contents

Become one of us, foreigner

I climbed into the rickshaw, a 125cc motorcycle with a pickup truck bed welded over shock-less back tires. The rickshaw had metal sidewalls and a burgundy canvas roof stretched over metal rails and trimmed with fat, swinging, red tassels. Plastic sheets covered the space between the walls and roof making a sort of blurry window just below eye level. The back was open, allowing entrance and a view to the street behind. In the truck bed, two narrow metal benches covered with thin red cushions provided just enough space for four people to sit hip-to-hip on each side, knees interlocking with four facing passengers on the opposite bench.

Inside the rickshaw were two men, one with a gray beard and the other with a long black one. As soon as they saw me, the black-bearded man shifted beside the other, making space for me to sit alone on one side of the rickshaw. It was the right thing to do, and I was pleased that they had adjusted. The rules in Afghanistan are clear, and all must follow them.

I lifted my long coat with one hand, pulled myself up with the other, and climbed in, careful not to brush against the men's knees as I sat. I wedged my hand between one of the metal roof rails and the stretched canvas it supported, locked on, lowered my head, and watched the street outside the back. The boy rickshaw operator popped into gear and bounced down one of the few paved roads in the Afghan town in which I lived.

I had muttered a soft "Salaam" as I climbed inside. It's polite, although a woman hidden under the all-encompassing blue burqa probably wouldn't have done it. The two men eyed me. That was rude, and they certainly wouldn't have stared if my face had been hidden. I was used to it. Virtually all Afghan men, completely unashamed, stared at me wherever I went—another price of being a foreign woman in Afghanistan.

It was early winter, the season of cold, intermittent rain and mud. I wore a long, dark blue coat made of a gabardine-like fabric. Draped around my head was a thin, burgundy scarf, loosely wound, my brown bangs resting against the edge of my sunglasses. I had a small, black leather purse across one shoulder with a bright yellow telephone pouch and a bunch of keys clipped on with a carabiner. Often, well-intentioned Afghan men told me that I should put my telephone and keys away where they wouldn't be stolen: "You can't trust anyone here." They had no idea how strong that carabiner was.

I had my own objectives. The phone was security. I had to be able to hear it and reach it quickly. In Afghanistan, I lived without armed guards or concertina wire. My body armor was a cotton scarf and gabardine coat; my combat boots, sandals, or slip-on shoes; my phone, a lifeline—literally.

In America, people carry their cell phones because they're emotionally attached to them. They wouldn't dream of being out of touch. In Afghanistan, I carry mine because I must. Suppose one of my coworkers is kidnapped or there's a bomb threat in town. How

would I know? If I were lucky, I would get a phone call or text message. Or suppose someone tried to kidnap me? I had to keep my cell phone near at all times.

The keys were another matter. I had a habit of collecting swirling clouds of children around me whenever I walked down my street. They all knew me and loved to draw close. I certainly couldn't be digging through my purse to find anything with such an entourage. Everything the foreigner has or does is fascinating. I wanted my gate key handy.

I wore dark sunglasses, even in overcast weather, and women in sunglasses were always an unusual sight. I had found wearing the glasses easier than exposing my shockingly blue eyes. Afghans said it was good that I hid my eyes behind the sunglasses. They told me it was good that I dressed conservatively, even if I didn't dress exactly like an Afghan woman. Often people thought I was a Muslim because I wore the long coat and headscarf. Misrepresenting myself was never my intention; avoiding stones thrown in rage was.

The two men, the gray-beard and the black-beard, studied me carefully. I hung on to the roof rail, pulled my knees close, and watched the paved road behind me. I suspected they would break the silence and hoped they wouldn't. I waited and thought of other trips I had taken in the company of other random men.

Once, in a different town, an Afghan taxi driver had asked me to take him to America. I had told him I couldn't; it wasn't possible.

"Why not?"

"Because you're not my relative."

"No problem. I will marry you. Then you can take me to America." I remembered watching him smile in the rearview mirror. He had been delighted with his own cleverness.

