

TRIP

by Murwarid Abdiani

Strewn with tank and helicopter carcasses, the perimeter of the Kabul airport looked like a war zone. Everywhere I turned there was something to see: American soldiers, Afghan military, German aid workers, even an actor I'd seen in a war film whose face I couldn't place. I wanted to approach him and start a conversation, but my father had warned me against speaking English. "Blend in," he'd said. The most unsettling thing about the airport was the huge passenger airliner that flanked the entrance; half buried in a crater like formation, the cockpit had somehow been blown in two. It was riddled with gaping holes from all sorts of artillery. Like Icarus, it had been brought down from the sky and suffered a tragic fate.

So this is Afghanistan I thought: Home of the Freedom Fighter; home to the hippie hash trails of the '60s; crossroads of the silk routes and spice trades of China; battle ground of Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Bacha Saquao. This is the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, the home of Islam, and the place where Buddhism once made its marks in the mountainous statues of the Bamiyan; Afghanistan, home to more than 3 million dead and 6.5 million displaced.

This was no vacation in Europe. This was post Taliban, post 9/11 Afghanistan. This place was romanticized war fodder for Time, Newsweek, and CNN. It had become a fifteen-minute blip on the world's radar as it suffered its fame after 22 years of inner turmoil. My country America, had just bombed my homeland Afghanistan...and I was here, for of all things, a wedding.

I was at work when I received the call. My father's aged voice, slow and thick with a regal intellectual accent, softly murmured through the receiver. "We're going to Afghanistan. Your mother thought I should ask if you wanted to go." Of course she did, my father would have never thought to invite me on his own.

My father and I had been at odds even in my earliest of memories. My half brothers and I hadn't seen eye to eye on anything with one another since they'd arrived in America and brought their Talib rhetoric from the homeland. Now one of them was getting married. I wanted to go, but this was by invitation from my father. Growing up, this was the man who always threatened me with, "Do you want me to send you back to Afghanistan!" With every defiant glare I'd burn into him after a violent argument with my mother, with every B that came on any report card, or any inclination my father had that I liked a boy, all I heard was that threat. He'd made several attempts at kidnapping my brother and I back to the old country when we were children. Wrestling us away from him, screaming with maternal fury, my mother would find the passports and always save us just in time. I had always been afraid of Afghanistan, and now here I was, standing in the land of my birth, home to beauty and terror.

I was constantly being bombarded with kindness, constantly being introduced to new family members who continued to ask, "Do you remember me? Do you remember me?"

I'd smile blankly at them all, kissing them and hugging them, wishing that I did. I was two when I left. I remembered the woven cots in my grandfather's dirt courtyard, carved wood and braided rope intertwined, laying upon my mother's stomach, the evening a bee stung her big toe and sent her screaming. I remembered having my ears pierced by an old witch-like gypsy, and the village women in their colorful head wraps, hues of green, bright pink and purple surrounding them like plumes of smoke, carrying terracotta jugs regally atop their heads from the village well. I remembered the beheaded lamb, hanging low on a tree branch in my Grandfather's courtyard, in preparation for some village celebration. These tid-bits I recalled night after night in my dreams for years, but this family, I did not. I had been a ghost in America. Afghanistan felt no different to me. I was a memory to these people, stuck in their minds as a precocious two year old, running rag tag with a gang of male cousins, ten strong, loud and rambunctious; their foul mouthed, baby girl mascot. Even then I hated being a girl they told me. Always with the boys, always doing what the boys wanted to be doing.

Here I was now, under house arrest in my homeland, because I was a woman. Was it any wonder femininity had always felt like a weakness?

"I would like to give a speech," Uncle Sher began as everyone settled for lunch, "Today is a happy day. My eldest brother has come home and brought with him his two beautiful children." Everyone sat silenced with their heads nodding in agreement around the feast that had been prepared for our arrival: platters of rice, chicken and potatoes, long flat naan, fresh from the tandoori ovens, and skewers of kabobs garnished with bright red tomatoes and green sprigs of parsley. The room was packed with attentive uncles, aunts and cousins who were all married to one another; this was a tribal society I had to keep reminding myself. They would have married me off to one of my cousins too if I'd grown up here.

