

The women arrive at the salon just before eight in the morning. If it were any other day, I'd still be in bed, trying to sink into a few more minutes of sleep. I'd probably still be cursing the neighbor's rooster for waking me up again at dawn. I might even still be groaning about the vegetable dealers who come down the street at three in the morning with their noisy, horse-drawn wagons, or the neighborhood mullah, who warbles out his long, mournful call to prayer at four-thirty. But this is the day of Roshanna's engagement party, so I'm dressed and ready for work. I've already had four cigarettes and two cups of instant coffee, which I had to make by myself because the cook has not yet arrived. This is more of a trial than you might think, since I've barely learned how to boil water in Afghanistan. When I have to do it myself, I put a lit wooden match on each of the burners of the cranky old gas stove, turn one of the knobs, and back off to see which of the burners explodes into flame. Then I settle a pot of water there and pray that whatever bacteria

are floating in the Kabul water today are killed by the boiling.

The mother-in-law comes into the salon first, and we exchange the traditional Afghan greeting: we clasp hands and kiss each other's cheeks three times. Roshanna is behind her, a tiny, awkward, blue ghost wearing the traditional burqa that covers her, head to toe, with only a small piece of netting for her to see out the front. But the netting has been pulled crooked, across her nose, and she bumps into the doorway. She laughs and flutters her arms inside the billowing fabric, and two of her sisters-in-law help her navigate her way through the door. Once inside, Roshanna snatches the burqa off and drapes it over the top of one of the hair dryers.

'This was like Taliban days again,' she cries, because she hasn't worn the burqa since the Taliban were driven out of Kabul in the fall of 2001. Roshanna usually wears clothes that she sews herself – brilliant shalwar kameezes or saris in shades of orchid and peach, lime green and peacock blue. Roshanna usually stands out like a butterfly against the gray dustiness of Kabul and even against the other women on the streets, in their mostly drab, dark clothing. But today she observes the traditional behavior of a bride on the day of her engagement party or wedding. She has left her parents' house under cover of burqa and will emerge six hours later wearing her body weight in eye shadow, false eyelashes the size of sparrows, monumentally big hair, and clothes with more bling than a Ferris wheel. In America, most people would associate this look with drag queens sashaying off to a party with a 1950s prom theme. Here in Afghanistan, for reasons I still

don't understand, this look conveys the mystique of the virgin.

The cook arrives just behind the women, whispering that she'll make the tea, and Topekai, Baseera, and Bahar, the other beauticians, rush into the salon and take off their head scarves. Then we begin the joyful, gossipy, daylong ordeal of transforming twenty-year-old Roshanna into a traditional Afghan bride. Most salons would charge up to \$250 – about half the annual income for a typical Afghan – for the bride's services alone. But I am not only Roshanna's former teacher but also her best friend, even though I'm more than twenty years older. She is my first and best friend in Afghanistan. I love her dearly, so the salon services are just one of my gifts to her.

We begin with the parts of Roshanna that no one will see tonight except her husband. Traditional Afghans consider body hair to be both ugly and unclean, so she must be stripped of all of it except for the long, silky brown hair on her head and her eyebrows. There can be no hair left on her arms, underarms, face, or privates. Her body must be as soft and hairless as that of a prepubescent girl. We lead Roshanna down the corridor to the waxing room – the only one in Afghanistan, I might add – and she grimaces as she sits down on the bed.

'You could have done it yourself at home,' I tease her, and the others laugh. Many brides are either too modest or too fearful to have their pubic hair removed by others, so they do it at home – they either pull it out by hand or rip it out with chewing gum. Either way, the process is brutally painful. Besides, it's hard to achieve the full Brazilian – every pubic

hair plucked, front and back – when you do it on your own, even if you're one of the few women in this country to own a large mirror, as Roshanna does.

'At least you know your husband is somewhere doing this, too,' Topekai says with a leer. My girls giggle at this reference to the groom's attention to his own naked body today. He also must remove all of his body hair.

'But he only has to shave it off!' Roshanna wails, then blushes and looks down. I know she doesn't want to appear critical of her new husband, whom she hasn't yet met, in front of her mother-in-law. She doesn't want to give the older woman any reason to find fault with her, and when Roshanna looks back up again, she smiles at me anxiously.

But the mother-in-law seems not to have heard her. She has been whispering outside the door with one of her daughters. When she turns her attention back to the waxing room, she looks at Roshanna with a proud, proprietary air.

The mother-in-law had picked Roshanna out for her son a little more than a year after Roshanna graduated from the first class at the Kabul Beauty School, in the fall of 2003, and opened her own salon. The woman was a distant cousin who came in for a perm. She admired this pretty, plucky, resourceful girl who had been supporting her parents and the rest of her family ever since they fled into Pakistan to escape the Taliban. After she left Roshanna's salon, she started asking around for further details about the girl. She liked what she heard.

