



Introduction

I touched down in Afghanistan for the first time on a raw winter morning in 2005 after two days of travel that took me from Boston to Dubai via London. My eyes stung and my head whirled. Too anxious to sleep, I had stayed up all night in Dubai's Terminal II waiting for the Ariana flight to Kabul, scheduled to depart at 6:30 A.M. The Afghan airline urged travelers to arrive three hours early, which made finding a hotel feel somewhat beside the point. The predawn destinations on the big black travel board read like a guide to the world's exotic hot spots: Karachi, Baghdad, Kandahar, Luanda. I realized I was the only woman in the airport, and, perched on a corner window ledge in the sparsely furnished Terminal II lobby waiting for my cell phone to charge, I tried hard to make myself invisible. But I could feel the puzzled stares of the men dressed in their loose-fitting *shalwar kameez* as they passed me by, pushing their rented silver luggage trolleys

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stacked high with bulging suitcases that were bound together with heavy brown cord. I imagined them wondering what in the world is that young woman doing here all alone at three o'clock in the morning?

To be honest, I wondered, too. I snuck into the empty but freshly cleaned ladies' room to change from my Boston outfit of gray turtleneck, Kasil jeans, and English brown leather boots, into an oversize pair of black pants, black long-sleeved T-shirt, black Aerosoles, and black socks. My only color concession was a loose-fitting rust-colored sweater I had purchased at a New Age crystal shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My friend Aliya had lent me a black wool headscarf, and I struggled to casually toss it over my head and shoulders, as she had taught me when we were sitting together on a plush couch thousands of miles—and worlds—away in her dorm room at Harvard Business School. Now, twenty-five hours later, standing alone in a sterile restroom in Dubai, I draped and re-draped my shawl a dozen times until I got it passably right. I looked in the mirror and didn't recognize myself. "Oh, it's fine," I said out loud to my worried-looking reflection. "The trip will be great." Faking confidence, I turned on my rubber wedge heel and walked out of the ladies' room.

Eight hours later I descended the metal staircase onto the makeshift tarmac at Kabul International Airport. The sun shone brightly and the scent of charred winter air—crisp, but laced with fumes—went straight to my nose. I

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bumbled along, trying to keep Aliya's wool scarf in place as I dragged my orange carry-on behind me. I had to stop every few feet to adjust my veil. No one had prepared me for how hard it was to stay covered while in motion, let alone when lugging heavy baggage. How did the women all around me manage it so gracefully? I wanted to be like them, but instead I looked ridiculous, a goofy foreign duckling fumbling among the local swans.

I waited for an hour in the 1960s-style airport, mesmerized by the carcasses of Russian tanks that still sat along the side of the runway, decades after the Soviets had left Afghanistan. I managed to get through the passport line quickly and without incident. So far, so good, I thought. But then, having gotten through customs, everyone around me quickly began to disperse in different directions, displaying a sense of purpose that I distinctly lacked. I felt a sharp stab of anxiety shoot through my stomach as I realized that I had no idea what to do or where to go. Journalists who travel to faraway and dangerous places usually work with "fixers," local men and women who arrange their travel, interviews, and lodgings. Mine, a young man named Mohamad, was nowhere to be found. I fumbled through my wallet for his phone number, helpless and frightened but trying to look cool and collected. Where could he be? I wondered. Had he forgotten the American, the former ABC News producer, he had promised by email to pick up at the airport?

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At last I found his mobile number on a piece of crumpled paper at the bottom of my purse. But I had no way to call him; I had dutifully charged my UK cell phone, but my London SIM card didn't work here in Kabul. So much for preparation.

Ten minutes went by, then twenty. Still no Mohamad. I imagined myself, five days later, still stuck at the Kabul Airport. As Afghan families cheerfully hurried out the glass doors, I felt more lonely than I had at 3 A.M. in Dubai's Terminal II. Only the unsmiling British soldiers milling around massive NATO tanks in front of the airport brought me any comfort. Worst-case scenario, I thought: I could go to the Brits and ask them to take me in. Never before had I found the sight of a tank at an airport reassuring.

Finally, I spotted a twentysomething bearded man selling phone cards, candies, and juices at a little corner stand by the airport's front door. I broke out a five-dollar bill and a big smile and asked in English if I could use his phone. He smiled and handed it over.

"Mohamad," I cried, shouting loudly to be certain he could hear me. "Hello, hello, this is Gayle, the American journalist. I am at the airport. Where are you?"

"Hello, Gayle," he said, calmly. "I'm in the parking lot; I've been here the past two hours. We can't come any closer because of security. Just follow the crowds; I'll be waiting for you."

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Of course, security restrictions. How could I not have thought of that?

I pushed my own overstuffed silver luggage cart the length of two football fields to a parking lot miles away from the NATO tanks and their British soldiers. There, as promised, was Mohamad, smiling warmly.

