

> It's been almost a month here, and I am very content to remain for as long as I can. I love driv-ing around from place to place, and I still stare at everything with complete awe. The women in the blue burqas. Beheaded skinned chickens and bloody carcasses hanging on steel hooks. Wagons of onions, tomatoes, bananas. Men and women selling pots, pans and plastic mugs on sheets on the ground.

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> For the first time in my adult life, I'm not torn between two cultures. I don't have to struggle between being Afghan and American. I am an Afghan living in Afghanistan. I can't even describe how comforting this feels. I believe I have been searching for this sense of belonging since we left Afghanistan 23 years ago.

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> November 14, 2002

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> After dinner at my uncle's house, I asked one of my relatives, Satar, to tell me stories about his life. Satar is one of the men who guided my family through the mountains 23 years ago during our flight from Afghanistan. After he left us at the border of Pakistan in 1979, he began fighting the Soviets with the mujaheddin.

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> During one battle, he told me, he was with my Uncle Abdul, who had been shot in the thigh. Satar tried to carry Abdul, but he was too heavy. He hid my uncle in the mountains, and he went to look for a donkey to carry Abdul out. As he was walking past a field, he saw hundreds of dead bodies. He had to be careful not to step on them. They were Afghan soldiers employed by the Soviets. He said dogs ate the bodies because they lay rotting for so long.

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> Abdul was sitting in the room as we talked, along with four women and six children. We had all eaten dinner together on the floor, digging into the same bowls and plates of rice, spinach, kidney beans and salad with our hands. After dinner, we drank tea and ate baked chickpeas sprinkled with red pepper and listened to more stories. My uncle's house doesn't have a television, furniture, beds or electricity, or toys or books for the children, but everyone laughed so much. They made fun of one another, yelled at the children, ate, told stories, hugged and pinched each other, cursed. They share a love that is real and raw.

> Abdul always ends the night with a few sarcastic remarks. This one is his favorite: "I almost lost my life trying to save Afghanistan, and all anybody wants to know now is if I can speak English and work a computer. God damn all of you."

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> November 24, 2002

> On Friday, our driver took us to Pul-i-Charki, the place where my father was imprisoned by Afghanistan's communists for eight months 23 years ago. We followed a paved road that led us out of the city for a long time and then turned right into a narrow dirt road lined with market stalls. As we neared the prison, it looked as I had imagined it: all stone walls, with the watchtowers crumbling.

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> At the front gate, five soldiers stopped us. My mother rolled down her window and said that her husband had been imprisoned here and that her daughter wanted to see the place. My mother and sister stayed in the car, and I walked in with the soldiers.

> The prison was emptied out after the fall of the Taliban. We went up three flights to a hallway with tiny individual cells with metal bars for doors. Water dripped in through the walls, and the floors were wet, the ceilings low. We went into another hallway lined with cells, and I stared out the thin, triangular window. I asked the soldiers where the torture room was. They said those rooms were hidden in places they couldn't even find.