Roshanna's father had been a doctor, and the family had led a privileged life until they fled to Pakistan in 1998. There, he was not allowed to practice medicine – a typical refugee

story – and had to work as a lowly shoeshine man. By the time they returned to Kabul, he was in such ill health that he couldn't practice medicine. Still, he staunchly carried out his fatherly duties by accompanying Roshanna everywhere to watch over her. The mother-in-law had detected no whiff of scandal about Roshanna, except perhaps her friendship with me. Even that didn't put her off, since foreign women are not held to the same rigorous standards as Afghan women. We are like another gender entirely, able to wander back and forth between the two otherwise separate worlds of men and women; when we do something outrageous, like reach out to shake a man's hand, it's usually a forgivable and expected outrage. The mother-in-law may even have regarded me as an asset, a connection to the wealth and power of America, as nearly all Afghans assume Americans are rich. And we are, all of us, at least in a material sense. Anyway, the mother-in-law was determined to secure Roshanna as the first wife for her elder son, an engineer living in Amsterdam. There was nothing unusual about this. Nearly all first marriages in Afghanistan are arranged, and it usually falls to the man's mother to select the right girl for him. He may take on a second or even third wife later on, but that first virginal lamb is almost as much his mother's as his.

I see that Roshanna is faltering under her mother-in-law's gaze, and I pull all the other women away from the waxing room. 'How about highlights today?' I ask the mother-in-law. 'My girls do foiling better than anyone between here and New York City.'

'Better than in Dubai?' the mother-in-law asks.

'Better than in Dubai,' I say. 'And a lot cheaper.'

Back in the main room of the salon, I make sure the curtains are pulled tight so that no passing male can peek in to see the women bareheaded. That's the kind of thing that could get my salon and the Kabul Beauty School itself closed down. I light candles so that we can turn the overhead lights off. With all the power needed for the machine that melts the wax, the facial lamps, the blow dryers, and the other salon appliances, I don't want to blow a fuse. I put on a CD of Christmas carols. It's the only one I can find, and they won't know the difference anyway. Then I settle the mother-in-law and the members of the bridal party into their respective places, one for a manicure, one for a pedicure, one to get her hair washed. I make sure they all have tea and the latest outdated fashion magazines from the States, then excuse myself with a cigarette. I usually just go ahead and smoke in the salon, but the look on Roshanna's face just before I shut the door to the waxing room has my heart racing. Because she has a terrible secret, and I'm the only one who knows it – for now.

Both engagement parties and weddings are lavish events in Afghanistan. Families save money for years and even take on huge debt to make these events as festive as possible, sparing no expense. After all, this is a country with virtually no public party life. There are no nightclubs, no concerts, only a few restaurants – and the ones that have opened since the Taliban left are frequented mostly by Westerners. There are a few movie theaters, but it's primarily men who go to them. If a woman happens to show up, as I once did when I insisted that a male friend take me, then she becomes the

show, with every turban in the room turned her way so that the men can gawk at her. There are just about no venues where Afghan men and women dress up and mingle. They don't exactly mingle at engagement parties and weddings, either. At big gatherings, the hundreds of men and women are segregated on two different floors of the hall with two different bands; at smaller gatherings, they are on one floor but separated by a curtain. In both cases, they dress to the nines. When I first came to Kabul, I was amazed by all the stores that sell wedding gowns. There are probably two on every block. Full-size mannequins are lined up in the windows of these stores, heads tilted at a haughty angle, overlooking the street in their colorful dresses spangled with rhinestones and swathed in tulle. They look like giant Barbie dolls – all very tall and Caucasian-looking – and when I was first here, I memorized the dolls in the windows so I could find my way back to my guesthouse. I pretended that they were guiding me home.

Roshanna's parents shook their heads and declined when the groom's mother first came calling with cakes and imported candies and other gifts to ask for her hand, but they were pleased with the offer. Saying no was only part of the ritual, a way of signaling that their daughter was so precious and beloved that they hated to let her leave the family home. It was also the first step in a bargaining process. For the next few months, the fathers haggled over the size of her cash dowry, over the number of dresses the groom's family would have their tailor make for her and the amount of fabric they'd give her family so they could make their own new clothes, over the value of the gold jewelry the groom's family would

give Roshanna. Her father had negotiated all this well. The cash dowry that would be paid to her family was ten thousand dollars, and she would receive five thousand dollars in gold as well as many other accoutrements of an upper-class wedding. Roshanna was not consulted about any of this. As with all first marriages in Afghanistan, it was strictly business, a transaction enacted between fathers. But she was eager to be married. In fact, she's one of the only brides I've ever met in Kabul who actually wanted to get married.

From the moment that I met Roshanna during my first visit to Kabul in the spring of 2002, the first spring after the rout of the Taliban, I puzzled over the sadness in her. Why did I respond so strongly to her sadness when there are millions of sad stories in Kabul? It's a city that's dense with sadness. There are so many people who lost loved ones in the twenty-seven years of war in Afghanistan, who have lost homes and livelihoods, who have lost entire towns and families, who have lost every dream they ever had. And there is still the occasional bombing or surprise mine explosion that rips away the happiness people finally think might be theirs. So why did Roshanna stand out amid all that sadness? I think it was her gaiety, her warmth and exuberance, her colorful clothes and bright smile. She was trying so hard to be happy that it hurt me when her sadness showed.

It had taken a few weeks for her to tell me her story. I had noticed that she seemed to light up when a certain young man came into the building where she was a secretary and I was a volunteer with a nonprofit organization. At first, I thought she might be sad because he wasn't interested

in her, but then I thought I saw the same light in his face when he caught sight of her from across the room. I started to tease her about it.

‘Got a boyfriend?’ I’d whisper, and she’d blush and turn away.

‘We don’t marry for love here,’ she told me after I had teased her a few times. ‘I have to marry the man my parents pick.’

