

> My uncles Zahir and Abdul came to breakfast and asked me why I looked down. I said the sadness of life here had finally settled inside of me and taken over. My Uncle Abdul looked at me seriously, put down his cup of tea, rubbed his hand over his beard and said, "Once there was a beggar, and he stood outside a house asking for bread. The owner of the house came out and gave him some bread. The beggar took the bread and said it would be so nice to eat the bread with some yogurt. The house owner thought for a second and said he'd return with the yogurt. When he returned, the beggar had eaten all the bread and said thank you for the yogurt but it would taste so good with some bread. The house owner went back to the house to get more bread, and when he came out the yogurt was gone." Abdul paused, still looking at me, and said, "This is your situation in Kabul. And can you get me another cup of tea."

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> December 31, 2002

> Today I woke up with a terrible headache. It hurt every time I moved, and I wished I was home. I just wanted to be comfortable, so I put on my yoga pants, running shoes, and wrapped a black scarf over my head and went to work.

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> Slowly the students began to arrive. The officers from the defense ministry walked in together and held out a black vase with white, purple, light blue and pink plastic flowers in it. They said in Farsi, "Happy New Year." I felt myself turning red.

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> A few minutes later another student came in with a box wrapped in silver paper and two white plastic roses taped to the front. Another student came in with a plastic bag filled with a crumbling pastry, sweet with walnuts in it that he had brought from Panshir. We passed the bag around our circle and broke off chunky pieces.

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> I forgot about my headache and being homesick. In class we talked about families, the smallest family in the class living in one house being five and the largest 29. After class was over, another student came and gave me two postcards of an Indian movie star, Rekha.

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> It's amazing how much people who have so little can give. A simple thing like a postcard is a luxury item here. I came here thinking I was going to help the poor Afghans, to teach them English, to give them money, but they are the ones helping me.

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> Until now, I've never liked plastic flowers. But tonight I will celebrate New Year's Eve at home, writing at my desk and staring with delight at my tacky, plastic flowers.

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> January 3, 2003

> Our supplies are dwindling here, and I'm being stingy with my last stick of clear gel nonscented Arrid deodorant. I've already run out of my all-natural toothpaste, shampoo, hair color, yogi tea, and I'm on my last few sticks of Carefree gum.

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> Yesterday my mother sent me out to find maxi-pads, which I was told I could buy at the pharmacy. The driver dropped me off on the street corner, and I walked into a small, dark store where three men with white beards stared at me from behind the counter. I looked past them at the items on the shelves and couldn't spot what I needed. I had no choice but to ask, so I said I'm looking for something for women. The man smiled and said, Kotex. I nodded. He said his supply was coming in tomorrow. This is the typical answer for anything out of stock.