I can't count the number of Afghan men who have offered to marry me. Afghan women have even asked me to marry their sons or their brothers. At first I thought it was just because I'm exotic, a

crazy blue-eyed foreigner with a quick smile. Eventually, though, I figured it out. I was far too "other" to be safe or even comprehensible. If I was going to live there, among Afghans, they needed me to become one of them, to fit in their social construct. There's no place in Afghanistan for an independent, unmarried adult woman. I didn't make sense. And anyway, in Afghanistan, marriage is a legal, practical arrangement. It isn't meant to be the deep, romantic companionship we prize in the West.

With that taxi driver from the other city, I had taken a guess. "You know, not everyone in America is a Muslim. Very few women wear headscarves."

At that, he shot me a wide-eyed glance in his rearview mirror. "But you do."

I smiled and responded, "Not in America."

He arched his back, stretched his neck, and completely abandoned the road for the rearview. "You walk around with your head naked?"

I narrowed my eyes and grinned. "Yep." I wanted to add, "You'd better believe it, buddy" but figured I'd expressed enough.

His response had been classic Afghan male. He lowered his eyebrows, tilted his head downward, and lectured me through the rearview: "You should be ashamed of yourself. And if America is like that, I don't want to go."

I figured his marriage proposal had just vanished. Ah, me, another opportunity lost. I smiled, grateful, and gently told the driver, "I know, you are not American." For him, the other, the stranger, the one who is not like us is simply incomprehensible.

I remembered that driver as the two men in the cabin of the metal rickshaw studied my clothes. They could see the edge of my calf-length navy skirt and the bottoms of my lightweight black tambon pants sticking out from underneath. They looked at my foreign shoes, ankle-high, flat-heeled, slip-on leather boots with Velcro clo-

sures. Certainly not the typical, shiny black plastic slip-ons or high-heeled, long-pointed shoes Afghan women favor. I think they even looked at my socks. In the winter, I always wore thick, brown, smart wool socks that someone had sent me from America. They were the best for the ice and cold. I only wished they were black so they'd disappear under my tambons.

All the while our little metal rickshaw with its boy driver bounced and braked and jerked along the main street through our little town. I clung to the metal roof bar and kept my eyes on the street behind us. It would only take a few minutes to reach the center of town where I'd jump down, pay a few Afghan coins, and go about my business. I wondered if I'd make it without conversation, but that wasn't to be.

I could see the gray-beard out of the corner of my eye, stroking his beard, considering his question. Finally, he found one. "Where are you from?" A simple question, but like any interaction in Afghanistan, full of potential danger or gracious welcome.

I didn't take my eyes off the street behind us. "America," I said, without apology, arrogance, or pride. I simply answered his question.

In my part of Afghanistan, Germany is more popular than America. For the most part, locals don't like America and have, on many occasions, made that very clear to me. Once, a bearded man in another rickshaw told me Americans were black-hearted, evil, and cruel. Germans were good. I had been very polite and had asked, "Do you believe I'm black-hearted, evil, and cruel?" I'd put him on the spot. I knew there was no way he could insult me. I was his guest.

That man had responded quickly, almost stammering, "No, no. You are our guest. Obviously, you are a good person. You must be here to help us. Do you work for an NGO? Which one? What kind of projects does your NGO do? Ah, that's very good. See, you are here to help us. You are good."

That day I had ignored offense and sidestepped confrontation. Before I had climbed out of that rickshaw, I had spoken a blessing over the man. It was a small blessing, but still generous: "May God bless you and your family." He'd been delighted.

This day, though, I was with two different men in the back of a rickshaw who were studying me closely. I waited, held on to the roof rail, and wondered where the conversation would go.

On some trips to the town center, I caught rickshaws full of women and children, uncomfortably packed, but I could climb inside without any trouble or fear. Sometimes I caught rickshaws with men, and they made space for me. I've stood on the street and waited until they all shifted and were satisfied that they had created an appropriate place for me to sit. They always did. The rules are clear.