I knew that Roshanna and the boy couldn’t admit their feelings or be obvious about them – they couldn’t do a damn thing about them, in fact, because there isn’t any dating in Kabul. But I thought that maybe his mother could talk to her mother and a match could be made that began with love. My mind started to race ahead with the possibilities. Which I mentioned to her one day, but she pulled me into a dark hallway.

‘It can’t happen, Debbie,’ she said, her eyes glistening in the faint light. ‘I was engaged once to someone else. This boy’s parents would never let him marry me.’

I slumped against the wall. ‘Why is it a problem if you were engaged before? Aren’t you allowed to change your mind?’

‘You don’t understand,’ she insisted. ‘We signed the *nika-khat* at the engagement party.’

This other, almost-marriage had taken place when the Taliban were still in power. Her family was living the miserable life of refugees in a camp just over the border in Pakistan. Roshanna was then sixteen years old and so bright that she’d actually found opportunities to get ahead in the camp. She learned English and some computer skills, and then found

a job as a secretary with an international aid agency. She often had to cross back into Afghanistan – accompanied by her father, of course – to do some work for the agency.

That brought her into dangerous proximity to the Taliban, then at the height of their power. They would often snatch up young unmarried girls without warning and force them into marriage with one of their men. During this period of time, many Afghan families didn't let their daughters out of the house for fear that the Taliban might see them. Even with these precautions, the Taliban might hear a neighborhood rumor – or get a tip from someone eager to curry favor with them – about a family with a beautiful daughter. They'd break down the family's door in search of her.

So Roshanna's family had a dilemma. They needed her income but were afraid she'd be stolen away from them and end up leading a life of bondage to a man they hated. And they hated the Taliban. Like many Afghan families, they had greeted the Taliban with cautious optimism when they first rolled into the city in 1996. Before their arrival, Kabul was being blown to bits by the mujahideen factions who had trounced the Russians, then turned on one another in a bloody fury, fighting for control of the country. Even though Roshanna's parents weren't deeply conservative Muslims, they wanted to see their country return to normal, and the Taliban seemed determined to make this happen. But her parents were horrified by the growing savagery that the Taliban used to enforce their kind of order.

To keep Roshanna safe, her parents did what many Afghan families did at this time. They searched frantically for a suitable husband among members of their tribe, hoping to

marry her off to a good man before the Taliban found out that she was available. They thought they had succeeded when they heard that there was a single male cousin living in Germany. It was a buyers' market for grooms in those days. The girls' families couldn't afford to dicker over dowries, dresses, and gold rings with the Taliban circling like wolves. So an agreement was quickly reached, with only a very small dowry. Because the families wanted the union to take place as soon as possible, the groom came back to Afghanistan for the engagement party right away. And because the actual wedding would take place in Germany months later, they signed the *nika-khat* that same night.

The *nika-khat* is the marriage contract drawn up according to Islamic law. This contract, more than the wedding itself, is what makes a couple legal husband and wife. In ordinary times, the *nika-khat* is signed well after the engagement party to give the groom's family time to put together their resources for the dowry, the clothes, the wedding, and so on. Roshanna's family took the less ordinary step of allowing her to become this man's legal wife before the wedding by signing the *nika-khat* at the engagement party. His family had insisted upon it, so that she couldn't change her mind about marrying him after he went back to Germany. And everyone agreed that it would be easier for her to emigrate there if she was already his legal wife. But within days her new husband left – without a word, without reason, and without her. She was crushed and humiliated, but it only got worse. Two weeks later, she was told that the cousin had divorced her when he got back to Germany.

'It is so easy for a man,' Roshanna told me. 'All he has to

do is say “I divorce you” three times in front of witnesses. We found out later that he already had either a girlfriend or a first wife in Germany. When he went back there, he decided to defy his parents’ wishes and be with this other woman.’

As Roshanna finished her story, she sobbed, and I held her just as I had once held my children. Even though I hadn’t been in Afghanistan long, I knew that things could hardly be worse for a girl. People don’t dismiss a divorce with a benign label such as ‘irreconcilable differences’ in Afghanistan. If a man divorces you, other people assume there must be something wrong with you. People will whisper that you are lazy or willful or a bad cook or – worst of all – that you were not a virgin. I love the Afghan people, but their true national sport is gossip. As a hairdresser – someone whose professional motto could be ‘Do tell!’ and who takes great pleasure in the whirl of divulged secrets and suppositions that goes on in every salon – I consider myself an expert on the subject. I wondered if the taint of Roshanna’s almost-marriage had made its rounds through the tea shops and neighborhood stores. She confirmed this, telling me that many of the Afghan men she encountered while she worked as a secretary had already made the mental leap from divorcee to whore. They’d take every opportunity to push her into dark corners and grope her in a way that they would never treat ‘nice’ girls. Her father had been imploring her to leave her job because of this; when I mentioned that I might want to come back to Kabul and start a beauty school, she leapt at this opportunity. But on that day back in 2002, my heart sank as I realized that this lovely girl would probably never be chosen as a man’s first wife again. She would likely be considered only as a second or third wife for a much older

man. She was sure of this, too; that was why she cried every time we spoke of it.

Or at least that was why I thought she was crying.

