

# *Sar-e Sarak ba Nezar-Jan*



*Stories from Riding the Road  
with Nezar-Jan*

*By Katy Anis & Nezar Mohammed Walizada*

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## From “*Sar-e-Sarak ba Nezar Jan*”

### *Stories from Riding the Road with Nezar-Jan*

#### CHAPTER 1

#### On Death and Life...

- On *Chakkari* - Around the City
- On *Jang*- War
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“*Har Halat Teir Mishe*- All Conditions Pass”

*“Walau, Kiti-Jan.....”*

By God, Katy-Jan, do you know what happened on this corner?....

As I draw a map for a newcomer to Kabul, I realize that along one road, I can recount at least 16 vivid incidents that my driver, Nezar, has told me that happened at various points along this road. As we drive around this city every corner is filled with memories.

The person is like a symbol to me. What he has seen in his 25 years is the equivalent of what the rest of us would have seen in 10 lifetimes. And there are 20 million other Afghans who have seen the same thing. From understanding one person's life, it gives me a tiny inkling of the untold trauma that exists within people. Every day when you hear the greetings, “ Good Morning, How are you? Are you good ?How is your body? Are you healthy? You are good? Praised be to God” (all in one breath). Behind the bright eyes and cheerful attitude of service exist hundreds of thousands of memories.

And I realized, whether I have no time, or not, whether I want to or not, it is my duty to write these stories down. Because my mind and my ears filled with these memories and stories everyday, I have no choice but to write them down. Because they must be written. Because the stories must be told.

When I started to write down Nezar's stories, I realized that many other stories came to me, that I have been witness to over the last three years in Afghanistan. And others continued to tell me more stories. And after a while, the stories became part of me. And then, after living in Afghanistan for many years, I became part of the story. And we all changed.

Everyone has lost someone. In one house of a friend I know 6 out of 7 brothers were all killed. So there is a lot of pain. But there is a lot of life too.

Now people are happy and they appreciate peace and they just want to work. But there are all these memories that are just below the surface, that nobody talks about. In writing them down, I wouldn't want somebody who is not here to think that that is all that Afghanistan is about. Afghanistan is not all about war. People are kind and loving and hospitable and more connected with each other and have a stronger sense of community than anywhere I have seen. There is an incredible, absolutely astounding attitude of surviving despite whatever happens and making do and surviving with what you have. They adapt.

But the memories stay just below the surface. And they are a part of people's life, their experience. So I will write down just a few of them.

How did these stories start?

After one of my yoga students was kidnapped, security procedures started getting tight. I asked my driver, with all this security getting tight again, what is like for you. Do you also feel the pressure?

On that day it opened like a faucet and stories just started pouring out since then.

t t t



*Around the City*

“You see this river, Katy Jan, -- in one day I saw 700 people killed in 3 hours. They came from one side, over there. And both met at the river. In this field in front of the river all you could see was dead bodies. Thos who didn’t get killed died in the river.”

~

“Katy-Jan -- I was on this road when the Americans dropped the bomb. I didn’t know which way to go. It hit this building which was a government mine clearing operation. It killed both guards. We were the first to get here and pulled the bodies out.”

~

“Our house has been completely destroyed 3 times. One time we were playing outside with toys, and then the rockets started hitting. One landed inside the house. My father was hit in 26 places with shrapnel and my sister was also injured. There was blood everywhere but it was so bad outside that we couldn’t to take him to the hospital for 3 days. After that, we left Kabulbai and went to live in Wazir Akbar Khan with relatives. We couldn’t even go back to get our clothes.

See this house, (next to Canadian Embassy). This is my uncle’s house. We were hit by rockets. One rocket hit a fuel tank and the house burst into flames. The flames were so high they reached 3 stories and our house was shown Al-Jazirah TV- Believe me Katy-Jan! Sardar went in to save my baby sister and all over half his body. Later he was paralyzed over half his body and lost a kidney. He should have died. But God has given life back to Sardar three times.”

~

“See this little shop, Kiti-Jan. One day I was passing here and a rocket ate the building. There was a man on the street and he was blown to pieces and his brain came on the whiles of my bicycle as I was riding by.”

~

“In my 25 years, I have put in prison 4 times. Usually because my beard was too short or my hair was too long. My uncle was kidnapped. And my father was a prisoner of war.

During Taliban time, my father was taken as a prisoner of war but we didn’t know. Part of my family had fled to Pakistan and part was in Kabul and each thought he was with the others. When we found him he was so skinny and had broken ribs. We had to nurse him back to health.”

~

“Do you see this roundabout? Believe me, Katy Jan, no one walked on this road for two years, except *musalas* ‘gun carriers’. The Macrorayan apartment structures were empty and the basement became like bomb shelters. People lived in there for years.”

~

“See this intersection Katy-Jan, no one passed on foot here for 2 years. They set all these buildings here on fire and my dad’s shop was destroyed.

There was no food. In the beginning of Taliban time, people had money but there was no food to buy. They would wait in a line outside the bread makers shop.

People would rob you for a piece of bread. If you left your house, the *musala* ‘gun carrier’ would take the money out of your pocket and the bread out of your hand. They would rob you of your bicycle in front of your face and then make you buy it back from them”

~

“The children of 2 years old know the sound of a gun here. They can tell you if it’s a Kalashnikov, or awan or sakar – they know all the types of rockets and guns.”

~

(As we pump gas in a gas station at Kabulbai)

‘Nezar Jan, why are those two men looking at me so funny?’

‘They are from Khost, Katy. They are not used to seeing foreigners. They were Talebs and now they are afraid of everyone. Because everyone knows they were Talebs.

