

BELOVED IS MY SISTER

by KAREN DAY

I am not a woman prone to disastrous enthusiasms. Low-riding jeans and Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey are my most criminal middle-age risks. Luckily, the predictable difficulties of a comfortable life define my worst problems; carpool scheduling, cellulite accumulation and meeting story deadlines despite the stifling inadequacy of words that has haunted many Americans since 9/11. Therefore, my family's shock was not completely unfounded when, slicing carrots in our San Francisco kitchen, I announced my trip to Afghanistan.

"I volunteered to do an article on this amazing humanitarian organization--" I chopped faster, "--in Kabul."

My husband stopped his spaghetti pouring and looked at me as if my hair had burst into flames. Our two kids exchanged cartoonish gawks that ended the nightly debate about setting the table. Leaning close, their father gently removed the knife from my hand. "Maybe, you should go back to your therapist," he said. "A lot of writers entertain suicidal thoughts at some point in their career."

Granted, to most U.S. citizens, visiting Kabul eight months after the Taliban was bombed into eviction sounds unreasonable, especially if the tourist is a woman with a strong conviction to the Equal Rights Amendment and lipsticks called *Wet and Wild Red*. My neighbor, a former Green Beret and my insurance agent, went so far as to call the idea dangerously patriotic. I took this as a compliment until written cancellation of my life insurance policy arrived. My mother offered the only practical advice, reminding me not to drink the water and be sure to wear nice underwear in case I met with an accident that would appear on CNN. She then suggested I avoid sports events in Afghanistan since women only went to the stadiums to be executed.

How could I explain to the people who loved me that an Iraqi woman I'd never met had inspired me to risk my life for thousands of Afghan women I'll never know? My decision was complicated but the answer was simple. The truth changed their minds and my life.

Zainab Salbi was twenty-three years old when she and her husband, Amjad Atallah, founded Women for Women International with \$2,000 of personal savings. Their initial goal was to offer female prisoners of Bosnian "rape camps" psychological healing and practical vocational training. Nine years later, the world-wide organization now serves 12,000 women in eight post-war-zone countries, including Bosnia, Kosovo, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Rwanda and most recently, Afghanistan. How? By matching sponsors from the United States, who provide financial and emotional support to individual "sisters" in need. Last year, the organization was nominated for the prestigious, Conrad Hilton Humanitarian award.

I learned about Zainab from one of those obligatory newspaper profiles on world saviors called, "**One Mission, Thousands Of Lives.**" Just reading the title made me feel cranky and pale in the light of her halo. Where did people find the time to change the world when I couldn't even get caught up on the laundry? Still, the fact remained that Salbi's efforts proved one person could make a dent in the world's suffering while I sat on my fat couch matching socks and feeling guilty. So I called. Could the organization use a mediocre, but well-intentioned journalist? I inquired. Salbi immediately proved more savvy and less annoying than my saintly stereotypes by inviting me to lunch at her office--in Washington D.C.--at my own cost.

Five-feet ten in heels with a boyish cut of jet-black hair and flawless olive skin, Zainab is the kind of singular beauty that makes me turn as catty as Judge Judy when they enter a room. She looks like a third-world cover girl with the saddest smile you've ever seen. Born in Baghdad, she grew up co-existing with war and explained her entire childhood by saying, "You wake up to the sound of a missile hitting a neighbor's home, and you think, 'OK, it's not me today,' and go back to sleep."

In 1990, she was nineteen and vacationing in the US when Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf War prevented her from returning home. "There are visible and invisible refugees," she told me when we met in September of 2002. "Imagine yourself, an educated, middle-class tourist in a foreign country, and suddenly, you can't go back to your home and family. You do not need to wear rags to be a refugee."

An articulate woman who has delivered speeches before President Clinton and the United Nations, Zainab only closed her eyes and shook her head when I mentioned what a tragic irony it is that she may soon be returning to Iraq to open Women for Women offices.