Then this engineer's mother waltzed into her salon two years later, and Roshanna's fortunes changed dramatically. I was back in America when it happened, but still planning to return to Afghanistan as soon as I could. Roshanna and I had been keeping in touch by e-mail, and all of a sudden, the whole tenor of her messages changed – it was almost as if music played when one of them dropped into my in-box. She had always hoped she'd be able to marry a man from a good family and have children. Now it seemed that she would get this wish. I was happy for her and didn't even want to ask about the problem with her first engagement. It seemed impossible that the engineer's family had not heard about it, especially since they were distantly related. Maybe they ran in vastly different circles. Or maybe they were a progressive family who weren't about to think ill of her because some cad of a cousin had toyed with her briefly, not caring if he ruined her reputation. Maybe they saw past the innuendo to Roshanna herself, as perfect a wife as any man could want. I hoped this was the case.

Before the engagement party, there had been yet another party – a sort of seal-the-deal gala to celebrate the end of the families' negotiations. Roshanna invited me to attend as her honored guest, and I was back in Kabul by that time and eager to share my friend's big day. The party was held in a large house in one of Kabul's old neighborhoods. Men and women from both families filed inside, and then the men

stayed downstairs and the women went upstairs and into a room heaped with good things to eat. When the mother-in-law arrived, she gave a basket of imported candies to Roshanna's mother, then kissed Roshanna, her mother, and then me and Roshanna's sisters three times on the cheeks. The groom's sisters and seven of his aunts and girl cousins followed with their kisses. There was so much kissing that my neck started to feel unhinged. Then the mother-in-law hung a gold necklace around Roshanna's neck. It was huge, like something a wrestler would win at a tournament. Each of the groom's sisters and aunts placed a gold ring on one of Roshanna's dainty little fingers, until she had gold all the way up to her fingertips. I could hear laughing from the men's room downstairs and then clapping. I went to the landing and peered down, but one of the groom's sisters pulled me back. 'They sign the papers now,' she explained. Her father was probably giving Roshanna's father the fat envelope stuffed with her dowry.

Then the groom's female relatives started to clap their hands and sing as one of them pounded a small drum. The mother-in-law and one of the groom's sisters unfolded something that looked like a huge umbrella draped with a soft netting stitched with flowers. They held it high, and the other women from the groom's family danced over to take up the edges of the netting; then they floated it over Roshanna's head and circled her, singing still, dancing, keeping step with the beat of the drum. It was as if Roshanna were at the center of a bright, noisy carousel. She stood still as the room turned around her, touching her hands to her hair nervously, her face pale against the moving backdrop of

her in-laws' brightly colored dresses, her lips pinched together. In the back of the room, her mother and sisters held one another. They looked at the dancers sadly.

If I'd known then what I know now, I might not have been alarmed by Roshanna's forlorn appearance during this ceremony. Afghan brides aren't really supposed to look happy at these events. Just as her parents turn down the first offer of marriage to show how precious their daughter is – and continue to look sad at all the wedding events – the daughter isn't supposed to act as if she welcomes the union, either. She's supposed to show that she's sad to leave her parents' home for that of her husband's family. Her sadness is a sign of respect for her parents. But even now that I know this, I don't think all the sadness is feigned. After all, the bride is leaving behind the tight embrace of her own family for one that may bring as much pain as pleasure. A mother-in-law sometimes turns into a tyrant after the wedding is over, expecting that her son's wife will become a sort of unpaid household servant who will sweep the floors, bring in the firewood, and even rub her feet when they ache. Husbands sometimes turn into tyrants, too. Or they turn into distant shadows as they spend all their time working and socializing with other men, returning to the home only for a meal or two. A man's new wife will serve this meal without any expectation that he will talk or even eat with her.

But I didn't know then what I know now, so I joined the forlorn-looking Roshanna after the dancing stopped. I took her hand, protective and suddenly apprehensive about her future since I knew so much about her past. She looked at me with terror and leaned toward me to whisper, while her

new in-laws continued to sing and clap. ‘Oh, my God,’ she said hoarsely. ‘This is really happening, isn’t it? What am I going to do?’

It was then that I divined her secret. She was not a virgin.

I couldn’t sleep that night; I couldn’t stop thinking about what she must be going through. The next day she came to the beauty school, and we ran out to a quiet place in back, between the building and the compound wall. She leaned against the wall and wept, tears of kohl streaking her cheeks. ‘My first husband, the one in Germany – he forced me the day after our engagement party!’ She gasped. She had never had the nerve to tell her parents about this. They would have been distraught and outraged if they’d known, since there is always a formal consummation ceremony at the beginning of a marriage in which the couple spend their first night as man and wife and the family wait outside for proof that the girl was a virgin. That’s the proper, time-honored way to consummate a marriage, but her cousin had grabbed her for a brutal quickie when he got the chance – and then bolted.

Roshanna had even been too ashamed to tell me until this moment.

And now she was headed toward another marriage with another man who lived abroad. Once again, the groom and a representative from her family would be signing the *nika-khat* at the engagement party because her husband – whom she still hadn’t met – would be going back to Amsterdam a few days after the party. He wasn’t planning to return to Afghanistan for the wedding party – odd as it may seem, this happens pretty often – and his family had

announced that they wanted to have the consummation ceremony right after the engagement party.

I hadn't forgotten any of this in the few months since the contract-signing party. I suppose, like Roshanna, I put it out of my mind because there was nothing I could do about it. Nothing she could do, either, if she intended to go ahead and marry the engineer from Amsterdam. His family would never accept her as his first wife if they knew she wasn't a virgin. Neither would any other family. So when she visited my salon during those months, we talked only about her dresses for the upcoming engagement party and wedding, her hair, the food that would be served, the guests who would be invited, and so on. We chatted about inconsequential matters. We enjoyed the gossip that followed my customers into the salon and filled it like strong perfume. Even when we were alone, we never talked about what might happen at the consummation ceremony. I didn't even want to think about it. I felt sick every time I tried.