You now what happened at this gas station. One night I was here with them and people came and they wrapped on the window. They wanted to buy gas. When we opened the door, they attacked us. It was dark and my gun had fallen under the heater. I was searching everywhere everywhere for it—but by then I took one hit and then another.”

~

Nezar tells me, “I had a friend who worked in the hospital and it was his job to take care of the dead bodies. His job was to tie the hands and toes of the dead people otherwise they were too hard to move. Believe me Katy Jan. It became normal for him.

This is Wazir Akbar Khan hill. During time of war, there were so many bodies that they would take them to the top of Wazir Akbar Khan hill and they would dig a hole and dump them there. I saw it myself Katy-Jan.

I’ve seen people torn into tiny pieces like bread. Those days there was so much killing that really it became normal for us.”

*On War*

In Taloqan, in an internet café....

There is a helpful IT assistant and he has helped me troubleshoot problems.

While I check internet the he is playing on a very loud game with violent, loud and somewhat offensive sound effects.

After I finish and get ready to go,

“We have enough war here, why are you playing this video game?”

“This video game is a fighting game.” “It’s good for learning how to war.”

I say, “Learning how to fight? *Jang kafi darim*. We have enough war here”

He laughs.

I raise my eyebrows and walk away.

~

“Nezar-Jan, did you ever have to fight?”

“Ne, Kiti Jan. I saw it all. So I never had an interest in soldier things.”

“How is that after all this fighting; you never had to go to war?”

“Katy, my father was a police chief and he knows all the commanders. But I never wanted to fight.

I never wanted to fight. But once I had to. My father was in the mosque. Someone came up behind him and attacked him while he was praying. When he came home he looked so bad. We said *Aqa Qand* ‘Sweet Father’, ‘What happened?’ He said nothing. ‘What happened?! When he told us we were so angry. If it was me, I could stand it. I wouldn’t fight. But if they hit my father, I couldn’t stand it. When went to the man’s house and we hit him and their wives and their daughters, even with the butt of a gun. Then after that, the Taleban put a warrant out for my arrest with 100,000 rupees award. So every night I would go to a different house so that they wouldn’t find me. For 12, 13 days I would hide in one person’s house and then another.”

~

After telling many memories, Nezar tells me,

‘Katy-Jan, this fighting will not finish. War will not finish until one or two generations later, until this generation dies.’

”Why do you say that Nezar Jan?”

“Because every one is *doshmand-dar* ‘an enemy-haver’.

In my area, in Kabulbai, all the people are from one clan. And there are only 3 families who are not *doshmand-dar*.

A few weeks ago, one of my friends was having a wedding. I wanted to go and help him decorate his car. But my father didn’t allow me because he was ‘doshmand-dar’. If I am with him, I may become someone else’s enemy.

But I went anyways.”

~

Being a *doshmandar* not end quickly -- You know there was one man whose family member was killed by another family. That family went to Germany. He later went to Germany and you know what, years later, he went after that family and killed one of their members.

~

As we stand in the airport, waiting for a flight, Nezar waits with me outside the airport. All the flights are delayed because Karzai is coming. Unbenounced to me, Nezar notices that there are snipers laced on all the buildings around us. I ask,

“How can you see that?”

“Living through all this war, you get used to things, you recognize things.

Any 2 year old will hear any kind of explosion, and they can tell what type of arms it is , whether it’s a Kalashnikov or any other type of gun and whether it exploded or not.”

He tells me about the different types of guns, and how to unload and cock them and that no one knows but inside the mud wall of his family’s house, he had made a hole and placed a Kalashnikov inside the wall.

“But oh how I loved guns. When I was young I found one and took it all apart and put it back together.”

“Nezar Jan. With the love of hunting and with your love of guns, you never had to use one?”

*Ne, ba khodah Kiti Jan* , No, I swear by God that when I was young I liked guns. But when I saw the behavior of soldiers, I didn’t like it and I never ever any interest in being a soldier. I never had to use a gun on anyone.

“Nezar Jan. I’m scared. It scares me that I am standing here with you and that you’ve held a gun in your hands.”

“Katy-jan, there is no way you can grow up here, in this culture of war for 23 years, without knowing these things.”

~

As I travel to the airport, I long to pick up a stone, as I carry back a rock from each province. As I approach the Kunduz airport, I remember my desire for a stone. However the stretch from the main road out to the airport is littered with bombed out tanks, shrapnel, half of the shell of many airplanes and the fields are burned and army camps are all around. Without even having to think twice, I know these fields are littered with mines, so I will have to content myself with a dusty and ordinary rock from the airstrip parking lot.

*On Cruelty*

Laila tells me, “You know there is a lot of hatred between Hazaras and Pashtoons. This will not pass during this generation. Hazaras would cut the heads of Pashtoons and put them on a food cart and then send them to Sayaf, the commander. Then Sayaf would do the same, and send them back.”

~

“They would put women and children in a shipping container and lock the door. Then they would light a fire underneath. And cook them until they died.”

~

“And you know they treated prisoners so so badly. They would take the female prisoners and pin up their clothing so that their genitals were exposed. Then they would make her stand in front of the males. And they would make the males look at her. It was such a shame and the males didn’t want to. But they would shoot them if they didn’t.”

~

“The prisoners had nothing nothing to eat. So the prison wardens would cut women’s breasts and make a stew of it, and cut men’s penises and make a stew of it, and then they would ask the prisoners, ‘What do you want for dinner? Man or woman?’”

~

Laila tells me, “You know they were very cruel in those days. A women would be giving birth and they would stop her on the road on the way to the hospital, and make her lie down there on the road. They would take her clothes and make her give birth right there, with all the soldiers and men crowded around and watching. And she and the died there on the road. Maybe just of shame.