Zainab was forced to stay in America, but hard work molded her nightmare into a dream. She enrolled in college, became a translator for the Arab League and began to feel hopeful again when she fell in love, married and became a dual citizen. Life appeared to offer some certainty until news clips of the Croatian-Serb war made it impossible for her to sleep at night.

"I knew about living in war, about wanting to survive, losing your family. And most of all, I knew about wanting to help and feeling helpless when you're thousands of miles away."

"I looked everywhere," she told me, "but there was no organization existed to help the women trapped in those horrific prison camps. People advised me to wait, that eventually something would be done. But women were suffering now, being raped at that very moment. There was no time to wait!"

With the aid of the small, All Souls Unitarian Church in Alexandria Va, Zainab and her husband flew to Croatia and distributed much needed supplies, money and emotional support. The overwhelming response they received inspired the birth of Women for Women International. "We thought the world had forgotten us..." one survivor told them through tears.

Listening to Zainab recount stories like that or the tragedy of Aysha, a young Bosnian girl who had been raped everyday for nine months in a war camp, I kept thinking of Orwell's prediction, "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stomping a human face forever." Based on the murderous nature of human history and the current figures on human rights violations, the statistics also suggest that face would be female.

"If our brilliant leaders can't heal the world's wounds," I said to Zainab, "what can I do?"

"Adopt a woman," was her answer.

Sponsors contribute \$25 dollars a month for one year, she explained, less than my latte budget, to help a woman learn a skill, feed her family and begin a new life. For example, In Rwanda, women had pooled a portion of their money and brought electricity to their village. In Bosnia, women were making and selling jewelry, artwork and greeting cards via mail-order catalogues in the US.

Get your own post-war pen-pal! Change the world from your armchair! It was a seductively convenient commitment. And I must also admit, at age fifty, to more often calculating the chance of getting a good table in the afterlife.

When Zainab stated the women of Afghanistan were her next mission, I was ready to whip out my Visa card and adopt an entire village. Ninety cents of every donated dollar goes to the adoptees, she explained, which insures the organization always need donations and can't afford a publicity department. Her greatest wish is to go out of business, but so long as war exists, her job is sadly secure. And funding a new office requires thousands of new donors and dollars.

As a journalist, I offered to write a check and several press releases, but as a human being, I couldn't walk away from the realization that writing was not only my job, but a gift I could give to others—which is why I also volunteered to go to Afghanistan and write as many articles as I could place about Women for Women. The truth eventually won the support of my family and numerous national publications, including the editors of "O." A month later, Zainab and I landed in Kabul.

Beige was my first impression of Afghanistan--mountains, huts, rivers and sky blurred into sandy monotonies by a four-year drought, choking heat and smog from the recent influx of 100,000 cars from Pakistan. Even the food lacked primary colors, consisting of rice, flat bread and mystery-meat kabobs browned in the smoky fires of street vendors. Blue, however, was my second impression. The Taliban-approved color for burkas floated down every sidewalk making women as invisible as moving parts of the sky.

According to estimates by the Ministry of Women's Affairs in Kabul, 1.5 million women inhabit the city and its barren outskirts. 600,000 are returning refugees. 250,000 are homeless or living in rag tents. These are the most destitute. Many are widows. A majority have three to eight children. All are uneducated and unemployed except for begging. Two days into our first week, Zainab and I had seen thousands of dusty, hopeless women and fewer than two dozen female faces.

I was constantly doing the math of despair. If half the planet lives on less than two dollars a day and a billion people on half of that, how many people could my new shoe habit feed? And what about my gas-guzzling SUV? The equation always added up to me feeling like a guilty imperialist, until day three of our trip.