But today is finally the day for the engagement party followed by the consummation. In the main part of the salon, I inspect the foils on Roshanna's mother-in-law and help the sisters-in-law pick out the right shades of nail polish to offset their gowns. Then I head back to the waxing room to see the sheets neatly folded on the foot of the bed. I go to look for Roshanna in the facial room, and she's there under a spotlight and Topekai's penetrating glare. Topekai has already shaped one of Roshanna's eyebrows into a delicate arch and is now inspecting the errant hairs on the other one, which she will remove by threading – an ancient technique Afghan

beauticians employ to whisk away hair using a piece of thread that is rolled across the skin and looped around individual follicles. Topekai holds one end of the thread in her mouth and has the rest of it wrapped around her fingers like in a game of cat's cradle. She points at the corner of Roshanna's eye, where a tear has formed, and rolls her eyes. She thinks Roshanna is crying because threading hurts. It certainly can be that painful, but I know better.

When Roshanna finally comes downstairs, the skin on her face is so clean that it looks naked. She is pale except for the red patches where her hair has been yanked off. All the other women applaud when she comes into the room, glad for her that her first big ordeal of the day is over. She fans her face and smiles. Bahar rushes to get a basin of hot water; then she begins Roshanna's pedicure, moving on to her manicure as I finish the mother-in-law's hair. Finally, I begin to work on Roshanna's hair after Baseera washes and blows it dry. I section off small pieces with a rat-tail comb and pin them back, then sink one hand into a special pot of gel that has gold glitter mixed into it. I begin shaping one of the clumps of hair into a big barrel curl on top of her head using the gold glitter gel. It seems as if everyone in the salon holds her breath, waiting to see if the big curl will collapse, but it stands. Then I shape some of the other clumps into big glitter-crustured curls until there is a mass of them on top of her head, like a pile of gold bangles. Next, I work some of the other strands in and around the big gold curls using red, green, and blue glitter gel. Everyone else leans in with suggestions. How about curls that slink across her cheeks like snakes – held in place with gel, of course? When I point

out that I've already used all of Roshanna's hair to make the big curls on top of her head, Baseera kindly offers to cut off a few pieces of her own hair and glue them on the bride's cheeks. Roshanna declines.

Finally, everyone crowds around to watch me work on Roshanna's makeup. It's customary to coat the bride's face with a heavy white matte base, almost like that of a geisha, but I don't like this look, and it bothers me even more today – I feel as if I'm erasing my friend's face. So I use a light hand, and I can tell by Roshanna's look that she approves. After this base is applied, I put green eye shadow – to match her dress – on her lids, then swoop it out to the sides of her face. I put a layer of glittering peach eye shadow above that, just below her eyebrows, then shape her eyebrows with a black pencil so that they arch and swoop, too.

My hands don't feel steady enough for the next step, so I hand Roshanna's little bottle of kohl powder to Baseera. She tells Roshanna to lick the kohl stick, dip it in the bottle, and blow away the excess powder. Then Baseera inserts the coated stick into the inside corner of Roshanna's eye, tells her to close it, and moves the stick across her eye so that it coats the inner lids, top and bottom, with black kohl. If this is done right, the stick glides across the inner lids, just barely missing the surface of the eye. While Roshanna's eyes are closed, Baseera also attaches a huge pair of false lashes. Roshanna opens her eyes and flaps her lids so vigorously that one of the sisters-in-law laughs. 'You make the hair on the floor blow away,' she says. Finally, I work on Roshanna's lips, lining them in dark reddish brown and filling them in with a bright candy-apple red. I apply some contouring makeup

and some rouge, then step back. The mother-in-law takes Roshanna's chin and inspects her. She's pleased but wonders about gluing a row of rhinestones just under Roshanna's eyebrows, which she saw on another bride several weeks ago. No, her daughters tell her; this is good, more would be too much. Then I have to rush off to do my own makeup and change clothes.

Soon there are cars honking and men shouting outside, and the compound guard comes to knock on the salon door. All of us walk outside in a cluster around Roshanna, the groom's sisters holding their hands around her crown of curls to keep them from blowing over, the mother-in-law trying to lift the hem of her dress enough so that it doesn't drag in the dirt but not enough that her legs show. Outside the wall, the groom's male cousins point to the bridal car proudly. They've spent the day decorating it with fabric and flowers, so that it looks kind of like a huge piece of cake with lots of icing. Roshanna and the groom's female relatives pile inside the car, pulling me in as well.

At the hall, the groom's mother and sisters sweep Roshanna inside right away for pictures. There is a blinding fluorescent light overhead in the photo room, and I can barely even look at her with the light shining off all the glitter and gold and spangles. The photographer makes her turn this way and that – arms this way, head angled that way, mouth just so. He wants poses that make her look innocent yet seductive, kind of like the shots of movie stars from the 1940s – assuming that they were getting photographed while their sweating older sisters were holding a Koran over their heads. Roshanna sees that one of her sisters is standing next to me, and she

makes a face at us, then folds her hands together under her chin and puts on a dazed-by-romance smile, looking kind of like the heroines in the Indian Bollywood movies that everyone watches in Afghanistan. ‘Should I start to sing now?’ she jokes, because that’s what the Bollywood stars do in the unlikeliest moments. The photographer puts down his equipment and shouts. He wants her to look like the haughty wedding mannequins in the stores.