When I was living in Karte Se, a Hazara district, my father told me, if the Hazaras come, escape. If you can’t escape, jump in the well, and have the family throw rocks on you. It is better that you die this way then to have them catch you.”

~

Nezar tells me, “You know when we would go to monitor the classes in Kabul province, the trainers would go inside and we would sit with the elders of the village.

Once the chief of a village outside Kabul asked where our office was. I told him Karte Se. He told me about his experiences with the Hazaras in Karte Se.

He went to a house and took the women their and cut off their breasts and nailed them to the wall.

Then he killed all the family members.

He went to the last place and found a cradle. When he pulled off the blanket there was a baby sleeping with a smile on its face. He shot the baby point blank in the face.”

### *On Memories*

I am looking at a property with my IT girl, Fareeha.  
She says “ I don’t think you should rent this property”.

““Why?”

“I don’t want to come here.”

“Why?”

‘Because a lot of bad things have happened in this area. This was the front of the fighting between the two sides during Mujahedin time. See this yard ( points to a yard full of blooming roses), there are probably tons of bodies buried in this yard. Women were raped here. I don’t want to be here.’

(Just a few blocks away, in a compound where I was living, an unexploded rocket and ammunitions stash was found under the rose bed and across the street an unexploded land mine was found.)

~

I return to my phone one morning and see there was a missed call from my husband. “Jun, I was just thinking to call you at this very moment”. He tells me that a mob has attacked his office. It had surrounded the governor’s office and his security folks told him to stay put in lock –down. But the crowd kept growing and growing from 100 to 300 to 500. They started throwing things, and had sticks, the police started firing, the people started firing back. The office windows were broken by stones and bullets.

His deputy assistant, Seir, just lost it, started freaking out and running around aimlessly. The deputy was about to open the door and escape by running through the crowd. Max stopped him. They called Kabul Security Officer and the officer said ‘Stay there. We will call you back’.

He said to hell with the security advisor’s office and it’s time to evacuate the office and sent staff home.

Luckily, at that moment, the crowd moved in a wave to another area of the city.

He talks about Seir losing control, and tells me some of the things that his assistant has seen and the memories he has. In the time of the Americans rule after fall of Taleban, Seir had been a translator with the CIA and was present during an uprising of Taliban prisoners where 400 people there were killed and American was beheaded. Seir had been a witness to all this. He and one other American had fled the scene. The American had \$10,000 on him, and stopped the nearest car, bought it for \$10,000 and they both drove off.

~

I wonder about trauma. What is post traumatic stress syndrome. Could a whole country have it? I wonder about my driver. Do they ever talk about these stories. Or do they just keep it all in.

In America, if someone loses a child they may be in counseling for years and maybe never recover. Here, they tell me, almost everyone has lost a child and or at least someone in their family. They have seen everything. But do they talk about it?

Talking with Sara, Mary, Nezar, tons and tons of memories come pouring out. I ask, "Do you think about these things?"

Sara says, "At work we are too busy to talk, but at weddings, at wakes, at Qu'ran readings, then we talk about these stories. Yes we talk !

Mary says, "What is sad is that when we were in Pakistan. Each time someone new would come across as a refugee new horrible news would arrive and we couldn't believe it – oh he was killed?! Oh she was killed too?"

~

And I drive through the streets of the town, I realize that on every street corner I can tell you what happened there.

As I talk with Nezar, 'Your memories have become my memories.'

I wonder what is like for the people who actually lived through all of this and what they see when they go through the same streets as I do.

### *On Recreation*

Sara tells me, "During the time of Taleban, there was a man who put in jail, and he had to go to the bathroom. He just couldn't hold it. He pleaded and pleaded and finally a jailer let him out and went he went toward the bathroom, through the Taleb jailer's area, he saw a coat rack and on each hook hung a fake beard, side by side. The Talebs who held all the prisoners captive for having beards too short, were now hanging up their fake beards while they ate their dinner. He was so overcome with laughter that he forgot he had to go to the bathroom!"

~

Sara tells me, 'We went to Pakistan because of a volleyball.

Our house was right in Karte Se in the middle of the fighting and there was war on both sides of house. But my father went to Pakistan and he was with a group of people fleeing and it was so dangerous. They had to get in this truck. And the truck was going so fast that the baby flew out of the window, out of the mother's arms! Now matter how much she pleaded the driver would not stop the car! He said, "Are not all these people's lives more valuable than this just this one?"

So many people were lost trying to flee to Pakistan and they were never heard from again. You never know what happened to them. Some were killed. Some drowned. Mothers even would throw their baby into the river to keep it quiet so that the other people being smuggled out with them would not be discovered and killed.

After that, when my father came back, he said 'No matter how bad the fighting is, we will stay here'. But later the Taliban came. One day they came to our house and there was a volleyball in our yard that the kids were playing with. And they shot that volleyball with a gun.

And on that day we decided to flee to Pakistan – because of that volleyball.”

~

Nezar says, “Katy Jan- You see this traffic circle- Massoud circle. In Taleban times, it was a jungle, you couldn't even see the circle. And there were Taleban sitting inside. One time I was walking home and I had a Turkish film post with the picture of a girl on it, and it was rolled up in my hand. Then the Taleban stopped me and asked, 'What is that?'. 'It is writing paper?' They took it from me. And for that I got 25 lashings on hand.

And you know what—they kept the poster of that Turkish film girl for themselves.’

~

“One time it was my brother's wedding. We put on a cassette tape that had music. The Taliban raided the wedding and we heard them coming and we ran. But two boys didn't get away fast enough so they got caught. We had to pay a lot of money to get them out of jail.”

~

As we talk about stories with Sara, Nezar and Mary, joke about who got how many lashes for what, they laugh and laugh at these stories. I ask “Is it funny?” They say, “No, in that time it was not funny. No one could talk for fear of being turned in. But now it's hilarious. Only now we can laugh about it.”