Once I climbed into an old Russian taxi with space for three in the back and two on the passenger seat in the front. When I climbed in, there had been only a single male passenger in the front seat, plus the driver. I sat in the empty backseat. We drove from one to another small village outside of town. That vehicle was a linie, a taxi that drives the same route over and over, back and forth. It picks up whoever wants a ride. Everyone shares the space. If there's no room in the vehicle, the children sit on the roof and the women in the trunk. It's dirt cheap and easy to catch. That particular line cost something like ten cents for a twenty-minute trip.

I had been alone in the backseat of that vehicle. It was a nice ride. When the vehicle stopped to pick up another man, he immediately climbed onto the passenger seat in the front, jamming in next to the other passenger who already had that seat. I still had the entire backseat to myself. Then the driver stopped to pick up another man. That rider slid into the wide backseat next to me, and I immediately got out of the vehicle. I told the two men in the front seat to move into the back and they did. They smiled, sheepishly, but they did it. I slipped into the front passenger seat. There are

rules, and they're important. They must be obeyed.

Once I even moved passengers on an airplane. I was flying from Istanbul to Kabul on a late-night flight. There was one other woman in the waiting lounge, a French aid worker living in Kabul. I asked her to sit with me, and she agreed. The plane was packed. About half the passengers arrived in the departure lounge in handcuffs. They were illegal refugees evicted by the German government. Their warders removed their shackles just before the illegal refugees boarded the plane. The French woman's assigned seat was in the center of a row of three. Mine was by the window in a row of two. I stood in the aisle next to my assigned seatmate, a young man newly freed from his German chains, and loudly ordered him to move and take the place of my companion. He hesitated. The flight attendant told me to take my seat, but I refused. "It's not appropriate. He must move." The other Afghan men seated nearby laughed at the youth and commanded him to yield. My French companion and I took our seats and slept peacefully all the way to Kabul. There are rules—rules about what to wear, where to sit, when to marry, and more. They must be obeyed.

The gray-bearded man in the back of the rickshaw with me knew the rules too. He could talk to me but not touch me. I could talk to him but should not look directly into his eyes. Instead, I studied the broken, potholed road behind us and waited.

Finally, the gray-beard leaned his relaxed face just slightly toward me, cocked his head sideways, and asked me honestly if there were mosques in America.

I breathed. It wasn't a threatening question. I have a stock response and gave it without looking at the man: "Yes, there are mosques in America. America is a free country, and people can worship God as they choose."

The gray-bearded man nodded thoughtfully. He stroked his long beard. Then he asked the expected question: "Are you a Muslim?"

I hesitated. His was a common question and I'd faced it many times. No matter what I said, my response wouldn't please him. I considered my options, the situation, and the rickshaw that both carried and trapped me.

The man hadn't asked if I went to the mosque in America. In Afghanistan, women don't go to mosques. There are a few exceptions, but so rare you can count them. Most of the women I know in Afghanistan, literally hundreds, have never walked into a mosque in their adult lives.

In Afghanistan, the culture, the rules are synonymous with the Holy Quran and the Hadith. A Muslim is a person who submits to these rules. The Quran, of course, is the holiest book of Islam, considered to be the very words of Allah spoken in Arabic, the language of Allah. The Hadith, and there are many, are written collections of the teachings and examples of the Prophet Mohammed. Most of Sharia law, the law of Islam, is drawn from the Hadith.

In Afghanistan, women wear burqas, the blue chadaris with the screen woven over the eyes. Burqas are required by the Holy Quran and the Hadith. Women cannot allow a male doctor or nurse even to take their blood pressure, let alone listen to their hearts, because it's the commandment of the Holy Quran or the Hadith. Women must ask their husbands' permission before they can leave the walls of their compound. These are all commandments.

