

THE CHOSEN ONE

Azita

AT FIVE A.M., she forces herself to rise from the pallet of long, bulky pillows on the floor of the dining room, which also serves as a bedroom.

Before she makes the push to rally her children for the day, she flips through a carousel of images in her mind, aiming to remember five good minutes from the day before, to wake up her spirits with good thoughts. Perhaps she spoke without being interrupted by one of her fellow parliamentarians. Or maybe one of the girls showed her a new painting, and it was really quite accomplished.

Only then does she walk across the hallway to wake her four daughters sleeping in their bunk beds under blue Winnie-the-Pooh covers. A small war over the bathroom usually ensues between Mehrangis and Mehran. The twins will eat some yogurt and naan bread left over from the day before. Mehran will likely refuse breakfast but agree to a roll or sugary cookies or an orange.

The three eldest girls will dress in below-the-knee black dresses and white head scarves over shiny black ponytails. The youngest will don pants, a white shirt, and a red necktie. All four will grab one of the identical large nylon backpacks. Mehran's is far too big for her, but she carries it with pride, just like her older siblings do. Their father will walk his children to the school bus, holding only Mehran's hand.

Azita has fifteen minutes left to get ready. But she is fast. In that time, she transforms herself. As soon as she steps out of the house, she will be upholding the honor of not only her husband and her family, but also her province and her country. Her appearance is a big part of that. She must dress carefully: to divert rather than to attract attention.

Reputation is more than symbolic in Afghanistan; it is a commodity that is hard to restore once it has been damaged. Much like a credit score, it should constantly be preserved and ideally also improved upon, forcing both males and females to adhere to a web of strict social rules.

In choosing each detail of her outfit, Azita considers the fundamentals of Afghanistan's honor culture, where a woman's purity is linked to the reputation of her family at all times. The Taliban no longer rules in Kabul, but the dress code for women is still very conservative. Carol le Duc clarified for me the informal but very real penalty system: "A woman who attracts improper attention to herself is inevitably a *whore*."

For a woman, being likened to a whore for dressing the wrong way or being seen speaking to a man who is not her husband can be of great consequence: Her neighbors will talk, her parents may be devastated, and shame will fall over her relatives and potentially tarnish their reputation and standing in society. For a female politician, this game is even more complicated, because politics by its nature requires some degree of visibility.

In the eyes of conservatives, if an Afghan woman must work, she should, at most, be a teacher in an all-female class. Any profession in which a woman interacts with or can be observed by other men is more problematic, as it risks tarnishing her family's reputation. Women who work with foreigners, with their different customs, are even more suspect. Sitting on the national assembly, in the burning glare of the public eye, Azita provokes reactions on many levels.

Her work uniform consists of an Iranian-style full-length black *abaya* with a thin black head scarf, meant to exude authority and dignity. She hopes to display a sense of refinement as well as deep conservatism; no contour of her body must be evident as she moves. The black garment features a small gold trim; any further display of color would be out of the question. In another universe, in another life, Azita's color of choice would be bright red—but that is an impossible color in Afghanistan. The color of fire is considered to be overtly sexual, meant to arrest the eyes of men. It is for someone who means to be flamboyant. Admired. Brightly colored dress was outright banned by the Taliban, but it still would be unthinkable, potentially even dangerous, in Afghanistan's conservative culture. No respectable Kabul woman wears red outside the house, and Azita owns no red clothing.

It takes her seconds to draw thick lines with black kohl around her eyes and dust herself with a beige powder. There are usually cameras in parliament, and she knows by now that matte skin photographs better. As she leaves the house, she puts on a pair of gold-ornamented dark

sunlasses. A friend bought them for her in Dubai. She allows herself a few more special effects: two Arabic rose-gold rings and a knockoff designer handbag. Gold is not so much decoration as a display of portable cash, signifying a woman's status as a good wife and mother. He who has a good, respectable, and fertile wife will honor her with gold for all to see. Azita has paid for her own rings, but this no one needs to know.

AFTER SHE IS settled in the backseat, her car is soon absorbed into Kabul's dense morning mash of wheels and dented bumpers. The usual fifteen-minute drive to the national assembly in Karte Seh takes at least one hour in the mornings. White Toyota Corollas patiently pop in and out of large potholes, navigating labyrinths of roadblocks and stretches of no road at all. Spring, or the beginning of *fighting season*, as it's called here—when Taliban and “insurgents” will spring into more aggressive battle—is still a few months away. The hard, icy ground is not yet covered with dust, and red pomegranates from Kandahar are still being cracked open in stalls by the roadside.

