

KABUL CUT & COLOR

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When I try to describe my home in the U.S. to people here, the first thing I say is "My city is so clean you can eat off the sidewalks." Here, in this high-desert capital, the streets are relentlessly dirty and brown, and reek with the smell of open sewers.

In the three and a half years I've been here, there has been tremendous progress. Buildings have been reconstructed, businesses reborn, and the final piece of government is now about to take shape with the legislative elections. At the same time, the enormity of the task of piecing back together an entire social structure has sunk in, and there is so far still to go. But Kabul has an energy that is hard to describe—and it makes the daily grind back in Silicon Valley, where one of my biggest problems was constituents complaining about people parking in front of their houses, seem a little boring, frankly.

What really makes this feel like home for me is the quality of the friendships I've formed. Relationships are much more intense, more affectionate and attentive than we are used to, and they are afforded a much bigger time commitment. For example, when I'm here and I'm talking to a friend, it would not be unusual for us to be holding hands or sitting very close or touching each other's faces. There's an intimacy we don't have in the States. It's not that you have more time for your friends, you *make* more time for your friends. In California, when you want to see someone, you're on the phone with them; you've gone through three weeks of each other's calendars and agree to get together the fourth Thursday from next Tuesday. Here in Kabul you call your friend and you have dinner that night or the next, or you spend all day Friday together, or you just sit and talk, making conversation for pure conversation's sake.

I go out practically every night to a party or a restaurant, but some nights the biggest bash in town is right in our yard—and in the beauty parlor. The huge kabob grill is going outside, plates of rice and fruit are lined up along the pedicure baths, drinks roll around on perm-rod carts, guests roll around on perm-rod carts, and the best musicians in town provide the music for dancing. Dancing is so spontaneous here, I'll be working upstairs some days, hear music, and come down to find everyone in the salon moving and clapping. And that's nothing compared with the dancing at parties, where everyone gets into the spirit. But there are dancers, and there are

dancers. Most men here are excellent at it (it's a traditional activity when they gather for any social reason), but our plumber, Zilgai, is incredible. Our bathroom sink has been leaking for a week, but who cares?

The party of all parties, though, is a wedding. Weddings are big business and a central focus of life in Afghanistan. They are also, coincidentally, one of the things that have made the beauty industry as indispensable as it is—and the reason underground salons remained open (though at considerable risk to their proprietors) throughout even the worst of Taliban times. I don't spend much time in the salon, since I'm usually out causing havoc on the school's behalf, but I always try to find a corner to lurk in when the brides come in.

A typical wedding day involves an early arrival at the salon by the bride and her female family members. Most of the afternoon is spent on hair and makeup, which is not applied with an especially light hand. A full face of it, starting with pancake foundation and ending with bright lipstick, electric-blue, green, pink, or silver eye shadow (or all four together!), and false lashes—"The thicker the better" is the motto. The hair is equally extravagant, with pin curls and flowers and a whole lot of glitter thrown over everything and everyone. Brides wear a standard wedding dress and will often start with a white one and then switch to a green one (green is the color of Islam) later in the evening. After everyone is beautiful, the music comes on and the dancing starts. Early in the evening the groom arrives with his male relatives in a car covered in ribbons and plastic flowers. At weddings in the States, I always loved watching the face of the groom as he saw his bride at the end of the aisle in her wedding dress for the first time. But he saw her the night before, and probably the nights before for several years. Most marriages in Afghanistan are still arranged by the family, so when the groom walks into the salon, he and his bride—two people who will spend the rest of their lives together—are seeing each other for the very first time. It's one of the only sights that can still leave me speechless.

Moments like these are why Debbie and I are here with no salary, living in a house that gets electricity by hot-wiring a car motor. The salon is the center of our world. Together with the students, we are trying to find a nontraditional place in a stridently traditional society. This dusty,

crowded, wild, war-ravaged city is my home for right now. The women here have captured my heart with their strength, their sheer endurance, and their humor. When I saw a woman flip up her burqa and push a ballot into the box during this fall's elections, I started to cry. Most of the time I have no idea why I'm here, and Heaven knows my poor parents can never figure it out. But every once in a while I stop by the salon of one of our graduates, like Malalai, where her dream of finding a way to support her family has become reality. And then I know. □