Whether the Muslim holy books record these as true commandments or not isn't relevant in Afghanistan. If the local mullah, the neighborhood religious leader, says this is what the Prophet Mohammed taught, then that's all there is to it. There's nothing to debate. There are rules, and they must be followed without question.

I lived in Afghanistan for five years. I learned the rules. I had to.

The gray-beard and black-beard in the back of the rickshaw eyed me. The gray-beard had asked me, "Are you a Muslim?" For him, the word *Muslim* had a very clear definition. He did not just mean, "Are you submitted to God?" To which I could have said, "Yes, of course." He meant something much more precise: "Do you submit to the laws of the Prophet Mohammed as recorded in the Holy Quran and Hadith and as taught by the mullahs?"

Whatever true response I could give would not be welcome. Still, I could only give a true response. I answered the gray-bearded man's question softly and again without arrogance or apology. "No, I am not a Muslim. I am a follower of the Honorable Jesus Messiah."

I didn't look directly at either man. That would be rude. I kept my eyes down on the gray-beard's gnarled hands resting loosely on his knees. They didn't flinch, and I relaxed. He had accepted my answer.

I flicked my eyes across him and then looked down again. He was wearing a light-brown wool blanket called a *pathu* that wrapped around his shoulders and hung down to just above his knees. Beneath it, he had a khaki *Shalwar kameez*, the knee-length, cotton blend, long-sleeved shirt and matching oversized pajama bottoms. He wore rubber boots like English wellies but cheaper. He had a light gray, fairly small turban wrapped around his head. The color of his turban indicated that he was not a mullah. In our area, most mullahs wore white turbans. Some wore black, but that's the Taliban style. The size of his turban indicated he was probably Tajik. Most Pashto men wear larger turbans if they wear turbans at all. I took all this in with the slightest glance but kept my eyes downward.

I caught the measure of the black-bearded man in the same brief flicker. He wore a black turban, slightly smaller, in the northern style. He would be conservative and perhaps a mullah. His beard was chest long, like his Prophet's. Beneath that, he wore a brown *pathu*, similar to the older man's and a light brown *Shalwar kameez*. I caught his

face just briefly and stiffened; I was not out of danger.

The black-bearded man scowled, brows furrowed, mouth tight as one might scowl at a hated child or a loose dog. He leaned too close to my face and glared directly into my averted eyes. His words came out as a command, short and abrupt: "You should become a Muslim. It would be better for you in this life and the next."

My body shivered.

It was not unusual for Afghans to press me to convert. I doubt if a week went by when someone didn't try. Usually, they just encouraged me to say the Shahada in Arabic, the Muslim statement of faith. I knew better than to say it. If I recite the phrase, I am automatically Muslim. My conversion would be irrevocable.

This black-turbaned, black-bearded man wasn't at all unique in trying to get me to convert. However, his intensity and barely contained fury were not the norm. I had lived in Afghanistan for five years and had run into other men like this one. It was a dangerous situation, and I weighed my response.

I looked directly at the man. I sat straight in my seat, nodded, and said simply, "Thank you." Then I looked away. My action was combative but my words conciliatory.

The man was not satisfied. He leaned even closer to my averted face and repeated, "You should become a Muslim. It would be better for you in this life and the next."

His words ricocheted in my heart and pressed my blood pressure upward. "Your life would be better in this world and the next." I had just left the house of an Afghan woman friend who had recounted yet another horrible Afghan woman story. I've heard hundreds of these—heart-crushing accounts of abuse, oppression, and violation. I thought, "My life would be better in this world? Do you know anything at all about the lives of Afghan women? Have you ever even considered them?"

Afghanistan, during the years I lived there, was certainly a dangerous place. I've heard the explosions of bombs and seen the glass on my house tremble. I've evacuated my home under personal kidnapping threat. I've sneaked out of the country through an active war zone hidden under the protective cover of an all-encompassing blue burqa. Still, my greatest fear in the country has always been that I would be kidnapped and sold to some warlord as a fourth or fifth wife, relegated to household and sexual slavery behind a twelve-foot, mud-brick wall and locked gate. Even the mildest stories of Afghan women's lives haunt me.