Azita's driver avoids getting too close to Afghan police transports, the green Ford Ranger pickup trucks crammed with blue-clad police officers, their assault rifles poking out in every direction. Afghan police are among the most popular targets for suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices known as IEDs. Officers patrolling Kabul are killed at twice the rate of military men, who are harder to get close to. In the eyes of insurgents, both are considered traitors working for the foreign-backed government. Early mornings—when the conviction of martyrdom and the prospect of virgins waiting in paradise is still fresh—are a favorite time for suicide bombers to attack, since dense traffic promises the reward of a high death count.

Azita subscribes to the regular Afghan argument: When your time is up, it's up. God decides when that may be. She cannot spend every morning ride to work thinking of whether the moment has arrived. Azita and her driver have missed explosions by seconds before. Each day, she takes a risk just by stepping out of her house. She logs about two anonymous death threats a week at her office or at home, when she is warned to quit parliament. Or else. To avoid the threats and the

inconvenience, she regularly buys new SIM cards for her mobile phone to get a new number, but they keep calling. Her transgressions are clear: She is a woman who dares to serve in parliament and she is a prominent symbol of a controversial, Western-supported government. The threats have become routine. Sometimes she argues with the caller, lecturing him on how the Koran does not condone murder. And it is always a he. “We know you don’t care about your own life, but think of your children,” they once said. That time, the threat was accompanied by the sound of gunfire. The one time Azita attempted to report threats to the police, they advised her “not to worry.” After all, they added, there is little they can do.

There have been direct attempts on her life: A year earlier, two men on a motorbike attempted to throw a hand grenade into the yard of her Badghis house. It exploded against the outside stone wall. When Azita ran out from the kitchen, she found her daughters hiding in a corner of the small garden.

Wealthier politicians travel by armored car, surrounded by gunmen with shortwave radios. Those with investments in the illegal yet flourishing poppy trade—Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of opium—usually have a follow car as well, to better the odds in case of a kidnap attempt. Azita cannot afford much more than her Toyota Corolla with a driver, who has taped a small glass bottle onto the dashboard—holy water from Mecca. It helps him focus; not even those who make sudden U-turns or drive toward him in the wrong direction merit a honk of his horn.

Azita did employ a bodyguard when she first started, as several colleagues told her it would look unseemly to always arrive without a male escort. But the bodyguard had a tendency to fall asleep as soon as he sat down, so she fired him. Along with all the other members of parliament, Azita has been issued a handgun for her own protection. With no intention of ever using it, she hid it somewhere in her apartment. She often reminds herself that she must find it before the children do.

In the car, she takes out her phone and attempts to bring up CNN’s website on the small display, but she does not get far on the spotty Afghan networks.

She looks out the window instead, on the merchants who slowly push

their carts toward the marketplace and the motorbikes with at least two and often three or four people clinging on, their faces protected against Kabul's beige-colored air with wraparound scarves. Pairs of Afghan ladies, wearing sandals with socks, hold hands and jump over open sewers. Not much is really white here, and few things are crisp, except for brand-new Land Rovers shipped in for foreigners and rich Afghans. Sooner rather than later, most things turn a shade of mud or khaki. Khaki and cement are the primary colors of Kabul, the monotony broken only by the poppy-funded houses that are painted a cream-infused red, a warm pink, or even green, with glimpses of tasseled pastel curtains—the deceptively cheery narcotecture of Kabul.

Chlorophyll is in short supply here; most trees have either died from pollution or have been burned for fuel by the indigent. A splash of matte red sometimes also filters through the Kabul gray, in an old mural or another Cold War-reminder of those who tried to control the capital before both the Taliban and the Americans.

TO AZITA, “THE Russian time,” as she refers to it, was not the protracted and brutal struggle painted by English-language memoirs of what Afghans call “the Soviet war” of the 1980s. To her, it was the backdrop of a reasonably charmed childhood.

Her father had been a member of a large but not wealthy clan, and was the first man from Badghis said to have pursued a master's degree in Kabul. He carried that distinction when he returned to his province to marry. He had first met Azita's mother, Siddiqua, when she was only twelve, and according to family legend, had fallen in love with her at first sight. They waited seven years to marry, and in 1977, their first child arrived, a much-loved and longed-for daughter. They named her after the Persian word derived from fire, or *azar*. Soon after celebrating Azita's first birthday the family returned to build a life in Kabul, arriving just in time for the Saur Revolution, when the Communist People's Democratic Party took over the Afghan government.

With ideological and financial backing from Moscow, the new leadership proclaimed aggressive reforms, setting out to replace religious law with a more secular system, promoting state atheism, and forcefully trying to establish a more modern society. Each business

sector and each official institution was to be overhauled, from agriculture and the legal system to health care and—most controversially—family law.

