

> I walked into another pharmacy and directly asked for Kotex. The man reached for a package and put it down in front of me, but then picked it up and began dusting it off. Afghan women either can't afford these packages or they are too embarrassed to go looking for them, based on the cloud of dust that settled on the counter.

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> Then I went to a shop on Flower Street in search of peanut butter. In the store, I found coffee, creamer, Corn Flakes, chocolate bars, Pringles potato chips, and I was overcome with excitement. I piled all these items on the counter in front of a young boy. He put them in two plastic bags and asked for 2,600 afghanis, which I handed over without really knowing how much money I had given him.

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> At home, my father looked at the receipt and said I had paid \$60, which happens to be the same amount he gets paid every month as a minister. The sweet-looking boy behind the counter had charged me \$9 for a small can of instant coffee and \$10 for a bag of almonds. I'd been had. So I believe it is time to come back to Fairfax to resupply.

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> January 14, 2003

> I walked down the hallway of Malalyia Maternity Hospital looking for my mother and Jamala, my uncle's wife, who had been admitted early in the morning. Pregnant women were leaning against the walls close to the wall heaters, lying on beds in the hallways, most of them whimpering.

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> I kept peering into rooms until I found them. My mother was pale and her eyes were red. Jamala was lying on her side. When she saw me she said, "Oh, Masuda, I'm dying, I'm dying." My other uncle's wife, Sackina, was holding her back and rubbing it.

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> I stayed and told my mother to leave. She was nauseous from the smell of urine, vomit and blood wafting through the warm, unventilated rooms. There were close to 15 patients in the room, some of them two to a bed. One woman kept moaning, and each time she whimpered, another patient, a nurse or the cleaning woman told her to swallow her pain and shut up. The moaning woman kept repeating, "You're butchers."

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> The metal bed Jamala was lying on had a thin mattress covered with a graying white sheet, her pillow stained with splotches of blood, and a yellow blanket darkened with dirt. I stared down at Jamala, who looked too young to be having a baby; at most she was 16.

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> As I was holding her, the woman next to us began breathing heavily and a quiet moan came out of her. When I looked over, a slimy, bluish baby lay on its side between her legs. As soon as the baby came out, a plump short nurse ran over to her and yelled, "What the hell is the matter with you? Why didn't you tell me you were giving birth." The woman lay still, not saying anything. The baby was moving, opening its mouth, and I kept staring at it, at its umbilical cord. I had never been so close to a new life.

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> I spent the day holding Jamala, letting her squeeze my hand and arms, letting her grab at my chest and scarf. My job was to protect her and pray that she didn't die. The nurses, doctors and old women who patrolled and cleaned the hallways were like wild dogs ready to bite and attack. They all came into the room at the same time, yelling at all the visitors to get out. I was stunned at how we were being treated, like cattle. Not one gesture of decency, kindness or gentleness.

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> I heard myself screeching, "I'm not leaving. I'm not going anywhere. Get the hell out of my face!"