The photographer finally finishes and starts packing away his things. Roshanna stares at him as if stunned that this diversion is actually over. Her sisters and mother flutter around her, and then one of her sisters opens the door to the party room and the noise of all the guests roars in. Roshanna turns a pale face toward me. ‘Walk with me,’ she pleads and holds her hand out, so I come over to her and hold her trembling hand and we move through the door.

The room is so full of glitz that even I am dizzy. Ornate chandeliers drip crystal tears over the heads of hundreds of women who are dressed like all the glamorous mannequins. Velvet, gold brocade, tassels, seed pearls, embroidered silk – and that’s just one of the dresses! As we make our way down a long white cloth that leads to an archway twined with roses, I see another side to the women of Kabul, who usually dress as if they’re headed to a funeral. Here, they truly strut their stuff, with slit skirts, plunging necklines, and heels so high they could swan-dive from them into a pool. Later, I’m told that this is where many potential mothers-in-law find wives for their sons; today, I’m just dazzled by the sight of them. As are the videographers, who pan the crowd and prompt one table after another to preen and smile.

One of them walks backward along the white cloth in front of Roshanna and me with a camera the size of a tree trunk, so I smile as if I'm one of those movie stars who escort Oscar winners across the stage. Roshanna looks down at the white cloth, and her mother and sisters follow us, dropping rose petals in our wake. One of her sisters is still holding the Koran over Roshanna's head, but her arms are drooping dangerously and the Koran nearly flattens Roshanna's barrel curls. Over to the side, a band is playing.

As we clear the archway, I see that the room is divided in two by a huge curtain – all the women are on this side, so I figure that all the men must be on the other. As if to prove this, a man's head pops up through a slit in the curtain and he gapes lecherously at the women, then is pulled back and the curtain drops. I see that we are making our way toward a stage on the women's side of the room, where two golden chairs – like those of a king and queen – are set up. There is a table in front of the chairs with what looks like a treasure chest, and a spotlight shines on the empty chairs. As we get closer to the stage, the curtain rustles, and all of a sudden, a man appears on the stage. I can't see his face well because the lights are so bright. 'I think that's the groom,' I tell Roshanna, but she won't look up. I want to turn around and ask her mother if that's the groom, but she hasn't seen him, either. Besides, the glare of the spotlights is still making it hard to see anything. We keep walking toward the stage, the noise of the crowd pulsing around us, the music picking up tempo, and Roshanna trembling so much that it's hard to keep a grip on her.

Finally, the man on the stage comes into focus, his face

pale and dazed – and suddenly there is the mother-in-law, reaching out to Roshanna. The mother-in-law pulls Roshanna up on the stage and takes the groom's hand and places it on Roshanna's, but Roshanna flinches as if his hand were on fire. Then all the members of the families climb on the stage, and I'm jostled away by a crowd of photographers and videographers. Lights flash, cameras whir and click, and the men wielding them push against one another for the best angle. I stand on my toes to see how Roshanna is holding up, and I resist the urge to yell 'Smile,' as we do at all such events back home. But she continues to look mournful, as do the members of her family. The groom doesn't look mournful, but he doesn't look happy, either. He looks stunned, as if someone knocked him out a few minutes ago and he just woke up to this assault by the cameramen.

Finally, the mothers lead Roshanna and her husband off the stage and pull them through the crowd toward a door at the far end of the room. Women at the tables near me stand and gesture me to join them, and I finally sit down.

'Where did they go?' I ask one of the women wearing a rhinestone headdress who seems to speak some English.

'They get to know each other now,' she replies. 'And family members get to meet, too.'

'Are they going to come back out here to eat?'

'No, not in front of all these people. This is their first meal together as man and wife.'

The band starts up again. Everyone stands to watch as the groom's mother and sisters step onto the dance floor. They move around the floor together in slow, graceful steps,

swaying toward one another and then falling away, like the pattern in a kaleidoscope forming and re-forming. Sometimes the mother is at the center, her purple-swathed bulk surprisingly sinuous and light. Sometimes her daughters are at the middle, their arms stretched out to the sides, their hundreds of bangles jingling and glistening in the light, their hips swaying. Roshanna's family sit off to the side, their sad faces a stark contrast to all the gaiety.

Then the music changes and the dancing becomes more suggestive. The groom's sisters pump their hips and draw their hands across their faces as if feigning sexual ecstasy. Even the mother does an exaggerated bump and grind for a second; then she laughs and sinks into a chair someone has pushed toward her. And then all the women join the sisters on the dance floor; I am included – the woman with the rhinestone headdress and her friends insist. There, I'm surrounded by the kind of dancing I would never have expected from these women who dart down the city streets – when they go out at all – draped in dark colors with their eyes down. This is dirty dancing, Kabul style: they shimmy, they shake, they arch their backs and thrust their hips. The ones with long hair whip it around, drape it over their faces, then lift it to reveal parted lips and smoldering eyes. They snake their arms behind their backs, to the sides, over their heads, and their hands move as if they're stroking imaginary lovers. They dance together and then break apart, but when they're together they move their hands along the sides of one another's bodies, sink to the floor, and sway back up again, grazing cheeks, arms, hips. And then I peer into the crowd, startled: I notice

that there are men on the women's side of the room, holding them around the waist, spinning them, and pressing their hips against them. I wonder if the police will storm the room and drag them off for sexual mingling. But then I realize that they're not men but women dressed as men, acting as men, standing in for men.