I thought of the black-beard's challenge, his confidence, and his ignorance. I recalled the stories of other Afghan women, returnees from decades or more in Iran, Muslim women who had learned the bitter challenges of life in Afghanistan. Often their stories began with hope and excitement. They talked of the hardness of life in Iran, of how they weren't accepted by the Iranian community. There they were called "Afghani-gaks" with a sneer: Little Afghans. They were regularly denied education while their Iranian neighbors went to school. Their fathers and brothers, if they worked at all, labored at heavy, load-bearing, unskilled jobs for low pay. Their language was similar enough. Dari and Hazaragi are both related to the Farsi language of Iran. Their religion, Shiite Islam, was the same as their Iranian neighbors. Still, in Iran, they were outsiders, and no one wants to be an outsider.

Most of these women dreamed of returning to Afghanistan, a home they either had never seen or had fled as small children. They had grown up in a country not their own. When the ruling Taliban were finally ousted, many returned "home" full of hope and false promises.

One group of sisters and sisters-in-law told me their story in great detail. They returned to live with a brother who had bragged that he had a shoe factory in Afghanistan. A factory owner, ah, that

must be a great man! They packed everything they owned, things they had acquired in Iran and some they had brought with them when their family fled one of the many regional wars in Afghanistan. They had clothes, bridal-gift carpets and gold bangles, hand-cranked sewing machines, pots, pans, teakettles, cups, plates, and all the other things that make up a modest Afghan household.

This family was promised a home to move into, and they had expectations for what that would look like. In Iran, they had hot and cold running water right inside their houses, indoor kitchens with counters and sinks, gas heating systems, and 24-7 electricity. They had refrigerators and gas ovens. They had no idea how good they had it.

The family, some eight men and women plus a few small children, hired a line taxi to take them across the border from Iran into Afghanistan near the ancient city of Herat. They were excited, full of hope. They were going home—finally. They were going home. They expected their lives to be better.

But their joy vanished as soon as they crossed the border into Afghanistan. First they were robbed, not by Iranians who despised them, but by their own countrymen, Afghans wielding Kalashnikovs (Soviet assault rifles). Shuddering with sadness, disappointment, and a dull fear about how they would establish themselves with nearly nothing, they continued their journey. There was no turning back. When they agreed to leave Iran, they lost their right to stay or even to return. That was the deal Iran made with its Afghan refugees—a bargain not fully understood when refugees accepted Iranian assistance.

The family traveled on, catching one vehicle after another. Finally they reached "home," the city of their future promised by their affluent factory-owning brother. They still had hope. They'd made it. Everything would be all right. But it wasn't what they had expected.

The brother's compound was a collection of small, mud-brick

houses behind the standard twelve-foot matching mud-brick wall. The floors were bare dirt. They didn't recognize the wooden doors and glass windows as an unusual benefit for refugee returnees. They had them, but nothing else.

The yard of the compound didn't have a blade or sprout of vegetation. The bathroom was a pit toilet behind a canvas curtain in the yard. In the heat, its stench filled the entire compound. The kitchen was a mud shed with a mud oven built low into the wall and fueled by a fire pit. There was no electricity. The water pump was two blocks away, out on the street.

The women cried. They had thought their lives would be better. That had been the promise, and they had believed it.

They discovered that the affluent brother with the shoe factory was actually the owner of only a single, hand-cranked shoemaking machine. Each day he sat on a blanket on the sidewalk in the center of the city stitching, gluing, and repairing shoes. If he had customers, he bought lunch from a street vendor in town. If there was anything left, he brought it home to his wife and children. There wasn't much. In those days, the city was full of returning refugees. Some came back from Pakistan, most from Iran. The Westerners provided temporary work for many of the men, but after the first year of the newly freed Afghanistan, most of that work dried up. In the meantime, the population continued to swell.