“Welcome to Kabul,” he said, grabbing my green Eddie Bauer duffel crammed full of headlamps, long johns, and wool blankets I had bought just for this trip. I wondered how many naïve foreigners Mohamad had greeted at the airport like this. He had worked with journalists for years and was a journalist in his own right. A friend at CBS News in London had insisted I hire him because she knew he was professional, experienced, and trustworthy—exactly what I would need in Kabul in the winter of 2005, a time when occasional rocket attacks and bombings had begun escalating into a full-blown insurgency. At that moment I felt most grateful for her insistence.

The streets of the Afghan capital were a cacophonous free-for-all, with crutch-bearing amputees, taped-together cars, donkeys, fuel-towing bicycles, and United Nations SUVs all fighting for the right-of-way with no traffic lights to guide them and only a smattering of police governing their progress. The crunchy grime of the brown Kabul air clung to everything—lungs, sweaters, headscarves, and windows. It was a noxious souvenir of decades of war in

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which everything, from the trees to the sewage system, had been destroyed.

I had never seen such an urban Wild West. Drivers would nudge the front end of their vehicles to within two inches of our blue Toyota Corolla, then suddenly careen back into their own lane. Afghan music blared from the Toyotas, Hondas, and Mercedes that were stuck with us in the gridlock. The city was clamorous in honking horns. White-haired old men with woolen blankets draped loosely across their shoulders stepped in front of cars, halting traffic and paying no attention to the oncoming vehicles. Clearly they—and everyone else—were used to this mad jumble of barely managed chaos that was Kabul.

I was not. I was a first-timer.

I was on winter break during my second year of MBA study at Harvard Business School. Journalism had always been my first love, but a year earlier I had given up my job covering presidential campaigns for the ABC News Political Unit, where I had spent much of my adult life. At thirty, I took the leap and decided to pursue my passion for international development, certain that if I didn't leave then, I never would. So I shed the warm cocoon of my Washington, D.C., world for graduate school. The first thing I did was start hunting for a subject rich with stories that no one else was covering. Stories that mattered to the world.

The issue that called me was women who work in

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war zones: a particularly intrepid and inspiring form of entrepreneurship that happens regularly right in the heart of the world's most dangerous conflicts—and their aftermath.

I began my research in Rwanda. I went there to see firsthand how women play a part in rebuilding their country by creating business opportunities for themselves and others. Women accounted for three-quarters of Rwanda's citizens immediately after the 1994 genocide; a decade later, they remained the majority. International officials—all men—in the capital city of Kigali told me there was no story: that women did not own small businesses in Rwanda, that they worked only in the far less lucrative microfinance sector selling fruit and handicrafts at little stands on the side of the road. My reporting showed me they were wrong: I found women who owned gas stations and ran hotels. And the fruit sellers I interviewed were exporting their avocados and bananas to Europe twice a week. Shortly afterward I published a profile in the *Financial Times* of some of the most successful entrepreneurs I'd met—including a businesswoman selling baskets to Macy's, the famous New York department store chain.

Now, just a few months later, I was in Kabul, again for the *Financial Times*, to report on a surprising phenomenon: a new generation of Afghan businesswomen who had emerged in the wake of the Taliban's takeover. I had also promised to find a protagonist for a case study that

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Harvard Business School would teach the following year. My former network news colleagues had tried to help me prepare for Kabul and paved the way by sharing their contacts, but as soon as I arrived I realized just how little I actually knew about the country.

All I had was the passionate desire to pursue a story.

Most stories about war and its aftermath inevitably focus on men: the soldiers, the returning veterans, the statesmen. I wanted to know what war was like for those who had been left behind: the women who managed to keep going even as their world fell apart. War reshapes women's lives and often unexpectedly forces them—unprepared—into the role of breadwinner. Charged with their family's survival, they invent ways to provide for their children and communities. But their stories are rarely told. We're far more accustomed to—and comfortable with—seeing women portrayed as victims of war who deserve our sympathy rather than as resilient survivors who demand our respect. I was determined to change this.

So I came to Kabul in search of that story. The plight of Afghan women had won worldwide attention in the wake of the Taliban's ouster by American and Afghan forces, which followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. I was eager to see what kinds of companies women were starting in a country that had barred them from schools and offices just four years earlier. I brought with me from Boston four pages, single spaced and neatly

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stapled, containing the names and email addresses of possible sources, the product of weeks of conversations with TV reporters, print journalists, Harvard contacts, and aid workers in the region.

I discussed interview ideas with Mohamad. Over cups of tea in the empty dining room of a hotel frequented by journalists, I asked him whether he knew any women who were running their own businesses. He laughed. "You know that men in Afghanistan don't get involved in women's work." But after a moment of thought he looked up at me and admitted that yes, he had heard there were a few women in Kabul who had started their own companies. I hoped he was right.