~

Nezar tells me, ‘Once I was coming on the road from Pakistan. We were sleeping at night and then thieves came and took our money. We jumped up and ran after them... One of my friends was very fast. He ran ahead of all of us and almost caught them. Then one of the thieves picked up a rock and hit him square in the chest. He fell down flat --- just like a cartoon. It was so funny we laughed and laughed.’

~

As we drive on a long long trip, Nezar tell me how he used to watch Jean Van Damme films as teenager. He loved them and they taught good fighting techniques. What I realize is that what other teenagers saw in action pictures was fun for them. For Nezar, it was real life.

Later my aunt tells me about a new pre-teen craze in America , where kids try and drink till they pass out or choke. And an American in Kabul tells me about raves where kids run against the wall and smash into it, until blood spatters and how people get raped in these raves and all kind of things.

One day, we are in the car going to the airport, and Hamid Karzai's convoy stops all the traffic. We become late for our flight and Nezar's use "Van Damme" driving tactics- driving on the sidewalk, swerving into the opposite lane of traffic.

It's seems like it's all survival adrenalin - just different kinds of violence. One is targeted for a specific output – the other is just- for fun...?

### *On Daily Life*

There was a bomb in front of my husband's compound. As he called me from Kabul, I could hear him shouting 'Get Down' and others running while he held the phone. ISAF was in the compound, and was shooting across the yard at the perpetrators. Car parts had landed around the compound. Later my husband went outside the front gate and there was flesh around as well as car parts strewn around. The shopkeeper in front of his compound and the area around the entrance to Nezar's neighborhood had been bombed.

When I call to Kabul to talk to Nezar's brother, Sardar, "Last night 30 people were killed in the explosion and 4-5 of them were from my family's clan. We had to walk home from Wazir Akbar Khan and all the roads were closed. We didn't get home until 9:30. When I got up this morning, the dead people were still there, laying in the street. And about 4-5 people from among my neighbors are missing and people are trying find out if they are dead or injured."

After the explosion, someone asks me, *Rocket be kheir tir shod?* 'Did the rocket go well?'

Later when coming back to Kabul and talking to Nezar, he is cheerful and polite. I express my sadness and my condolences about the people he lost.

He says 'These things happen, Kiti-Jan.'

Of the people killed, one was his foster brother, foster father, and a child of 4 years, his son. The shopkeeper who was unrecognizable from the top half up. And from the waist down he was covered in flour. Nezar's friend lost his arm from the elbow down.

In the explosion that had happened two hours earlier on the same road, his two friends who worked on the car wash station were killed.

After hearing all the news,  
"Nezar, how do you feel about all of this?"  
"*Kiti--Jan, har kesi khod qesmat dare.*"  
'Everyone has their own destiny.'  
Their time was up.

Death follows the young person and the old person.

The time of death is never known. Only God knows the hour we will go.

If you are meant to go, you are meant to go, even if you are in the safest place or in America. If it is not your time, then it is not your time, no matter how dangerous the circumstances.

You know, we have seen things. People die all the time. It is normal.

But it is only, if you lose someone in your family, or your house, someone you see everyday, then that is really something. That is a loss. Like the man who lost his son in this explosion. We had goings and comings with him. Or we when people are dependent on that person for bread. That is a loss. ‘

### *On Endurance*

Sara tells me, “When the fighting was really bad, Believe me that in 7 minutes, 360 rockets hit. After 10 15 days, they would give a break in the fighting so that both sides could collect their dead. When it was so heavy like that, the whole family had to go into a hold in the ground. We all stayed there and there was no food. For 4 days no food. Even though I was a woman, I was the bravest one among them. There was an apple tree in the yard. I would run out and shake the apple tree so all the apples would fall. Then I would run back to the hole. After a half hour when things had quieted down, I scurried out and collect the apples. That way we had some food after that. But we ate only apples for the rest of the time.”

~

Nezar tells me, “You know every thing hurts more in the cold. Once I was riding my bike home on this road, (15<sup>th</sup> sty next to Wazir Akbar Khan mosque), and the Taliban stopped me because my beard was too short. And they gave me 200 lashings. And ohhh it hurt! In the winter, it hurts when your hands get beat !”

~

“But once I was coming from Pakistan and sleeping on the way and we got robbed. I had no money and I still had to come all the way from Pakistan. Since I had no money to pay for a bus so I had to jump on the back and grip on. So I gripped on to a bus. Believe me Kiti-Jan, I gripped it with my hand over all the bumps and jumps and potholes. ‘Katy Jaaa AAaan! I qadr... khak bud!’ ‘Ohhh! There was such a huge amount of dust.’ And it was good it was summer, because if it had been winter my hand wouldn’t have been able to grip the bar. And it was so dusty. In my face, in my hair everywhere. When I got home my mom asked why I was so dusty and I had to tell her the story.

~

‘One time I was playing in this stadium and we were playing football. And my beard was ok but my hair was too long. So the Taliban came and we didn’t know where to go. You are always supposed to do your ablutions before you pray. But the Taleban would catch us if you did not

pray. So when they came, we went right into prayers without doing ablution. Because of the Taleban forcing us to pray, I prayed without ablutions.

But still they saw my hair and o they caught us. And they took me and my bike in their car. And they took us to the main jail. And I asked one, ‘What did you do?’

‘My hair was too long.’

‘What did you do?’

‘My beard was too short.’

It went on and on like this.

And one guy said he had been put in the prison 32 times.

So I was there. And later I saw my dad and brother who came to visit. And they said ‘Do you need anything? I said, ‘No I’m fine.’ But really, I had no food. And one bread was 5000 lak rupees.

