FROM CALIFORNIA TO KABUL

businesses, joining others, or remaining at the school as teachers.

The school made immediate sense to me because my priority was looking for nontraditional ways to help women earn money. Educated women had had access to a wide variety of careers in Afghanistan in the sixties and seventies—they were doctors, teachers, lawyers, bureaucrats, even politicians—but with the destabilization of society brought by the country's political troubles, women lost access to education, health care, and any type of employment. Salons, which are women-only environments—men get their grooming done in male barbershops or more commonly on a stool on the sidewalk—are one of the few businesses women are allowed to operate on their own.

Since they are also one of the rare places outside the home where women can gather, they serve as a social and psychological lifeline: Women go to a beauty parlor to see friends, drink tea, share gossip. And sometimes get their hair done. In a salon (which can be a single chair in a private home), women control the entire business cycle: Their customers come directly to them, they negotiate a price, and they receive payment. The average salary for an educated person here—from teachers to government officials—is $30 to $40 per month. Women like Nazira, the mother of two girls, whose husband is unable to work, and Malalai, who was married at fifteen, widowed at 20, and supports her son, younger brother, mother, and sister-in-law, can make ten times that cutting and coloring hair in a busy salon. This is ultimately about economic empowerment—not lipstick and nail polish.

BUILT TO LAST WEDDINGS, LIKE THAT OF NOOR RAGHI (FAR LEFT), WHO OVERSAW THE BEAUTY SCHOOL'S CONSTRUCTION, ARE ALWAYS A BIG DO.

It was during this first visit to the school, as I was having my face threaded—which roughly translated to having all the hair pulled off my face by a student wielding a looped string stretched tightly between her mouth and her hands—that I met Debbie Rodriguez. A hairdresser from Detroit, Debbie had come to Kabul with the original Clairol team to help teach that first class. Three years later, she is the school's director, and—after falling in love with a charming, handsome man named Sher, who owns his own construction company—an Afghan wife.

Within minutes, a truly dangerous partnership was born, and I became the program's logistics manager, responsible for anything that didn't involve actually touching someone's hair. Though I knew nothing about the beauty business, I quickly learned that to do my job—figuring out what supplies and equipment the school and salon needed to keep running, begging and buying them in Kabul and abroad, finding the money to pay for them when absolutely necessary—the most important qualifications were a quick mind, a strong stomach, and a moderate level of insanity.

As my term as mayor was drawing to a close in late 2004, Debbie talked me into moving to Kabul full-time. She lured me, actually, with the promise of marriage to Sher's gorgeous cousin. I wasn't in the market for a husband, but the prospect of a romantic involvement in this exotic country seemed intoxicating after eight years of civic politics, which included mundane things like zoning, traffic, and garbage rates. Sher's cousin got snatched away to an arranged marriage a few days after I arrived, but I was here anyway, for better or worse.

I moved into a room in the beauty-parlor building between the facial room and Debbie and Sher's bedroom, and witnessed the push-and-pull of a cross-cultural marriage. Debbie doesn't go to certain parts of town, doesn't go out alone at night, and dresses modestly, with a head covering, when she is outside. Her world is the salon, with the women who work there and the customers who bring the life of the city inside. In many ways we live vicariously through one another: When I come home each evening (covered in dust and dirt, wearing no makeup), she fills me in on the daily gossip—who's coming, going, apart, together—and I tell her about the urban chaos that is Kabul.

> What really makes Kabul feel like home is the quality of my friendships. There's an intimacy we don't have in the States

I'm not exactly low-profile here. My job takes me deep into the bazaars looking for rope, locks, false eyelashes, power converters; through the dilapidated service buildings at the airport and into the mud along the runway searching containers for boxes of pink rollers. I have grown accustomed to tormenting government employees into signing the gazillion papers I need to get a shipment of salon chairs and perm solution through Pakistan without paying customs; I drive my Toyota like a proper Kabuli maniac through crazy traffic, beeping my horn and shooing away goats, pausing only to take note of daily police reports, which include reminders to avoid land mines and list roads threatened with bombing. I'm one of the only women driving in Kabul, and I do it without a head scarf. Because I need to go places only men go, I act like a man so that I am treated like one. Western women here have an advantage Afghan women do not: Afghan men don't quite know how to treat us. We're a bit of a third gender, a cyborg. I take advantage of that to get men to see me as one of them as I drive up to their shops, get out of the car, head uncovered, and negotiate in insistent Dari to get what I need.

That might not be much different from how I often got things done in the States, but it didn't seem quite so outrageous in Mountain View. And life here is outrageous. *(continued on page 386)*