As the days passed, I worked my way down the roster of potential interviewees but kept coming up empty. Many of the women whose names I had been given were running nongovernmental organizations, or NGOs, that were not businesses at all. In fact, I was told, when the international community first entered Afghanistan en masse in 2002, it was easier to register an NGO than a company. The incentives were fixed early on. American officials in Washington and Kabul may have been championing Afghan businesswomen, holding public events and spending millions of government dollars on their behalf, but here I was struggling to find a single entrepreneur with a viable business plan. Surely they were out there and I just hadn't looked in the right places?

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My deadline was approaching, and I was beginning to fear that I'd return home empty-handed and let down both the *Financial Times* and my professor at Harvard. And then finally a woman who worked with the New York nonprofit organization Bpeace told me about Kamila Sidiqi, a young dressmaker turned serial entrepreneur. Not only did she run her own firm, I was told, but she had gotten her unlikely start in business as a teenager during the Taliban era.

At last I felt a jolt of reporter's excitement, the thrilling rush of news adrenaline that journalists live for. The idea of a burqa-clad breadwinner starting a business under the nose of the Taliban was remarkable for sure. Like most foreigners, I had imagined Afghan women during the Taliban years as silent—and passive—prisoners waiting out their prolonged house arrest. I was fascinated, and eager to learn more.

The more I dug around, the more I realized that Kamila was only one of many young women who had worked throughout years of the Taliban regime. Driven by the need to earn money for their families and loved ones when Kabul's economy collapsed under the weight of war and mismanagement, they turned small openings into large opportunities and invented ways around the rules. As women throughout the world always had, they found a way forward for the sake of their families. They learned how to work the system and even how to thrive within it.

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Some staffed foreign NGOs, often in the area of women's health, which organizations the Taliban permitted to continue. Doctors could still work. And so could women who helped other women to learn basic hygiene and sanitation practices. Some taught in underground schools, leading courses for girls and women in everything from Microsoft Windows to math and Dari, as well as the Holy Q'uran. These study sessions took place across Kabul in private homes or, even better, in women's hospitals, the one safe zone the Taliban permitted. But the women could never fully let their guard down; classes would pack up at a moment's notice after someone came running down a hallway to warn that the Taliban were coming. Still others, like Kamila, launched home businesses and risked their safety to find buyers for the goods they produced. Though their vocations differed, these women shared one thing in common: their work meant the difference between survival and starvation for their families. And they did it on their own.

No one had fully told these heroines' stories. There were moving diaries that captured the brutality and despair of women's lives under the Taliban, and inspiring books about women who created new opportunities after the Taliban had been forced into retreat. But this story was different: it was about Afghan women who supported one another when the world outside had forgotten them. They helped themselves and their communities with no

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help from beyond their poor and broken country, and they reshaped their own future in the process.

Kamila is one of these young women, and if you judge by the enduring impact her work has had on modern-day Afghanistan, it's fair to say that she's among the most visionary. Her story tells us much about the country to which we continue to send our troops nearly a decade after the Taliban's foot soldiers stopped patrolling the streets outside her front door. And it offers a guide as we watch to see whether the past decade of modest progress will turn out to have been a new beginning for Afghan women or an aberration that disappears when the foreigners do.

Deciding to write about Kamila was easy. Actually doing so was not. Security went to pieces during the years I spent interviewing Kamila's family, friends, and colleagues. Suicide bombings and rocket attacks terrorized the city with increasing frequency—and potency. Eventually these grew sophisticated and coordinated enough to pin Kabulis down in their homes and offices for hours at a time. Even the usually stoic Mohamad occasionally showed his nervousness, bringing me his wife's black Iranian-style headscarf to help me look more "local." After each incident I would call my husband to say that everything was okay, and urge him not to pay too much attention to all the bad news in his "Afghanistan" Google Alert. Meanwhile, all across Kabul cement walls rose higher and the barbed wire surrounding them grew thicker. I and ev-

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everyone else in Kabul learned to live with heavily armed guards and multiple security searches each time we entered a building. Thugs and insurgents began kidnapping foreign journalists and aid workers from their homes and cars, sometimes for cash and sometimes for politics. Journalist friends and I spent hours trading rumors we had heard of attacks and potential attacks, and texting one another when security alerts warned of neighborhoods we should avoid that day. One afternoon following an intense day of interviews I received a worried call from the U.S. Embassy asking if I was the American writer who had been abducted the day before. I assured them I was not.

This worsening reality complicated my work. Afghan girls who worked with Kamila during the Taliban era grew more nervous about meeting with me for fear that their families or bosses would shun the attention a foreigner's visit attracted. Others frightened of being overheard by their colleagues refused entirely. "Don't you know the Taliban are coming back?" one young woman asked me in a nervous whisper. She worked for the United Nations at the time, but had just been telling me all about the NGO she worked for during the Taliban. "They hear everything," she said, "and if my husband finds out I talked to you, he will divorce me."