It was 80 people in one room. And in a space for 1, they put 3 people. And when I was there they would throw us in the water. They wanted to shave our heads. I could endure anything, but not when they shaved our heads. Because then we would die of cold when they threw water on us in that severe winter.

### *On Bravery*

Marzieh, the girl who helps in my house tells me she has to get classes or contacts. She explains “My eyes have gone bad because I had to weave rugs from when I was 12 to 16.. There was no other work to do during the war. So to survive I and the women in her family wove carpets. The boys all went to Pakistan to find work. So the women were left here and in the time of fighting we lived in a dirt hole under the ground. We had nothing to eat, not even bread. There was no school. There was nothing.”

During Taleban time, she and her sister Ramzieh taught classes for girls. All the girls in the neighborhood came to her house. They would teach them. Some people would say, “Don’t do this, if the Taliban knows you are teaching girls in your house they will catch you and put you in prison”. She said, “I don’t care if they do”, and she continued teaching classes. After the fall of the Taleban, a school was started in their neighborhood. The teachers were so surprised that some of the girls could read and write and it was if they had studied up to third grade. When they found that it was Ramzieh who had taught them, the teachers went personally to her house and congratulated her. Both sisters are still teaching children’s classes in their home.

Marzieh quotes “*Ranj dar rah ye khedmat ganj hast*”. ‘Suffering in the path of service is a treasure.’

### *On Honor*

Nezar says, “I have never once in my life extended my hand to ask someone else for money.

Once I was on the mountain. And my father asked if I had money.

I said ‘yes’.

But in truth I had nothing.

I walked four hours across town to reach by foot to Kabulbai village.

My grandfather would ask me. ‘Do you have money? I would always say yes, I have money’.

Even if I had nothing.

“Nezar why did you do that?”

“Because people will think less of you, they will be happy and they will feel better than you if you don’t have and they give to you.”

~

“Joblessness is the source of all bad things. The one is joblessness is everyday thinking who can I kill to get money, who can I steal from to get food for my children. And then he does something it lasts a couple of months. Until he steals again.

You see these police men on that corner. They are the same people who have been standing on that corner for 30 years. Their clothes change. Their beards change. But they are the same.

There all these people, who, with a gun, have eaten bread free for 15, 20 years. Even if you take away the gun they will not be ready to stop eating for free.”

~

Sara says “Sometimes mothers who would bring their children to the mosque and ask someone to buy them because they could not feed them. Many children were sold this way.

Nezar says, “Just the other day when I waiting for you at Chelsea supermarket, I saw a man who had sold his children for 700,000 rupees.”

~

Nezar says, “Honor is something that God has given. Look at all these poor people on this street. They are all poor. Some steal out of *majburiyatt*, ‘out of necessity’. But there are those will die before they will steal.

Your honor is given to you by God. No matter what happens, you can choose never to lose your honor.”

*On Hambastegi – Solidarity*

When the Operation Manager said he didn't want to leave the organization, but he needed a higher salary, all of the drivers got together and pooled together their money (while they made only a fraction of his salary) so that he would have enough and could stay.

~

Laila, a master trainer, had just returned from the provinces. The drivers did not know she was back in town and so when no staff car arrives she takes a taxi to work. When the taxi arrives the office gate, the drivers surround the taxi and each vies with the other, to pay her taxi fare.

~

Nezar had no money, not even enough to feed his family. But one day a guard came to him and told him his daughter was sick, could he help. Nezar went and borrowed money on his own name to give to the father.

### *On Free Time*

“How was your weekend, Nezar?”

”What weekend? We went to a wedding, and there was a fight. Me and Qais and all of us, got thrown in jail.”

‘Why did the fight break out?’

“Someone made a *chesmak*, a wink, at one of my relatives.

(A man winked at a younger man, meaning he wanted him for sexual favors)

~

While I am a guest in Nezar's house, his mother and sisters and father are with us. After we have asked the basic questions, everyone is silent. Only when the child comes in the room, conversation starts again, and everyone comments on what she does, whether she moves to the left or the right.

The mother says ‘It is so nice to have children, *ke sa'at tir mishe* ‘so that the hours pass’

She asks “Why don't you have children? You should have children so that *sa'at tir mishe.*”

She later shows the recent engagement photos.

“With these photos, *sa'at tir mishe.*”

In the span of an hour and a half, I hear his mother repeat “*sa’at tire mishe*” a minimum of 7 times.

I find later that none of the girls above twelve have gone to school, they are all illiterate and have not studied at the mosque, and their sa’at tir mishe-- their daily hours pass-- with housework.

~

During the month of Ramazan,

‘Nezar, your eyes are looking dark- how much sleep are you getting?’

‘Two hours. I get home at 10 or 11 from work, then we have guests that stay past 1. Then at 3:30 I am up again for dawn breakfast. Then I can’t go back to sleep again and then there are morning prayers and we start again.

But believe me Katy-Jan, in war time, we had much less sleep than this. Once I didn’t sleep for the whole week.”

~

“After all the fighting, the only thing that I miss was the time of the school years. I wish I had those days again. Your mind was free, and life was happy. “*waqt dars khandan khatta khord*’. But the time for studying was lost.’

~

We sit in the car waiting for my husband Max, outside the Roshan Telephone office.

‘Nezar, now I know what it feels like to be in your place. To be waiting.

Usually I am running around. But now we are both waiting.”

“Katy Jan. Waiting is very difficult. It’s one of the most difficult things to do.

Especially when you are imprisoned.

During the war years, the prisoners used to write graffiti- ‘*In ham migozarad*’

‘This too shall pass’

And in this way, the days passed.

One by one.”

