiled and began to make

faces, doing my best to get the girl to giggle. Her wide brown eyes held an age I've seen in old women, and I resorted to more and more ridiculous expressions as I tried to coax a smile. Sometimes I'd get it—the girl's eyes would sparkle amber, a dimple would show in her cheek, and then she'd press her face against one of the women's arms. Eventually she'd overcome her shyness and peer at me again. I kept trying to make her laugh, waggling my eyebrows and pursing my lips.

This went on for several minutes before the women laughed, and I realized I was being watched. I smiled sheepishly. The girl left and I went back to picking at the straw. The harsh language of the women pounded in my head, a series of coughed *kh*'s and clashing syllables that sounded angry no matter what the words actually meant. The topic of discussion was worms, and I was glad I couldn't understand. Zarmina and Maliha taught the lesson, my sister watching quietly. Pictures of the various worms were passed around. I pushed them on to Amy without looking. Maliha noticed and laughed, "Aliajan, you do not like the worms?"

I managed a weak smile, feeling overwhelmed in the crowded room, and leaned back on the wall again. My mother covered my feet with her legs so that I could sit more comfortably and asked if I was okay. She said my face was whiter than my chadar. My relative health throughout the visit had been unusual, because we ate in so many homes where we had no way to tell how the food had been cooked. I'd pushed myself to come to the village, though to the last minute before I stepped into the van I felt dizzy and disoriented.

As I tried to assure my mother that I felt better than I did, I had the queer feeling that I was not really there. I could see myself still sitting in my sister's small house trying to decide whether I wanted to go or not. A dreamlike haze passed over me, where the village and words

and women seemed so unreal I could not tell if I sat among them or sat alone in my room. I pressed my cheek against the cool, firm wall. The widow got up and left.

I watched one woman in particular. She was tall and strong as a mountain. She tilted her head up, her arms covered in bangles and her hair dyed red with henna. I found myself afraid to make eye contact. Later my sister told me that she was the wife of a Taliban warlord. She spoke of her daughter's nightly trips to the roof of their house. She was afraid that one day her daughter would jump, like the girl in the well. My mother reached over, touched her arm and told her earnestly that she would pray for her and for her daughter. The wife of the Taliban lord trembled a little and lowered her eyes. "Tashakor, manana," she murmured. *Thank you, thank you.*

Earlier in the trip, an Afghan man had shared a story with me. There was an old tradition that when two communities are at war, a woman had the power to stop the fighting. She would bake bread in her home and take it to a woman in the other side. The battles would cease out of respect for the courageous woman.

My sister asked, "If an American woman brings bread, can the war stop?"

We all laughed.

"No," the man said, "because the terrorists do not honor tradition."

The image is beautiful and horrifying to me as I think of a little woman in her chadar, clutching bread still warm from the oven, going into war with a silent gift of peace. It is so Afghan: The darkness of war and suffering blended with hospitality, honor and a deep hope for peace.

The widow came back into the room holding something wrapped in cloth. She knelt down before me and held out a loaf of naan. The toothless old woman said that they give bread to the sick, to the traveler. That bread brings health, bread brings healing. My bones ached as I shifted my weight on the threadbare cushions. The naan was warm and soft in my hands. I wondered how many mountains the widow had climbed with the bundles of weeds on her head to afford this meager, priceless gift. In a village clogged with dust and death and worms, the widow had a compassion—a love—that shamed me. I who had suffered so little was cared for by those who had nothing untouched by suffering.

I thought of the girl in the well, of my sister's pain, of Cheryl. I thought of the beautiful perseverance of the Pashtun and the heartbreaking age in their children's eyes.

Ever since that night outside the Pentagon, I had been grieving. Terrorism stole my childhood—first on the night when my security vanished, and again and again as I watched my sister's heart break. But terrorism had also stolen their education, their daughters, their lives. I had come hoping to help them. But we were all broken.

Bread brings healing.

I felt small and very young. All I could do was murmur, "Tashakor." *Thank you.*

I tore a piece and motioned for the widow to take some. She protested, wanting the guests to have it all, but we insisted three times. At last, she smiled and gave it to the ancient woman. Nodded with approval, the old woman took a chunk, and the naan continued around the room.

We ate together.