I didn't know how to answer such questions but did everything I could to protect my interview subjects and myself: I dressed even more conservatively than the

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Afghan women around me; wore my own headscarves, which I had bought at an Islamic clothing store in Anaheim, California; and learned to speak Dari. When I arrived at stores and offices for interviews, I stayed silent for as long as possible and let Mohamad speak to the security guards and receptionists on my behalf. I knew that the better I blended in, the safer we all would be.

One of my reporting trips coincided with an audacious early morning attack on a UN guesthouse that killed five UN workers. For many nights afterward I would jump out of bed and leap into my slippers whenever I heard the neighbor's cat walking across the plastic sheeting that insulated our roof—I thought the noise was someone trying to break in. A friend suggested, only half jokingly, that I keep an AK-47 in my room to defend our house against would-be attackers. I agreed immediately, but my roommates worried that, given my limited firearms experience, this would create more danger than it prevented.

Kamila and her sisters also feared for my safety.

"Aren't you worried? What does your family say?" Kamila's older sister Malika asked. "It is very dangerous here for foreigners right now."

I reminded them all that they had lived through much worse and had never stopped working. Why should I? They tried to protest, but they knew I was right: they had kept going during the Taliban years despite the risks, not

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just because they had to but because they believed in what they were doing. So did I.

The fact that I stayed in Kabul then—and kept coming back year after year—earned me their respect and strengthened our friendship. And the more I learned about Kamila’s family—their commitment to service and education, their desire to make a difference for their country—the more my esteem for them grew. I strove to be worthy of their example.

Over time Kamila’s family became part of mine. One of her sisters would help me with my Dari while another made delicious traditional Afghan dinners of rice, cauliflower, and potatoes for her vegetarian guest from America. When I left in the evenings, they always insisted on checking to make sure my car was outside before letting me put my shoes on to leave. We spent afternoons sitting in our stocking feet in the living room drinking tea and snacking on *toot*, dried berries from the north. When we weren’t working we swapped stories about husbands and politics and the “situation,” as everyone in Kabul euphemistically referred to security. We sang and danced with Kamila’s beautiful toddler nieces. And we worried about one another.

What I found in Kabul was a sisterhood unlike any I had seen before, marked by empathy, laughter, courage, curiosity about the world, and above all a passion for work. I saw it the first day I met Kamila: here was a young

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woman who believed with all her heart that by starting her own business and helping other women to do the same, she could help save her long-troubled country. The journalist in me needed to know: where does such a passion, such a calling, come from? And what does Kamila's story tell us about Afghanistan's future and America's involvement in it?

That is the story I set out to tell. And those are the questions I set out to answer.

The Dressmaker of Rhair Khana







The News Arrives and Everything Changes

Kamila Jan, I'm honored to present you with your certificate."

The small man with graying hair and deeply set wrinkles spoke with pride as he handed the young woman an official-looking document. Kamila took the paper and read:

This is to certify that Kamila Sidiqi has successfully completed her studies at Sayed Jamaluddin Teacher Training Institute.

KABUL, AFGHANISTAN
SEPTEMBER 1996

“Thank you, Agha,” Kamila said. A snow-melting smile broke out across her face. She was the second woman in her family to finish Sayed Jamaluddin’s two-year course; her older sister Malika had graduated a few years earlier and was now teaching high school in Kabul. Malika, however, had not had the constant shellings and rocket fire of the civil war to contend with as she traveled back and forth to class.

Kamila clasped the treasured document. Her headscarf hung casually and occasionally slipped backward to reveal a few strands of her shoulder-length wavy brown hair. Wide-legged black pants and dark, pointy low heels peeked out from under the hem of her floor-length coat. Kabul’s women were known for stretching the sartorial limits of their traditional country, and Kamila was no exception. Until the leaders of the anti-Soviet resistance, the Mujahideen (“holy warriors”), unseated the Moscow-backed government of Dr. Najibullah in 1992, many Kabuli women traveled the cosmopolitan capital in Western clothing, their heads uncovered. But now, only four years later, the Mujahideen defined women’s public space and attire far more narrowly, mandating offices separate from men, headscarves, and baggy, modest clothing. Kabul’s women, young and old, dressed accordingly, though many—like Kamila—enlivened the rules by tucking a smart pair of shoes under their shapeless black jackets.

It was a far cry from the 1950s and '60s, when fashionable Afghan women glided through the urbane capital in European-style skirt suits and smart matching headscarves. By the 1970s, Kabul University students shocked their more conservative rural countrymen with knee-skimming miniskirts and stylish pumps. Campus protests and political turmoil marked those years of upheaval. But that was all well before Kamila's time: she had been born only two years before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, an occupation that gave rise to a decade-long battle of Afghan resistance waged by the Mujahideen, whose forces ultimately bled the Russians dry. Nearly two decades after the first Russian tank rolled into Afghanistan, Kamila and her friends had yet to experience peace. After the defeated Soviets withdrew the last of their support for the country in 1992, the triumphant Mujahideen commanders began fighting among themselves for control of Kabul. The brutality of the civil war shocked the people of Kabul. Overnight, neighborhood streets turned into frontline positions between competing factions who shot at one another from close range.