For the sisters, the first summer was brutal. There were no trees in their refugee returnee neighborhood, no fans or electricity to power them, and the wind, when it did blow, covered everything with a thick carpet of fine Afghan dust. They closed their windows against the dust and slept out on their roofs, rising before dawn to escape the eyes of neighbors who were all doing the same.

Winter was worse. Each day, even in the coldest of the winter, they squatted on the frozen dirt, filled their pots with rice and icy water, built a small fire, and cooked their family's food. If they had

tomatoes or onions or cucumbers, they sliced them with stiff, aching hands. They had no counters, no cutting boards, and no running water. Inside their dark home, kerosene lamps provided dim circles of illumination through the long evenings. Wood coal fires built under a table covered with blankets provided their household warmth.

But the worst for the sisters was the culture, the rules of this country they called their own. When they recounted their story, the women had looked at me earnestly, nodding in agreement as one sister said, "Iran was free—modern and free."

It took me a long time to understand their perspective. I'm an American. To me, Iran is anything but free—modern perhaps, but free? I look at the world through my American eyes. I come from a land of tolerance with a level of diversity incomprehensible to even the most modern-thinking Afghan.

When the sisters arrived in Afghanistan, they had brought the small, white headscarves they pinned or tied under their chins. They had brought ankle-length black cloaks they draped over their heads. In Iran, a land of small headscarves and long coats, they had been conservative. They were accustomed to walking Iranian neighborhoods and streets with their faces open. They could ride buses and shop without harassment. Women in Iran had faces. That's what they grew up with, what they understood.

In Afghanistan, they were called "Irani-gaks" with a sneer: Little Iranians. Men walked past them on the streets and called them "naked" because their faces were not hidden. The younger sisters quickly acquired burqas and learned to live their very limited public lives under them.

And they cried. All that first year, they cried. Their lives were certainly not better.

Each sister told me her story. Each told me of her tears. The filth, the poverty, the ignorance broke their hearts. This was not the coun-

try they had dreamed of, the life they had wanted, the future they had hoped for. Yet it was theirs. They had become Afghan women.

The man in the rickshaw with the black turban and black beard had said, "It would be better for you in this life." I wondered if he was cruel. Did he have any idea how good my life was? Had he thought about how harsh and difficult the lives of Afghan women are? Did he even see these strong, beautiful women who hid their faces and voices in public but knew how to laugh when the doors were closed? My heart and mind were filled with their faces, the sounds of their voices and their stories, too many stories of poverty, war, ignorance, and oppression.

The man in the rickshaw had said, "Become a Muslim . . . It would be better for you in this life," and my heart railed. I held on to the rickshaw and kept my eyes on the road. I would have to find another response, a calm but true word, but first I would have to sift through my emotions.

I thought of heaven. After all, he had said, "Your life would be better in this world and the next."

Many Afghan men have told me exactly what heaven is like, in stunningly great detail. Men will get their wives back as well as, if they've been very good, seventy virgins who regain their virginity each time it's taken. There will be wonderful food, even meat. Ah, the good life. What every Afghan man dreams.

Once, after a male Afghan friend had detailed his understanding of Muslim heaven and derided me for my very incomplete understanding of what heaven looks like according to Jesus, I had privately asked an Afghan woman what she expected to find in heaven. Was there anything for her? Her response was jarring.

She was carrying a restaurant-wide, round aluminum tray of dirty dishes into the yard, and I had followed with her baby in my arms.

"Is there anything for you in heaven?"

She looked down, shrugged her shoulders, and said in perfect Afghan slang, "*Machem,*" meaning, "How should I know?" She slid the tray onto the ground and retrieved her baby. If there was any soft ray of sweet heaven's hope, I missed it.