The Russians were not the first to try to effect gender parity in Afghanistan, nor would they be the last.

Amanollah Khan had tried to assert rights for women in the 1920s, together with his queen Soraya, who famously cast off her veil in public. The royal couple also began promoting the education of girls, banned the selling of them for marriage, and put restrictions on polygyny. The backlash was severe. To many Afghans, and particularly to the majority who did not live in Kabul, the reforms seemed outrageous: Tribal men would lose future income if daughters could no longer be sold or traded as wives. In 1929, under threat of a coup, the king was forced to abdicate.

Three decades later, King Mohammad Zahir Shah made another, more cautious push for educating and emancipating women, proposing to grant them equal rights in the Constitution of 1964, and the right to vote. Privileged Afghan women were sent abroad for university studies, returning to become professionals and academics.

Arline Lederman, an American development professional who taught at Kabul University in the early 1970s, remembers “a thrilling time” when elite Afghan women were more sophisticated than most of their liberal American counterparts. Women of Kabul’s royal family who wore raincoats, sunglasses, and Hermès head scarves and gloves “could have passed for Jackie Kennedy’s friends on an autumn day in Boston,” she observed.

Those advances of a small group of elite women were significant, but they were exclusive to Kabul and a handful of other urban areas. In the rest of the country, women’s roles were largely stagnant.

When Communist-era reforms rolled out on a large scale in the 1980s, however, they did not settle for the small elite in Kabul. In this new era, women and girls would no longer live in seclusion—they would receive mandatory educations, freely choose whom to marry, and be active participants in a new society. After the massive Soviet military force arrived to prop up the fragile Kabul Communist government, thousands of government-employed Russians also landed in Kabul to help execute Moscow’s idealized plan for a new Afghanistan.

Agrarians, engineers, aid workers, teachers, and architects began to set up large-scale foreign aid projects with Soviet expertise. The programs were targeted toward turning around the whole country, and quickly. The Soviet leadership, which prided itself on having built an ideal, superior society at home, initially did not place much weight on historical references or failures by others who had come before them.

One clearly stated goal was to educate and introduce more women in the workforce. The idea was sound: Only by gaining real economic power would women have the chance to gain real rights and redress imbalances. The execution would eventually prove to be as misguided as in previous attempts, with only a gradual and late understanding of the deep-rooted economics of patriarchy in the countryside.

But in Kabul, a few female Afghan ministers and parliamentarians were appointed. Others took up work as doctors and journalists, police and army officers, and lawyers. Unions and associations were formed, and, occasionally, women led them. In the capital, segregation at restaurants and on public transportation was banned.

In that progressive environment, Azita's family settled into an upper-middle-class existence, where her father taught geography and history at the university and eventually invested in a small neighborhood store, selling paper goods, dried fruit, nuts, and other household staples. When he realized his daughter had a knack for languages, he bought her a small television set, so she could watch state newscasts broadcast in Russian and eventually translate parts of them for her parents. When Azita's skill became known to teachers, she was singled out as a particularly talented child.

With that, she had been chosen for a special purpose.

As in any long game of invasion and nation building, the Soviets wanted to train the next generation of Afghan leaders and secure their loyalty to Moscow. Little Azita, who possessed a quick mind and a willingness to study, was moved to a more demanding school, with foreign teachers and Russian as the official language. She and other handpicked students would ascend through the new system's most elite institutions—the breeding facilities for Afghanistan's future power cluster. Their education would be crowned by a year or two of higher studies at the best universities of Moscow or Leningrad.

Azita remembers this time being “like Europe,” in Kabul, where she

would take an electric tram car to school, operated by a female driver. The female school uniform was a brown dress, a white apron, and brown shoes with white kneesocks. On their heads, the girl students wore only brown velvet bows.

To the delight of her Russian teachers, teenage Azita was athletic, too, and she was made captain of the girls' volleyball team. She planned to take her father's academic legacy a step further, and make him even more proud of his firstborn. It did not matter that she had not been born a boy—this newly reformed country that promoted women was on her side. She would become a doctor. Failing that—which did not seem likely—she saw herself as a news anchor, inspired by the unveiled, modern women she saw on her television set. Azita was the Soviet plan for a new Afghanistan incarnate.