Despite the civil war, Kamila's family and tens of thousands of other Kabulis went to school and work as often as they could, even while most of their friends and family fled to safety in neighboring Pakistan and Iran. With her new teaching certificate in hand, Kamila would soon begin her studies at Kabul Pedagogical Institute, a coed university

founded in the early 1980s during the Soviet years of educational reform, which saw the expansion of state institutions. After two years, she would earn a bachelor's degree and begin her teaching career there in Kabul. She hoped to become a professor of Dari or perhaps even literature one day.

Yet despite the years of hard work and her optimistic plans for the future, no joyful commencement ceremony would honor Kamila's great achievement. The civil war had disemboweled the capital's stately architecture and middle-class neighborhoods, transforming the city into a collapsed mess of gutted roads, broken water systems, and crumbling buildings. Rockets launched by warring commanders regularly arced across Kabul's horizon, falling onto the capital's streets and killing its residents indiscriminately. Everyday events like graduations had become too dangerous to even contemplate, let alone attend.

Kamila placed the neatly printed certificate into a sturdy brown folder and stepped out of the administrator's office, leaving behind a line of young women who were waiting to receive their diplomas. Walking through a narrow corridor with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Sayed Jamaluddin's main entrance, she passed two women who were absorbed in conversation in the crowded hallway. She couldn't help overhearing them.

"I hear they are coming today," the first woman said to her friend.

“My cousin told me they are just outside Kabul,” the other answered in a whisper.

Kamila immediately knew who “they” were: the Taliban, whose arrival now felt utterly inevitable. News in the capital traveled at an astoundingly rapid pace via a far-reaching network of extended families that connected the provinces across Afghanistan. Rumors of the arriving regime were rampant, and the word was out that women were in the crosshairs. The harder-to-control, more remote rural regions could sometimes carve out exceptions for their young women, but the Taliban moved quickly to consolidate power in the urban areas. So far they had won every battle.

Kamila stood quietly in the hallway of the school she had fought so hard to attend, despite all the dangers, and listened to her classmates with a feeling of growing unease. She moved closer so she could hear the girls’ conversation more clearly.

“You know they shut the schools for girls in Herat,” the sharp-nosed brunette said. Her voice was heavy with worry. The Taliban had captured the western city a year earlier. “My sister heard that women can’t even leave the house once they take over. And here we thought we had lived through the worst.”

“Come, it might not be so bad,” answered her friend, taking her hand. “They might actually bring some peace with them, God willing.”

Holding her folder tightly with both hands, Kamila hurried downstairs for the long bus ride that would take her to her family's home in the neighborhood of Khair Khana. Only a few months ago she had walked the seven miles after a rocket had landed along the road in Karteh Char, the neighborhood where her school was located, damaging the roof of a hospital for government security forces and knocking out the city's bus service for the entire evening.

Everyone in Kabul had grown accustomed to seeking safety between doorjambes or in basements once they heard the now-familiar shriek of approaching rockets. A year earlier the teacher training institute had moved its classes from Karteh Char, which was regularly pummeled by rocket attacks and mortar fire, to what its director hoped was a safer location in a once-elegant French high school downtown. Not long afterward yet another rocket, this one targeting the nearby Ministry of Interior, landed directly in front of the school's new home.

All these memories raced through Kamila's mind as she boarded the rusty light blue "Millie" bus that was once part of the government-run service and settled into her seat. She leaned against the large mud-flecked window and listened to the women around her while the bus began to maneuver bumpily through Karteh Char's torn-up streets. Everyone had her version of what the new regime would mean for Kabul's residents.

“Maybe they will bring security,” said a girl who sat a few rows behind Kamila.

“I don’t think so,” her friend answered. “I heard on the radio that they don’t allow school or anything once they come. No jobs, either. We won’t even be able to leave the house unless they say so. Perhaps they will only be here for a few months . . .”

Kamila gazed through the window and tried to tune out the conversations around her. She knew the girl was probably right, but she couldn’t bear to think about what it would mean for her and her four younger sisters still living at home. She watched as shopkeepers on the city’s dusty streets engaged in the daily routine of closing their grocery stores, photo shops, and bakery stalls. Over the past four years the entrances to Kabul’s shops had become a barometer of the day’s violence: doors that were wide open meant daily life pushed forward, even if occasionally punctured by the ring of distant rocket fire. But when they were shut in broad daylight, Kabulis knew danger waited nearby and that they, too, would be best served by remaining indoors.