The new offices of Women for Women sit on a dusty side street of Kabul in the rented home of a family who, like many wealthy Afghans, chooses to reside in Pakistan, where the power does not out each night at six o'clock. The threat of terrorism forces most Westerners to live and work within guarded compounds twenty-four hours a day, as does the staff here, even though all but two of ten are Afghans. Women empowering women, regardless of nationality, is heresy condemnable by death as preached by thousands of Islamic fundamentalists throughout Afghanistan. Violent repression of women remains especially strong in the north, where a dozen girl's school have suffered attacks in the past year and warlords rule like brutal celebrities, enforcing Taliban-like restrictions. Inside the walls of the compound, the Women for Women house appears shockingly festive and vaguely resonant of a Frank Lloyd Wright design if the architect had swallowed a tab of LSD. Each wall is painted a different pastel color--Easter, Islamic style.

I saw this as a good sign.

Twenty-seven blue burkas stood at the front gate. Each woman had walked miles from the tent camps we had visited in the last three days, none aware the program provided money and a year of vocational training. A shred of hope and a possibility of work was all we had offered when we invited them here.



Money is never mentioned, Zainab learned by watching thousands fail or prevail, until a woman demonstrates she has the will help herself without a handout. These women had come because the unknown could be no worse than misery they already knew. Amongst the sea of blue, I recognized one burka by voice and remembered Zainab asking this widow what she dreamed of. Her answer was thirty cents a day to feed her five children.

For five hours, the women crouched on the floor, waiting to share their tragedies. One by one, when each spoke, the veil lifted. I will never forget those twenty-seven courageous faces or their stories. One in particular cemented herself into my heart, a thirty-five year old with haunting, coal-rimmed eyes, six children and one toe on each bare foot. Two decades of war have left one in every ten Afghans handicapped. Today, like every day in Afghanistan, a person is maimed or killed every fifteen minutes by a land mine.

Mahbuba was her name, which translated, means “Beloved.” I was mesmerized by the smile she dared, defying the traditional dictate that proper Muslim women hide their mouths in the presence of strangers. Her first husband had died repairing a cassette recorder that unexpectedly blared music as the Taliban’s Squad of Vice and Virtue passed. He was shot point blank. Mahbuba was remarried now, to man who is also disabled.

Beloved became my sister that day and forever. Each month, I send her \$25.00 and a letter, detailing how my days are spent, writing under deadline, battling laundry, trying to get food on the table. I purposefully omit complaints about our outrageous grocery bills or over-worked washing machine, though from the generosity of spirit apparent in her letters, I



suspect my sister would be more forgiving of my good fortune than I am.

Six months later, Zainab tells me the Kabul office has sponsored more than 2,500 women. Mahbuba writes that my money and the classes of Women for Women have enabled her to purchase a sewing machine and begin selling clothes. Lately, I find myself checking the mailbox for her next chapter, not so much to note her progress, but to hear her newfound hope echo in my own heart.

Name: Mahbuba, Sheer Mohammed

Group name: Mursal

Sponsor Name: Zaks, Karen

Woman ID# 19214

463093723

Dear my kind sister,

How are you and the rest of your family?

Thanks so much for the money that I received for the second time. Now let me tell you more about myself. I'm a 35 years old woman with 6 children (4 daughters, 2 sons). My husband is 40 years old. His right leg is disable, it is the cause of a mine explosion. My feet are also disable. I knew how to sew, but I didn't have any sewing machine until I received your money and bought one, now I sew some clothes and earn money. My husband can't work so he begs money in the streets.

My oldest son is 12 years old and he goes to school also he sells vegetables after his studies.

I live in a tent, place called chaman-e-babrak, life is very difficult, but since I've found the precious gift of Allah which is your kindness and help, I've got more hopes and wishes.

I want to hear more about you and I will be waiting for your letter. Please know that I care about you.

Sincerely,

Mahbuba

A saint I'll never be due to a severe weakness for red lipstick and low-riding jeans. Still, standing in my kitchen overlooking the blue, blue Pacific, I'm reminded of my Afghan sister under her burqa and Mother Teresa's quote, "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." Maybe today I'll tell my family I've bought a ticket to Baghdad to cover the opening of the new Women for Women office.