I looked straight at the black-turbaned, black-bearded man just long enough to speak my response. I smiled, nodded my head, and said again, "Thank you." He had given his advice, and I had heard it. That would have to be enough. I didn't want to enter into an argument or any kind of spiritual discussion with the man. No matter what, I would lose, and my loss could be great. I was quite aware that I was riding in the back of a metal rickshaw in a small city in Afghanistan with only a headscarf and a cell phone to protect me. I would not provoke this man.

The man wasn't satisfied. He leaned even closer and growled, "You should become a Muslim now." It was not advice. It was a command, the third time he had given the same command. There are rules. Afghanistan is a Muslim country. The stranger in our midst must become one of us.

I glanced quickly at the gray-bearded man. Would he rescue me? Would he defuse this wrath? But he was still, his hands folded, his eyes downward. He would not speak. The black-bearded man was a mullah. His black turban outranked even the gray in his companion's beard. I was on my own.

I caught my breath, sat up even straighter, pressed the back of my head into the canvas roof behind me, and responded in the gentlest voice I could find: "I am a follower of the Honorable Jesus Messiah. He is my Savior and my Lord. I believe I have chosen the right path. Thank you for your counsel."

The black-turbaned, black-bearded man leaned back, perhaps considering his next challenge. I took the space he'd left in front of me to signal to the driver-boy to stop. I was several blocks from

where I needed to get off, but walking would be safer.

I jumped down, paid the rickshaw driver the equivalent of fifteen cents for a ten-cent ride, and stepped up onto the sidewalk. I had escaped.

Relieved, I turned toward the center of town. To one side was a large park surrounded by a low concrete wall. The park, as always, was full of men; some lounged, some clustered in groups, others played soccer. Those who saw me turned to stare.

On the sidewalk in front of the wall, vendors squatted on blankets, selling used fabric, spices, and random electronic gear. On the street, rows of wooden carts called *karachis* displayed fruits and vegetables, makeup, combs and brushes, cell phone covers, and portable chargers. Each man and each boy stopped talking to stare at me. Some nudged their neighbors. "A foreigner. Look."

I walked slowly, picking my way around clusters of men and boys, *karachis*, and blankets stacked with wares. I stood as tall as I could and at five-foot-seven inches, that's tall enough to be dramatic. I kept my eyes straight ahead. I passed young staring men and didn't acknowledge their existence. I passed old bent white-bearded men, placed my right hand on my heart, and whispered a respectful *"Salaam."* I ignored the teenage boys who tried out their English or spoke openly to their companions about me.

I thought about the black-bearded man in the rickshaw. "You should become a Muslim. It would be better for you in this life and the next." His framework, his experience, his faith and practice could not be further from my own.

My eyes flicked across the men squatting on their vendor blankets and leaning against their *karachis*. I thought about them, Afghan men living in a gender-segregated society.

I thought about the Afghan women I'd spoken with over the years. I knew without a doubt that I had engaged in long and deep conversations with far more Afghan women than these Afghan men

had ever seen the faces of, let alone talked to. The black-bearded man, so confident, couldn't possibly know. The hearts and minds of Afghan women are completely invisible to him. Yes, he sees his mother or his wife and his daughters cooking in the yard, sweeping the house, laying out the floor-cloth, and serving his tea and his meals. But that's the way it's always been. That's the rule. For him, the lives of women are nothing to question. The Islam he knows, expressed in his culture, simply must be the best way to live. I had to believe he thought he was offering me a better life. He just didn't know the life he was demanding I embrace. And he certainly didn't know the life he was asking me to trade.

And what about God? What about Jesus? What about the faith that infuses every aspect of my life, my thoughts, and my actions? What about the promise of heaven, eternal life spent in the presence of the God I love, the God I see as astoundingly good and beautiful? What does the black-turbaned, black-bearded man know of my God, my faith, my hope?

How could I respond? What could I possibly say that would make any sense in the framework of his worldview? Any alternatives I could show him would simply seem to be the ramblings of the profane—nothing worth considering, and perhaps, even, an attack on Islam itself.