The old bus lurched forward amid a belch of exhaust and finally arrived at Kamila’s stop. Khair Khana, a northern suburb of Kabul, was home to a large community of Tajiks, Afghanistan’s second-largest ethnic group. Like most Tajik families, Kamila’s parents came from the north of the country. The south was traditionally Pashtun

terrain. Kamila's father had moved the family to Khair Khana during his last tour of duty as a senior military officer for the Afghan army, in which he had served his country for more than three decades. Kabul, he thought at the time, offered his nine girls the best chance of a good education. And education, he believed, was critical to his children's, his family's, and his country's future.

Kamila hurriedly made her way down the dusty street, holding her scarf over her mouth to keep from inhaling the city's gritty soot. She passed the narrow grocery store fronts and wooden vegetable carts where peddlers sold carrots and potatoes. Smiling, flower-laden brides and grooms stared down at her from a series of wedding pictures that hung from the wall of a photo shop. From the bakery came the delicious smell of fresh naan bread, followed by a butcher shop where large hunks of dark red meat dangled from steel hooks. As she walked Kamila overheard two shopkeepers trading stories of the day. Like all Kabulis who remained in the capital, these men had grown accustomed to watching regimes come and go, and they were quick to sense an impending collapse. The first, a short man with balding hair and deeply set wrinkles, was saying that his cousin had told him Massoud's forces were loading up their trucks and fleeing the capital. The other man shook his head in disbelief.

"We will see what comes next," he said. "Maybe things will get better, Inshallah. But I doubt it."

Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud was the country's defense minister and a Tajik military hero from the Panjshir Valley, not far from Parwan, where Kamila's family came from. During the years of resistance against the Russians, Dr. Najibullah's forces had imprisoned Kamila's father on suspicion of supporting Massoud, who was known as the "Lion of Panjshir" and was among the most famous of the Mujahideen fighters. After the Russians withdrew in 1992, Mr. Sidiqi was freed by forces loyal to Massoud, who was now serving in President Burhanuddin Rabbani's new government. Mr. Sidiqi went to work with Massoud's soldiers in the north for a while, eventually deciding on retirement in Parwan, his boyhood home and a place he loved more than any other in the world.

All through the preceding summer of 1996, Massoud had vowed to stop the Taliban's offensive even as the relentless bombardment of the capital continued and Taliban forces took one city after another. If the government soldiers were really packing up and heading out of Kabul, Kamila thought, the Taliban could not be far behind. She picked up her pace and kept her eyes on the ground. No need to look for trouble. As she approached her green metal gate on the corner of Khair Khana's well-trafficked main road, she sighed in relief. She had never been more grateful to live so close to the bus stop.

The wide green door clanged shut behind Kamila, and her mother, Ruhasva, rushed out into the small courtyard

to embrace her daughter. She was a tiny woman with wisps of white hair that framed a kindly, round face. She kissed Kamila on both cheeks and pressed her close. Mrs. Sidiqi had heard the rumors of the Taliban's arrival all morning long, and had been pacing her living room floor for two hours, anxious for her daughter's safety.

Finally home, with her family close and darkness falling, Kamila settled down on a velvety pillow in her living room. She picked up one of her favorite books, a frayed collection of poems, and lit a hurricane lamp with one of the small red and white matchboxes the family kept all over the house for just such a purpose. Power was a luxury; it arrived unpredictably and for only an hour or two a day, if at all, and everyone had learned to adjust to life in the dark. A long night lay before them, and they waited anxiously to see what would happen next. Mr. Sidiqi said little as he joined his daughter on the floor next to the radio to listen to the news from the BBC in London.

Just four miles away, Kamila's older sister Malika was finally winding down a far more eventful day.



"Mommy, I don't feel well," said Hossein.

Four years old, he was Malika's second child and a favorite of his aunt Kamila. She would play with him in the family's parched yard in Khair Khana and together they would count the goats and sheep that sometimes passed

by. Today his small body was seized by stomach pain and diarrhea, which had worsened as the afternoon passed. He lay on the living room floor on a bed of pillows that Malika had made in the center of the large red carpet. Hossein breathed heavily as he fell in and out of a fitful sleep.

Malika studied Hossein and wondered how she would manage. She was several months pregnant with her third child and had spent the day inside, heeding a neighbor's early morning warning to stay home from work because the Taliban were coming. Distractedly she sewed pieces of a rayon suit she was making for a neighbor, and watched with growing concern as Hossein's condition worsened. Beads of sweat now covered his forehead, and his arms and legs were clammy. He needed a doctor.

From her closet Malika selected the largest chador, or headscarf, she owned. She took care to cover not just her head but the lower half of her face as well. Like most educated women in Kabul, she usually wore her scarf draped casually over her hair and across her shoulders. But today was different; if the Taliban really were on their way to Kabul they would be demanding that women be entirely covered in the full-length burqa, known in Dari as a chadri; it concealed not just the head but the entire face. Already this was the rule in Herat and Jalalabad, which had fallen to the Taliban just a few weeks earlier. Since she had no burqa, the oversize veil was the closest

Malika could come to following Taliban rules. It would have to suffice.