But tradition still ruled in the provinces, where the political manifesto mandating equality between the sexes directly contradicted much of Pashtun tradition around inheritance and ownership. Rapid attempts at reforming society and culture were met with great resistance and fury aimed at the government for again issuing decrees to ban child marriage and the lucrative trading of women and girls, and for stating that no women should be sold for marriage, or married against her will. Once more tribal men saw the risk of losing both cash and influence. If women were to be educated and work outside the home, they would “dishonor” their families by being seen in public and potentially develop other, even more subversive ideas. And who would care for the children if women took over the tasks of men? Society would undoubtedly fall apart. Worst of all, another proposed decree would allow women to initiate divorce more easily. Clearly, foreign influence brought decadence and subverted Afghan traditions. The reforms were declared un-Islamic by many religious mullahs.

Meanwhile, armed resistance to the Soviet occupation built around the country. Parts of the mujahideen opposition to the Soviet occupation had found a sympathetic ally in the Pashtuns next door in Pakistan, who were eager to exert influence in Afghanistan. The Soviet-instituted reforms proved to be an efficient pretext for recruiting followers: Women's education as well as all women's rights were despicable, pernicious poison-pill notions that stood to destroy the very fundament of Afghanistan's culture and way of life.

Power has always been held by those who manage to control the origins of life by controlling women's bodies. The old Afghan expression *zan, zar waa, zamin* summarizes the ever-present threat against men's personal property, which was always the main reason for taking up arms: Women. Gold. And land. In that order.

Resistance against the Soviets was boosted by generous financing and logistical help from abroad: U.S. president Jimmy Carter had declared that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan constituted "the greatest threat to peace since the Second World War." As the fight against Communism was a battle between good and evil, Islamic fundamentalists made excellent partners in this mission as they, too, had clear views of good and evil, albeit from a slightly different perspective.

And so the gains of women in Afghanistan once again directly contributed to war, as their fate was mixed into the powder keg of tension between reformers and hardliners, between foreigners and Afghans, and between the urban centers and the countryside.

Yet, the outside world did not seem to notice the central controversy of Afghan women. The foreign powers instead seemed to agree that there were much bigger problems with Afghanistan than such a peripheral issue, which would have to be revisited at some other time, when the men had stopped fighting. The threat of Communism—and the need to contain it—ensured American dollars and arms kept flowing to the Soviet opposition, moderates and extremists alike.

AZITA'S FAMILY HELD out in Kabul for a while, through violence and power struggles following the eventual Soviet troop withdrawal, when mujahideen groups fought for control of the capital. When the violence shut down schools and many areas of the city, a routine was established for the now seventeen-year-old's rare outings with her father. Azita always carried a note with the phone numbers for relatives in her pocket and a few bills in one of her shoes, in case an attack should separate them.

In the spring of 1992, Kabul erupted into full-blown civil war. Azita gradually trained herself not to panic when a first blast set off a series of explosions, or when she, like most other children in Kabul at the time, saw body parts and corpses on the streets. Her memories from that time

largely revolve around shock waves, vibrating buildings, and the fires that ensued: “It started from everywhere. Shooting, bombarding, blasting, killing. Everywhere, there was something. One day we had fifteen or sixteen rocket blasts in our neighborhood. The house was shaking all the time.”

Her father, Mourtaza, decided the family had to leave. His family had grown, with three more daughters and one son arriving after Azita, and he could not find a way to take them to Pakistan. Instead, they made a difficult journey back to their remote home province of Badghis. The apartment in Kabul was boarded up, the store left behind. It would be ransacked, but there was nothing they could do to stop it—everyone they knew was fleeing, too. After packing all they could in a small car, the family drove off as refugees in their own country. As their car became a target for snipers the family abandoned it by the road, continuing for eighteen days by bus and by foot, sleeping in mosques and trying to avoid rebels and looters along the way. Those are days Azita cannot recall anymore; her brain has buried them somewhere.

When they reached what they saw as a semblance of civilization again—the city of Herat in western Afghanistan—they were certain of survival, as war had not yet reached nearby Badghis. Her youth would end there, and she would not return to Kabul for many years.

She remembers being angry about the war, and that she had not been able to take any of her books with her, from the small library her father kept in the house.

“Did you have a favorite book?” I ask her in the car, as she describes her last days in Kabul.

“Of course. *Love Story*.”

“Oh. I read that, too.” I had found it at my grandmother’s house once, in my mother’s collection of books. “Do you remember the quote at the end? ‘Love means never having to say you’re sorry’?”

“Yes, yes.” Azita smiles and her eyes drift off a little. “It was difficult for me to understand, but I cried a lot in the end when she died. I cried a lot. When I grew up I understood the exact meaning. I watched the movie, too, several times.”

“Have you ever been in love?”

She looks at me, silent for a moment before she speaks.

“I love my husband, Jenny.”