Could I assure him, "No, my life would not be better in your world as an Afghan woman"? The idea is horrifying even without considering my faith in a God who loves and a prophet who saves. As for Jesus, the prophet who saves, there's no way I could trade Him for the Prophet of Islam.

Throughout my years in Afghanistan, I've thought about the Prophet Mohammed, Islam, and especially the brand of Islam practiced in Afghanistan. Almost every day in the country, Afghans showed me or told me the stories and teachings of their religion.

Sometimes they did it because they wanted me to understand. Sometimes they did it because I'd asked a specific question, and virtually every question of culture or faith goes back to their Prophet, the Holy Quran, or the Hadith. Often they explained things because they wanted me to see that their Prophet is the true and final Prophet of God and that their religion is the true and final religion.

I have met the Prophet Mohammed through his people in Afghanistan. I have learned about his life through what I've read and through the stories my Afghan neighbors have told me. I've come to know Islam through their lives, their culture, and the teachings they've explained to me.

Throughout my five years in the country, Afghans asked me, "We believe this . . . What do you believe?" A great many Afghans have questioned me closely about what I believe, how I practice my faith, and why. It's always the second great conversation. The first is different for men and women. For men, the most interesting conversation is about government and war. For women, the first most interesting conversation is marriage and family. But the second great conversation is always about our faith and our practice.

From my Afghan neighbors, I've learned about the Prophet Mohammed and Islam. From me, they've learned about Jesus and what it means to follow Him. We've traded our stories.

Imagine sitting at a lunch table with a group of American coworkers. Perhaps you are sitting on plastic chairs at a plastic table. One of your coworkers looks across the table, focuses hard on your face, and asks, "Do you pray?" Everyone at the table goes still and wide-eyed. We simply don't normally have these conversations in America, but we do in Afghanistan. We have them all the time.

"Do you pray?" "Really?" "How?" "Why don't you pray like we do?" "Do you fast?" "Really?" "How?" "Why don't you fast like we do?" "What do you do with your dead?" "Really?" "How do

you do that?" "Why don't you bury your dead like we do?" "How do you expect to get to heaven?" "Really?"

Each time I entered a conversation, I was challenged to think through the answers. Afghans asked about America assuming that all of America is Christian and that all Christians do the same things. Their questions pressed me into clarifying what I believe as an American and what I believe as a follower of Christ. Those are not always the same things. After all, American culture is not a one-to-one expression of biblical teaching.

For example, Afghan women wear headscarves, usually even indoors. They do it because it's the commandment of the Holy Quran and is required by Islam. That's what they tell me. They ask me, "Do women wear headscarves in America?" And I must answer them. I might start by reminding them that America is a free nation and that the people of America practice all different religions or even no religion at all. I might tell them America does not pass laws dictating how people are to live or worship. Then I might go on to explain why I, as a follower of Jesus, don't wear a scarf in America.

They are often surprised by my answers, and sometimes I'm satisfied with what I've said. Other times, I walk away and think, "Why didn't I tell them this?" or "I should have said that." Sometimes I forget to differentiate between what I believe as an American woman and what I believe the Bible teaches. America is my culture, and Jesus is my Savior and Lord. Sometimes it's hard to untangle the two. Afghans challenged me to try.

This book is a journey into Afghanistan, into some of those conversations. I invite you. Come with me. Join me in the rickshaws and taxis, the bazaars, offices, and Afghan homes. You will be our guest. Listen in to our conversations as we share our lives and our faith with one another.

It's a privilege to live in such a different society, immersed in a different culture. Sharing stories with Afghans has helped me con-

sider and clarify who I am and what I believe. My faith has grown clearer and stronger through the journey. Perhaps, as you sit with me in Afghan homes or ride with me in Afghan taxis or walk along Afghan streets, you too will grow deeper in your understanding of what you believe, why, and what it means to live out your faith. Along the way, you'll meet Afghans, real people with real troubles, hopes, and dreams—people not unlike us, precious men and women who are also on a journey, their own journey of faith.