I back off the dance floor, because this scene is almost too much to take in when I'm right in the middle of it; then I notice that another man has stuck his head through the curtain to watch. Sure enough, a big hand quickly appears to grasp him by the hair and pull him back, but this makes me curious. I make my way over to the split in the curtain and arrange a tiny peephole so that I can look through. It's almost the same wild scene on the other side, only with a different set of clothes and less glitz and the powerful aroma of male sweat. The men are dancing with one another, snaking their arms, thrusting their hips, holding one another close, shimmying to the ground while running their hands down one another's sides – all of it. I'm stunned, and I let the curtain flap open a little more so that I can watch.

The men are obviously very comfortable touching one another, dancing with one another. They show one another not only affection but also sexual vigor. I wonder what would happen if the two sides of the room ever got together, wonder if any of the men and women ever find a way to sneak off together, and then suddenly I don't have any more time to wonder about it. Some of the men have seen me peering through the curtain, and they pull it open wider. There I am, my face poked into their side of the room, looking very much

like a woman with her head in a guillotine. It seems as if all the men in the room turn around to look and shout. Blushing, I pull my head back and move away.

The dancing on the women's side has begun to slow down, because the food is on its way. Each of the red-clothed tables seats around twenty people, but enough food is brought for forty or more. Piles of kebabs on platters, pasta stuffed with leeks and covered with a meat sauce, bowls with every known method of food preparation applied to eggplant, rice with nuts and raisins. The delivery of food goes on for what seems like hours, as the family makes sure no one leaves the feast without having stuffed themselves ten times over. There are no utensils on the tables, and everyone eats with her hands. I admire the way the other women are able to eat without spilling so much as a drop of sauce or a grain of rice. A thread of cabbage coated with yogurt falls in my lap, and I whisk it away quickly, but I soon wind up wearing more of my dinner than I eat. I drop so much that I'm actually still hungry when the servers come back to take away the plates. Once the food is gone, the women around me stand, kiss my cheeks, and begin to leave.

I'm not sure how I'm going to get home, but finally I see one of Roshanna's sisters rushing toward me. She tells me that Roshanna wants me to come to her parents' house with some of the other honored guests and the groom's family. So we go outside, and I squeeze back into the bridal car with a dazed Roshanna and about six other women in tight dresses and high heels. As we start driving, a car behind us honks and pulls up, and a man with a video camera leans

out the passenger side window. Then an insane race begins as the driver of the wedding car tries to make it as hard as possible for the video car to keep up with us. We race up and down Kabul's streets, dodging people on foot and on bicycle, screeching around corners. We pass a bus and, incredibly, wind up driving on the other side of the oncoming traffic, almost on the sidewalk. We almost sideswipe a patient, dusty water buffalo that's standing near a group of men having an argument. The driver guffaws that he's lost the videographer and we turn a corner, but there the other man is, facing us. He leans so far out of his window that I'm sure he's going to fall, but he wins the game: he's able to film our driver frantically backing out into traffic again as the women in the back of the car – except Roshanna – scream with laughter. Driving in Kabul is never a walk in the park, let me tell you, but I truly thought we were all going to die on the way to Roshanna's house.

When we arrive, we take off our shoes at the door and go into the living room. Roshanna and her new husband sit on the only chairs in the room, and the rest of us drop onto cushions. I wave and put on my biggest smile for Roshanna, but she doesn't respond. She and her husband sit without touching, without smiling, like bride and groom mannequins propped in the chairs. Roshanna's sister takes my arm and leads me to her, pats the cushion next to her, and I sit near my friend, who only glances at me and then resumes staring into space. For a moment, it's hard to believe that this woman with the dead eyes and rigid body is my Roshanna. But I know that the consummation ceremony is the next event on

the marital agenda. I realize she's so stunned with fear that she can't do anything other than stare. I don't even see her breathing.

We are all served tea and sweets. There is much talking among the guests and families. I can't understand them because my Dari – the Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan – is not so good, and the one person in the room who speaks English well – Roshanna – isn't talking. Then the groom's family and the other guests begin leaving in little groups, and I stand, both relieved to go and guilty about leaving my friend. But again, her sister clamps herself to my arm. She shakes her head while she keeps talking. Her mother comes over, too, and tugs on my arm. I don't know what's going on until Roshanna turns to me. 'Please stay,' she whispers, and then she lays her own cold fingers on my wrist.

Roshanna's mother turns to the bride and groom. She beckons them and they rise, although Roshanna catches her heel on the cushion and staggers forward. They follow her mother down the hall, Roshanna still a little shaky on her feet. She bumps into the wall, as if she's been drinking, but this has been a strictly traditional Muslim affair with no drinking – as for myself, I'm thinking fondly of the bottle of Johnnie Walker Red in my room at home. I hear a door slam in the back of the house; then I'm led to a guest room with four of the other women. We lie down on the cushions in our party clothes, and one by one, we fall asleep. I'm the last to go. I keep listening for noises from down the hall, but all is quiet and I finally let go of my fear. Or it lets me go. Anyway, I sleep.