### *On Death and Life*

“You know in the stadium they used to have public executions.

If a man was caught with homosexual behavior they would collapse a wall on him.

If a women was accused of infidelity she would be stoned.

At first every one liked the stadium executions, it was interesting and people would come. Then the people became tired of it..

You know after seeing an execution, each time, it felt awful. I could never eat anything until I had taken a shower.”

~

As we drive along the road at about 8 pm,

Zia, another driver, asks:

“Katy-Jan Can I ask you something?”

“Ask, Zia-Jan”

“Are you afraid of death?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you afraid of it?”

I explain my concept of death and life after death. How I actually look forward to death.

“Well If you see a dead person on the street are you afraid?”

“Why do you ask Zia-Jan?”

Because in time of Taliban, if you traveled on this street, at this time of night, every night you would see 10-15 dead people just lying in streets, in the ditches. People would take the clothes off their back and they would just be lying there.”

~

Nezar tells me, “Katy Jan, when people die and they are left in the street, you would not believe- - By the time their family comes, nothing is left- all their clothes and possessions have been taken.”

~

A woman who at the Ministry of Reconstruction and Rural Development tells me how during the war time, there was the *Raks – Marg*’-the Dance of Death. “People who had been decapitated were lying in the street at night. To scare the populace, people would pick them up and take them out and make them dance headless at night. People still have nightmares of this scene.”

~

Nezar says, ‘There was a battle so that was so bad, that we said that anyone that survived this battle would never die. *Hich marg nadara*. So we are the ones, after this we will never see death’.

~

After talking much time about this among a group of 4, Nezar says,

*I waqt tir shod.*

*Har kes mord mord*

*Har kes zenda mand, mand*

“That time has passed. Those who died, died. Those who are left living are living.”

~

My husband's impression after his first week in Afghanistan—  
“Either they will give their life for you, or they will kill you. There is no in between.”

~

A rural Maryland co-worker's advice to my husband, on the Afghans,  
“They should just nuke ‘em all”

~

Laila travels to Paktia, where she takes only a plastic bag, goes under cover as a doctor, doesn't tell anyone she is there until she arrives, and doesn't let anyone know she works with an NGO, or they would kill her.

I ask her, “Do you feel it is safe to go?”

She says, “If it is not your time to die, if is not the hour that God has appointed, you will not die. If it is your time to die, whether you are in America or the best of places, then it is your time.”

As she arrives back to the office various people say,  
“Laila- Welcome back ! Are you alive?”

“Laila! You came out alive!”

“Laila ! You returned alive?”

When speaking with her husband, and how she convinced him to let her travel to Paktika, she says “You only die once.”

~

“In Afghanistan, killing is easy.”

~

Nezar tells me, “Katy Jan- My baby is going to be born in 22 days.

“*Agar zenda bashim, shomara dawat mikonam* ’.

“If we are alive,

I will take you to the baby shower”

“If we are alive.” He says.

### *On Forgiveness*

Nezar says, “ You know this forgiveness is very hard.

There is a man in our village, *Comandan-e Qand* (Commander Sugar Sweet). In the time of war, there was a death owed to his family. So the other group came and raped all the women in his family in front of the family. So then in retaliation, they came at night and took 15 people from his house and took them out in the wheat fields and hacked them to pieces. Now he says that if he comes to mosque, he can make an oath on the Qu’ran, and inside the mosque he can swear to forgive, but when he leaves the door of that mosque and goes outside, he just cannot forgive those people.

In Taleban Times, when one side owed the other a death, they would come together in the stadium. And one man from the offended family had a right to kill someone from the other family. I saw so many times that after the death was avenged, the moment the avenger walked out of the stadium, he was killed by tens more bullets.

~

One time, there was a man who brought the offender to the stadium and he took the knife to his throat and then right there he forgave him. And he said, “I brought you here and I want you to know I have the right to kill you. And I have the power to kill you. But I forgive you. Not of weakness that I couldn’t kill you but because I choose to forgive you.”

~

When my father was taken as a prisoner of war by the Hazaras, they took him and brok all his ribs. And they bit the meat from off of his hands. And they put him in an outhouse with sewage up to his waste and left him there for a week. When we got him back he was so weak. It took him 3 months to recover and for the first week his only food was medicine.

You know if I see those people, I don’t know what I would do.

After more discussion...we talk and talk.

“Nezar-Jan if you see them, there is only one thing you can do. You must forgive. It’s the only way. If you, just one person, cannot forgive them, this nation will never rebuild itself.”

~

“Nezar, your father was taken as a prisoner of war by Hazaras?  
How do you feel about Hazaras?

“I don’t have any problem with them.

Kiti-Jan. Believe me. Whoever held a gun committed cruelty during these years. Pashto, Hazara, Tajik. All of them.

~

“The problem is this. If Hazaras are not in power, they are well behaved. But if they are in power, they become cruel. When they had power of this road here, they used to even nail horseshoes on to the feet of dogs.

Fakhrudin, (his Hazara friend), says that what was done for a 1000 years to Hazaras, it was committed to the rest of the populace only in the last 3 years by Hazaras and now there is all this talk against Hazaras. But these cruelties have been committed against the Hazara people for centuries.”

### *On Trust*

While traveling, Esmerai driver tells me,

“We discussed Katy-Jan and if anything happens, me and Nezar have decided that we will die first and you will be safe.”

“I know that. And that is why I trust you and why I work for these people in this village”

“You are very *del-por*, ‘full-hearted, brave’ Katy Jan. You travel with us until late at night”

Later when practicing English sentence, I give them English exercises to work on while I am monitoring.

My family is \_\_\_\_\_

My house is \_\_\_\_\_

My wife is \_\_\_\_\_

My life is \_\_\_\_\_

When I come back and check their work, Esmerai has written,

“My wife is \_\_\_\_\_ dead.