Once her sister-in-law had arrived from the apartment upstairs to look after her older boy, Malika gathered Hossein in her arms and tucked him inside her baggy black overcoat. Holding him close to her swelling belly, she hurried out the door for the ten-minute walk to the doctor's office.

The silence in the street frightened Malika. At this early afternoon hour her neighborhood was usually crowded with a jumble of taxis, bicycles, donkeys, and trucks, but today the streets were empty. The rumors of the approaching army had sent her neighbors deep into their homes, behind their gates and window coverings. It was now a waiting game, and no one knew what the next few days would bring.

Malika winced at the sound of her own heels clacking on the sidewalk. She focused her eyes on the ground as she struggled to hold the wide folds of her scarf in place, but the heavy fabric kept slipping off her head, forcing her to juggle and shift the small boy in her arms as she performed the awkward dance of replacing the shawl, keeping the child covered, and walking as quickly as she could. An afternoon shadow began to fall on Karteh Parwan's uneven rows of homes and shops.

Finally Malika made a right turn off the main road and reached an office that occupied the ground floor of a

shabby strip of storefronts, all of which shared the same cement floors and low ceilings. Several rows of brown stone separated the shops from the balconied apartments above. Relieved to be inside and to rest for a moment, Malika checked in with the doctor, who had come out of his examining room when he heard the front door.

“My son has a fever; I think he may be very sick,” she said. “I brought him here as soon as I could.”

The doctor, an older gentleman whom her husband’s family had visited for years, offered her a kind smile.

“No problem, just take a seat. It won’t be long.”

Malika settled Hossein into a wooden chair in the dark and empty waiting room. She walked the floor, trying to calm herself, then rubbed her belly for a moment and inhaled deeply. Little Hossein was pale and his eyes looked glassy and expressionless. She wrapped her arms tightly around him and pulled him closer to her.

Suddenly a noise on the street outside startled her. Malika jumped from her chair toward the window. Gray clouds hovered over the street and it had grown dark outside. The first thing she could make out was a shiny dark truck. It looked new, certainly newer than most cars in Kabul. And then she saw three men standing beside the pickup. They wore turbans wrapped high and thick and carried long rods in their hands that looked like batons. They were striking at something or someone, that much she could tell.

With a start Malika realized that the figure huddled in front of them was a woman. She lay in the middle of the street, crouched in a ball, and was trying to fend off the blows. But the men would not stop. Malika heard the dreadful slapping sound of the wooden batons as they hit the helpless woman—on her back, her legs, over and over again.

“Where is your chadri?” one of the men shouted at his victim as he lifted his arms above his head to strike her. “Why are you not covered? What kind of woman are you to go out like this?”

“Stop,” the woman pleaded. “Please have mercy. I am wearing a scarf. I don’t have a chadri. We never had to wear them before!”

She began to sob. Malika’s eyes teared as she watched. Her instincts commanded her to run into the street and rescue this poor woman from her attackers. But her rational mind knew it was impossible. If she left the doctor’s office she would be beaten as well. These men would have no problem hitting a pregnant woman, she thought. And she had a sick child to protect. So she stood helplessly by the window listening to the woman cry, and wiped her own tears away.

“You think this is the last regime?” one of the young men shouted. His eyes were black with kohl, the night-colored cosmetic that Taliban soldiers wore. “This is not Dr. Najibullah or the Mujahideen,” he said, his club hit-

ting her once more. "We believe in sharia, Islamic law, and this is now the law of the land. Women must be covered. This is your warning."

Finally the men got back in their truck and left. The woman bent over unsteadily to grab her handbag from the street and slowly limped away.

Malika turned back to Hossein, who was folded up in his chair and moaning softly. Her hands shook as she held his small fingers. Like the woman outside, she was from a generation of Kabul women who had never known life under the chadri. They had grown up in the capital long after Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud Khan had embraced the voluntary unveiling of his countrywomen in the 1950s. King Amanullah Khan had attempted this reform unsuccessfully thirty years earlier, but it wasn't until 1959, when the prime minister's own wife appeared at a national independence day celebration wearing a headscarf rather than the full chadri, that the change finally took hold. That one gesture stunned the crowd and marked a cultural turning point in the capital. Kabul's next generation of women had gone on to become teachers, factory workers, doctors, and civil servants; they went to work with their heads loosely covered and their faces exposed. Before today many had never had reason to wear or even own the full veils of their grandmothers' generation.