And awake to someone shaking me. Roshanna's mother is standing over me, waving a white handkerchief, her long black braid swinging over my head. She's talking rapidly and clutching the Koran to her chest. Every once in a while, she stops talking and covers the Koran with kisses. I look over at one of Roshanna's sisters, who winces and tries to explain. 'No blood,' she whispers. I remember that this is supposed to be the proof of Roshanna's virginity: a bloody handkerchief, dropped outside the door of the consummation room.

Roshanna's mother is still talking away, rapid, frantic words that might not make any sense in Dari, either; then she grabs my hand and works the handkerchief into my clenched fist. She and the sister start pulling me down the hall. I protest, but it doesn't do me any good. They open the door to the consummation room, and in the dim light, I see Roshanna crouching on one of the cushions at the side of the room. Her husband is sitting on the bed. He turns his face away from the door, and then Roshanna's mother pulls her from the room and closes the door.

'It is not working,' the husband says suddenly. I didn't think he spoke English, but he does, at least a little. 'It's not working.'

I'm not sure what he means, but he seems troubled, not angry. Is he having a hard time getting an erection? Is she having a hard time with lubrication? Even though he's forty years old, is it possible that he doesn't know what to do in here? That he's been told all his life that sex is so dirty and shameful he's never tried it? I decide these questions are too big for me to tackle, even though many of the Afghans I've

met seem to think Americans can figure anything out. I try a different angle.

‘Sometimes there is no blood, even if the girl is a virgin,’ I say. ‘If she works too hard or even falls down a flight of stairs, there is sometimes no blood.’

He nods, his dark eyes on the ground.

‘Sometimes, it’s hard to have sex if the girl is nervous,’ I continue. ‘You have to be gentle. You have to touch her very gently so she can relax.’

He doesn’t say anything. I don’t want to use body language to show him where he should touch her. Instead, I stroke my arm. ‘Like the way you’d pat a dog if it’s scared,’ I add desperately. It’s the only thing I can think of, but he gives me a funny look. Then I remember what an Afghan friend told me the other day, that Muslims don’t like dogs because one of them was supposed to have bitten the Prophet.

‘I know all these things,’ he says with sudden agitation. ‘But it’s not working.’

Then Roshanna’s mother is knocking on the door, and she brings Roshanna back into the room. She smooths her hair and then smiles at me as if I’ve made everything right again. ‘Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!’ the mother says, pulling me out the door. Then one of the sisters leads me back to the guest room while the mother settles herself right outside the door of the consummation room.

The other women are awake and waiting for me in the guest room. I bet they’d kill to have a Dari-English dictionary right now so they could ask me what’s going on. I just wave my hand as if the problem down the hall is so minor that it need not concern them, then settle myself on my cushion

again. I ignore them until they stop talking and fall asleep, and then, amazingly, I too fall asleep. It's a bad sleep, though: I'm back in the car on the way to the wedding and the driver keeps smashing into other cars and I'm afraid, once again, that we'll all die.

Then someone is shaking me. Roshanna's mother is back, waving the clean white handkerchief, kissing the Koran, then hugging it to her chest, rocking back and forth, wailing and crying, talking rapidly to me and to her daughters, who are again urging me up off my cushion. This time, her mother looks even more terrified than before, if that's possible. I don't know how many trial runs Roshanna will be allowed before the groom decides his family has been cheated, that she is not a virgin, that she is a disgrace and a humiliation to both families. I try to act as if this is no big problem, that the couple just need a little bit more prompting. 'Let me talk to Roshanna alone,' I say.

The groom leaves the room, and I settle my arms around my shivering friend. 'I'm afraid,' she whispers. 'It hurts so much when he pushes into me that I pull away. I can't help it.'

'Try to relax,' I tell her. 'Breathe slowly. It won't hurt as much if you can relax.' Then I give her the advice that so many women who don't really like sex cling to – just lean back, open your legs, and try to think of something else. I tell her that it won't hurt after the first few times, that she might even find it as pleasurable as I do. She looks at me as if I'm trying to convince her that she will enjoy chewing broken glass someday.

'One more thing,' I tell her. 'If this happens again, tell them that you want to talk to me one more time. But this

time, don't let your mother take the handkerchief.' Then I kiss her and leave. I check my watch, because I know that after the morning call to prayer the in-laws will be coming back to the house. They'll want to see a bloody handkerchief.

This time, I can't sleep. And sure enough, her mother is back in the room in a half hour or so, weeping, kissing the Koran, imploring me to talk to Roshanna again. I'm ready for her this time, with my purse tucked up inside my dress. Back in the consummation room, I ask Roshanna for the white handkerchief and pull a pair of fingernail clippers out of my purse.

'What are you doing?' she asks.

I grit my teeth and dig the clippers under one of my nails, then cut down to the quick until blood spurts out. I wipe my finger back and forth on the handkerchief, then hand it to her. 'Here's your virginity,' I tell her. 'Hide it under your cushion and then pull it out the next time he enters you. Let your mother come in and find it.'

She puts her hands over her face again, and I leave the room.

Back in the guest room, I fall asleep once more and am awakened just as the sky is beginning to lighten. The house is in chaos. I can hear Roshanna's mother wailing and screaming. Doors are slamming, people are crowding the hallway, everyone is talking at once. I stagger up from my cushion, filled with dread that the husband has discovered the bloody handkerchief under their bed or that it somehow doesn't look the way it should.

But when I rush out into the hallway, I see that Roshanna's mother is wailing for joy. 'Virgin!' she shouts at me triumphantly, waving the handkerchief stained with my blood. 'Virgin!'