My life is \_\_\_\_\_ full of sorrows.

I tell them this is very deep.

Later he explains his wife had a heart problem and died two days after being married. He spent all his money on the marriage and now he is broke. Now he has been engaged to an illiterate girl in Paghman area. He is trying to work double shift so that he can earn enough to marry her. He asks if there are extra literacy books, because he wants to start literacy class in her village.

~

Several months later---

One evening I am driving with a temporary driver, Mustafa. I hear him mentioning a rumor to my husband that Esmerai's wife did not die of heart failure—that actually Esmerai has killed his wife. He brags about it to all the drivers. My stomach is sick and I suddenly feel uncomfortable in my skin, knowing that I have spent 6 days in the field dependent on Esmerai for my life.

The next day Esmerai is the temporary driver. I am not able to switch around the driver's schedules and as we travel around the city, I have this creepy feeling wondering if it is true or not.

I change the driver's schedules until I can confirm the situation.

I ask Babajan, the Operations Manager to investigate. The information is confirmed by various sources. He calls me early in the morning.

"It is true Katy Jan. Esmerai found she was a "woman" not "a daughter" after they married and so he killed her on the second day of marriage. He strangled her."

~

Zia, the Lead Driver and a brother-in-law of Esmerai, tells me, "Katy why are you taking Esmerai off the shift. People say he killed his wife but it is not true. He divorced her but it is a shame to say these things in this country, so instead he tells people he killed her."

"Zia-Jan. Whether he divorced or killed her, how do you think I can send my women to the field alone with him, when he tells people he has killed her?"

~

Babajan and I begin to investigate the background and politics of each of the drivers. He is driving with Mustafa when Mustafa tells him, "I miss the days of the fighting. In those days, when two factions were warring, we would chop the head off a person and then douse him with gasoline. I wish those days were here again."

When Babajan tells me this story his eyes well up with tears.

*"Daman qasab ich waqt pak nemishe."*  
'The skirt of the butcher is never clean.'

~

We root out all drivers with family connections to anyone else in the office. Except one- Nezar. We interview scores of drivers. Checking for political background. Or war history.

One says,  
“Yes, I can drive in the provinces.”  
“Which provinces have you worked in.”  
“ I have worked in Kandehar”.  
“Good. Who did you work with?”  
“I worked with the Arabs there.”  
“I see. What were they doing.”  
“I don’t know. Some kind of development action.”  
“I see.”

~

Another comes in mechanic uniform, replete with oil stains.  
“What is your name?”  
“Abdul Walid”  
“Up to what grade have you studied?”  
“Oh, 7, 8 , 9, in there.”  
“I see.”

~

I ask Nezar about this incident with Mustafa and his delight in oil dousing.  
“Did he really say that?”  
“Yeah, I was there. But he was just playing with Babajan. He was really pulling his leg.”

~

“Nezar?”  
“Ajan”

“How do you know who to trust? How can you trust people? You may have good relations but then you find things out that they have killed people.”

“Katy –Jan , really it is difficult to trust people here. You know I don’t have *salam-o-aleiki* with everyone. Only with some people. You have to see them. You have to see their character. And you can easily tell their character. This *jang* ‘war’ won’t end in Afghanistan for a long time. Not for 2-3 generations. Really it is difficult to trust people. And when there is killing that has happened, you can never trust people. No matter what they say.”

*On Powerlessness*

Nezar tells me, “Before, when you would go out on the street, each direction you would go, people would rob you. The soldier at the checkpoint, said to me,  
‘Give me one thousand lak rupees.’  
‘I don’t have it’  
‘Give me 2000 lak rupees.’  
‘I don’t have it’  
“Give me 3000 lak rupees’

Then if you didn’t give it, sometimes they would shoot you. Or they would take your bike and sell it back to you so you could give them the money.”

~

“With this *arami*- peacefulness, look how we are going around at this time of night. You could have never done that in the time of Rabbani. You know Rabbani Katy Jan? During the time he was president, between my village of Kabulbai and the Macrorayan apartment buildings there were 50 police posts. And the police were robbing at each one of them. Well Rabbani brought his family from Pakistan, believe you me, they robbed his wife and children. The president of the Republic, they robbed!

~

I get word that some of our staff have been caught and beaten by the police. Later I find it is a driver and the finance officer- Nezar and Sardar.

Nezar tells me, “We were going to pick up Sayed Azim in the staff car like we do every day. We came to this corner here in Karte Nau, and all the cars were passing through. Then the police stopped our car. They said, ‘You can’t go’ We asked why they stopped the other cars but they did not stop our car. They didn’t say anything.  
I said, ‘Man miram’. ‘I’m going’.

Then one police opened the door and pulled me out. My foot left the brake and the car lurched forward and hit the next car. Then the fighting started. They hit me on the shoulder until you could see the meat (He showed me and it was red and purple and black). They yanked off my gold Qu’ran chain and took my telephone, and hit me in the eye (his eye was bloodshot). They took my brother and gave him a sprained arm.

Then they took me to the Ministry of Interior and put me in a cell. One guard saw my ears and said ‘Oh you are a *pahlawan*’ so he beat me even more for about 40 minutes. (Pahlawans are people who train in an ancient form of wrestling and often get their eyes broken, so the scars are noticeable)

But my brother had called my father and they didn’t know my father was a police sergeant, so soon , 35-40 cars came to the Ministry of Defense and everyone said, ‘What’s going on? Who has arrived?’. My father came and got us out, with lots of back up.

They had thought they could stop our car and easily get money from us but they didn't know who my father was. Now everytime I go to Karte-Naw to pick up staff, the same police are there but they look the other way when we come."