In America, when I hit puberty, my father no longer allowed me to be in the same room with any male cousin, let alone any male my own age. That was hard considering everyone in my family had boys. My mother tried to explain that in Pushtun culture, puberty meant that a young girl and boy were ready for marriage. I was 12 when my cousin Najib and I weren't allowed to hang out anymore. We got in trouble, because I had the door to my room closed and we were playing records. Angry and suspicious, my father had slapped me. My life was filled with episodes where I hadn't done anything wrong, but received unjust punishments due to my father's Pushtun culture.

In Afghanistan, my father revealed to me he'd been married off to his first wife by his mother and village elder when he was in the 7th grade. It had been a tribal union joining two clans as one. It never occurred to him that in America his reality didn't have to be mine.

I snapped back into consciousness as my uncle spoke my name in Pushtun, "We were very afraid to meet the children, we had not seen you Marghalare since you were but a small child," he began tearing up. "Meerwais, we had never seen at all." Looking over at my kid brother, I could see his eyes welling with tears, and without warning, mine began

cascading off my cheeks as well. I was beginning to understand so much. “We did not know what to expect. We thought you have grown in America and there is nothing of Afghanistan left in you.” Not a sound was heard in the room now; even the army of rambunctious children had grown quiet clinging to each other, listening. They had never seen their grandfather cry before. “We were so frightened you would not accept us, frightened you would not understand us. We thought you would come off this plane in your American blue jeans and sunglasses ...” he stood up suddenly breaking everyone’s trance and held open his arms hugging the air in front of him, mimicking my brother and I de-boarding our flight, “ We were so afraid you would say: HELLO UNCLE! VERY NICE TO MEET YOU UNCLE!” The boom of Uncle Sher’s voice and his impersonation of an American teen-ager, sent the entire family into fits of laughter and giggles. My father shook his head smiling broadly and my uncle raised his hand again to silence everyone.

“We are so happy that you speak the language, that you know the customs. So happy that you have come, that you are with us, your family. God bless your mother for teaching you so well. We see now you are not American. We know you have not forgotten Afghanistan.”

All my life, I had wanted nothing more than to forget Afghanistan. Every moment of my life outside the parameters of my family’s watchful eyes, was spent trying to weave myself into the fabric of America, unraveling the Afghani in me.

Having grown silent again, the members of my family slowly began raising their tea glasses filled with orange Fanta toasting my uncle’s speech in agreement. My father was crying too. It had been his biggest fear that we wouldn’t fit in, that we would embarrass him. Instead, we’d upped his stature and standing within his family. Though we were deep down American, we were not like the other Western sons and daughters who had come to visit Afghanistan. Not like the ones who chose to flaunt the fact that they were from the West, acting in disdain at all they encountered in the dust of a tattered nation. My brother and I were secretly falling in love with Afghanistan. We were learning to make peace with where we came from, to love the very thing we held in such contempt as children. The desire to be accepted was mutual.

Part of me felt as if I were living a lie in front of these people, embracing the duality of two cultures depending upon my circumstance, the other part of me reveled in the chameleon I’d become because of it: They thought we were full blown Afghans. They didn’t know that back home I lived a life away from my family, I drove a car, I painted my nails red and shaved my legs. They didn’t know that in college I’d had a boyfriend and that in America, I didn’t cover my head or pray 5 times a day, even though I knew how. I fit in, but this was as much a lie as my fitting in as an American in the West.

By evening end, I wanted nothing but the privacy to sit quietly and think about all that had happened on my first day back in this place I’d been so afraid to call home. There would be no sleep this night. Struggling to bounce moonlight off my journal and write, I sat for hours watching and listening instead.

Cloaked by a lifting darkness, men, young and old, shuffled out of teahouses, home to their sleeping families. The howling of the coyotes lurking on the outskirts of the city, intermingled with the crying of children re-living war traumas in their dreams. There was never any peace in this place, even the chickens fought. Of course, there was the random gunfire bursting abruptly, rattling the nerves of those unused to such things. The first sounds of exploding bullets in the sky shook me, but in his waking sleep, my father softly mumbled, "Don't worry bachem, it is nothing, we are safe." I sat there quietly on my dark perch in the window, almost more startled by my father's words in the dark than by the gunfire. This whole time he had been awake watching me watch the destroyed remnants of what was once his beloved homeland. I sat there contemplating my father and the many ways in which he almost seemed a foreigner to this place. My father lay there marveling at how well I had managed to fit in, embracing what little was left of it.