

> I looked up and staring at me was Qasim with red eyes and tears rolling down his face. He quickly got up and left the room. And I knew I wasn't the only one in Kabul with a soft heart.

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> We had spent two hours a day, five days a week, together for two months learning English, laughing, talking politics and getting to know one another. When they asked me

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> to please return, to serve Afghanistan, I promised them I would be back in two months.

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> On the drive home, my mother was quiet, her face slightly pale, and I asked her what was the matter. She said, "Look at our people. After all they have been through, their hearts are open, and they appreciated us without any bitterness for leaving."

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> February 7, 2003

> Last January I sat high up in the bleachers far away from the stage and listened to President Karzai speak at Georgetown University. He stood tall and confident, speaking in English, Farsi and Pashtu, telling stories and pausing long enough to greet an old friend in the audience. He was intelligent and witty, and he wasn't a warlord. When he told the Afghans in the audience to return home, I listened.

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> Yesterday my father and I stood in the hallway of the presidential palace looking at gifts that had been given to the president -- a matching set of gold dragons, a long sword -- when we heard a commotion. The president had walked down the stairs. As he turned around, he saw my father and greeted him in Pashtu. He looked thinner, but his face glowed, radiated.

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> My father introduced me as his daughter, the writer. The president asked if I had come back to help the country, and my father said I had been here for many months teaching English. I said, "If you want your life story told, I'm the person to write it." He smiled, looked into my face for a few seconds and then left to pray at the mosque across the courtyard.

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> My father and I walked out in the rain, and I thanked him for bringing me there. I asked him if he ever thought about the gruesome day he was arrested at the palace 23 years ago. He said not often; he is preoccupied with work. On the way home, we passed by two soldiers who work at my father's ministry. He made our driver turn back and give them a ride home.

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> Until I came to Kabul, I didn't really know my father. He was the man who worked too many hours, traveled often, loved to talk politics and didn't spend enough time with me. Yesterday I understood the courage it took for him to return here knowing the risks. He is here for the right reasons, doing good work, and he has not lost his sincerity.

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> February 11, 2003

> I'm at home in Fairfax, and it's 5:30 in the morning. I've been wandering around the house, and I found myself in the basement looking at my things, which are packed in boxes. I found pictures of family from Afghanistan and books, and I laughed a little because they used to be my only link to the country. Then I cried a little, because suddenly life seemed so complicated and overwhelming. The thought of returning to Kabul in two months frightened me: Would I make it back alive a second time?

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> I miss Kabul, and I'm thinking about my dad alone in our house there, about my students and how they're getting along with the new teacher, about my Uncle Zahir, his brothers, his wife and children.