Suddenly the tide had turned again. Women would

now be forced to dress in a style—and assume a way of life—they had never known, by rulers who had known nothing else. Was this what was in store for her, too, once she left the doctor's office? Malika felt her heart pounding in her chest as she wondered how she was going to get Hossein and herself safely home. Like the woman's outside, Malika's scarf was large, but it was hardly big enough to cover her whole face and convince the soldiers of her piety. She held Hossein tightly, trying to comfort herself as much as her son.

Just then the doctor returned.

After a quick but thorough examination he assured Malika that it was nothing serious. He prescribed plenty of fluids and gave her a prescription to fill, then walked Malika and Hossein back to the waiting room. When they reached the front door Malika stopped.

"Doctor, I wonder if we could stay here for a few more minutes?" She pointed her chin down in the direction of the little boy in her arms. "I need to rest for just a moment before carrying him home again."

Malika didn't want to talk about what she had just seen, but it weighed heavily on her mind. She needed to make a plan to get them safely out of this situation.

"Of course," the doctor replied. "Stay as long as you wish."

Malika paced the waiting room floor and prayed for help. She could not go back out onto the street without a

chadri, that much was certain. But she had no idea how she would get hold of one.

Suddenly her heart leapt. Through the window she saw Soraya, her older son's elementary school teacher, walking down the street toward the doctor's office. Malika recognized the purposeful gait from a distance and then glimpsed the teacher's face peeking out from beneath her dark scarf. A small grocery sack dangled from each arm. Malika ran toward the door. After she had scanned the sidewalk to make certain the Taliban were no longer in sight, she took a furtive step out of the doctor's office.

"Soraya Jan," she called from the doorway. "It is Malika, Saeed's mother."

The startled teacher hurried over and Malika related what she had seen in the street.

Soraya shook her head in amazement. She had spent the past hour buying what vegetables she could for her family's evening meal of pilau, Afghan aromatic rice, and naan bread, but food had become hard to find these days. A Taliban blockade now strangled the city, preventing trucks carrying food from reaching the capital's 1.2 million residents. Today Soraya had barely managed to get hold of a few potatoes and some onions. The market had been abuzz with rumors of the Taliban's arrival, but Malika was the first person she knew who had actually seen the capital's new soldiers up close.

"My house is just around the corner," Soraya told

Malika, taking her hand. "You and Hossein will come with me, and we'll figure out how to get you a chadri to wear home. Don't worry; we'll find a way."

Malika smiled for the first time all day.

"Thank you, Soraya Jan," she said. "I am so grateful."

The women quickly walked the one block to Soraya's house, which stood behind a bright yellow gate. They didn't speak a word during the short trip, and Malika wondered if Soraya was praying as hard as she was that they wouldn't be stopped. She couldn't get the image of the woman in the street off her mind.

A few minutes later they sat together in Soraya's small kitchen. Malika tightly gripped a glass of hot green tea and relaxed for the first time in hours. She was deeply thankful for the warmth of her friend's home and the fact that Hossein, who had taken a pill at the doctor's office, was already feeling a bit better.

"I have a plan, Malika," Soraya announced. She called for her son, Muhammad, who was in the other room. Once the little boy appeared, Soraya gave him his mission. "I need you to go to your aunt Orzala's house. Tell her we need to borrow one of her chadri for Auntie Malika; tell her we will return it to her in just a few days. This is very important. Okay?"

The eight-year-old nodded.

Just half an hour later young Muhammad bounded into the living room and solemnly handed Malika a white

plastic shopping bag; the handles had been carefully tied together and inside was a blue chadri. "My aunt says you can borrow the chadri as long as you need it," Muhammad said, beaming.

Malika unfolded the fabric, which was really several panels of material that had been sewn together by hand. The front section, about a yard in length, was made of a light polyester with a finely embroidered border at the bottom and a cap at the top. The chadri's longer side and back panels formed an uninterrupted wave of intricate and meticulously pressed accordion pleats that hung close to the floor. Wearing the garment required getting underneath the billowy folds and making certain the cap was in just the right spot for maximum visibility through the webbed eye slit, which turned the world slightly blue.

The family invited Malika to stay for dinner, and after sharing a plate of rice and potatoes by candlelight on the living room floor, she stood up and put on the chadri. The hem of her fashionable brown suit pants stuck out from beneath the veil. Malika had worn the covering only a few times before when visiting family in the provinces, and she now found it tricky to maneuver among the slippery pleats and panels. She struggled to see out through the small eye vent, which was just two inches long and three and a half inches wide. She tripped over the fabric while saying her last good-byes to Soraya's family.

“One of my sons will bring the chadri back to you soon,” Malika said, embracing her friend and rescuer.

She took Hossein by the hand and began to walk home under the starry evening sky, stepping slowly and carefully to make certain she didn’t trip again. She prayed the rockets would wait for her to make it back safely.

Days would pass before she would see her family in Khair Khana and share her harrowing story. Malika, it turned out, was among the first to experience what lay ahead for them all. It would be just as the young woman at Sayed Jamaluddin had predicted.