~

All the other days it doesn't hit me. But today, it hits me. I go to the Project Principal Investigator and break down in tears

I am overcome with powerlessness, that I have the responsibility to protect my staff. And I have to choose when to send home 80 provincial visitors because the riots are too close. And I send my women staff to the field every week and they travel along the same roads where kidnappings occur and Talebs catch cars, and twice they have narrowly escaped robbery. And they leave their families and stay in uncomfortable places with little facilities where women who travel and work with NGOs are seen as bad, people easily kill. They tell me, "We know when we go to the provinces we are putting our heads in the palm of our hand and we do it for you, Katy. If it were someone else we would not do it."

Yet here in Kabul, two of my male staff, whose father is a police sergeant, are attacked and robbed and beaten.

I am pissed off and frustrated and filled with a sense of powerlessness.

### *On Tears*

"Nezar Jan, these stories should be written."

"No they are *jigar-khun* (sad- literally, they make your liver bleed) . People should talk about things that make them happy."

"Nezar Jan. Can I ask you something?"

"Ask Kiti Jan."

"Do you ever cry?"

"No.

Never.

I have never cried.

Not even if you eat a bullet you don't cry. And once when my beard was too short, they hit my hands 220 times. And Katy Jan when your hands are cold it hurts so much. But for me it was like I didn't even have hands.

One day there was a boy and there was a scorpion. You know the scorpion? With the pointy tale and all. Well it bit him. And it was so painful. And I was driving him and he was writhing in pain and when anyone came to the door of the car, asked him he would say "No no I'm fine.' But when they left he would writhe in pain. And after all that, still he never cried."

~

We are driving in the car. My husband calls and says something hurtful.

“KatyJan. With something small you become happy, with something small you become sad.

But I am not like that. I have seen everything. If one day there was murder, the next day massacre, the next day worse.”

~

“Have you ever cried?”

“*Ich.* ‘Never.’

Believe me I have seen people who ate bullets. Oh how it hurts and they never cried.”

“You know you had the right to cry . But you were never given the chance to cry. In the life of anyone in any other country, after one day there is a time to relax, and lick your wounds. Here it was one disaster, after the other. And your right to cry was taken away.

Let me tell you. Crying is something sweet. You would believe it’s deliciousness. It’s like a zit Or when you have to go to the bathroom. And there is so much pressure, but after that so much *arami*, a peace and quiet that comes. It’s such a peaceful feeling afterwards. Like nothing I can explain.”

“I want to do something for me. I want you to try to cry.”

“I can’t really. I just cant. Even however hard I tried.”

~

“Katy Jan, crying is a shame.”

“A shame?”

I think it’s a sign of strength.”

~

“Nezar. We had a presentation today. You know Ian. Who we dropped off tonight. Today in a meeting, when he heard the stories of our women and the impact of the Learning for Life classes, he was so touched he cried.

In this country , crying is shame. But actually it is a sign of strength. To be able to show your emotion. And be proud of it.”

“One day in the life of a lion is better than ten years in the life of a fox ( brave vs. cowardly)

“Nezar-Jan. Tears do not mean you are not brave. How many lions are there in the jungle? Only one. But there are also deer, ducks, foxes, ... There is a place for all kinds of people.

Tears are beautiful.”

### *On Heaven*

“Katy. Today I was washing the car. And I thought about Allison. And the orphanage she has, with 27 orphans. And her noble behavior. And I thought, she won't even be stopped for questions. She will go straight to heaven, “no questions asked”

~

Several months later

“You know, these mines are bad. One day, there was a girl who was in our neighborhood. And she climbed the stairs, and on the third stair there was a mine. It blew off her leg from the thigh down.

I found. I tied it up. I took her on my back and started walking toward the city. Between here and the hospital, there were 100 police check posts. They each asked me. Who is this girl. What are you doing with her. I said she a stranger to me. I am just taking her to the hospital. With great difficulty I got her through. I only had a little bit of money. So I used this to take a taxi. I took her to the hospital. Then I went back to the village to notify her family. By the time I got back to the hospital- - she had died.”

“Nezar, if you had done nothing else in your life, for helping this stranger, maybe you will go straight to heaven, “no questions asked”.

Nezar How did you handle of all of this?

*Kiti- Jan- Har halat ke sar ensan miaye, tir mishe.*

‘Any condition that comes upon a person, it passes...’

‘After all of this, how are you still alive Nezar Jan?’

*Tawakkol ba Khodah, Kiti-Jan*

On God we rely.

## From “*Sar-e-Sarak ba Nezar Jan*”

### *Stories from Riding the Road with Nezar-Jan*

#### CHAPTER 2

#### On Men and Women...

On *Eshq*- Love

On *Maqbuli*-Beauty

On *Hambastari*-Sexuality

On *Bad Aklaghi-ye-Zanan*- Women’s Misconduct

On *Adl*- Justice

On *Bad Aklaghi-ye -Mardom* -Men’s Misconduct

On *Arusi*-Marriage

On *Hoquq o Naqsh*- Rights and Roles



### *On Love*

Nezar tells me, “There was a boy who was poor, just a laborer. But he was a beautiful artist. He saw a girl in the university and fell in love with her. From afar, he drew her portrait. And he gave it to the school guard to give to her. He swore the guard not to tell who had made it.

When the girl received the picture, she was very touched. She pleaded and pleaded with the guard to tell her who had drawn it, but he would not budge. But finally she convinced him. So he took her to the top of the hill in the poor neighborhood where the boy was making mud bricks. He came out of the house all muddy and dirty. But she fell in love with that boy. And despite her class and education she married that boy. And later in life, he took her London. But when she was there and still young she had a heart problem and died. And he returned to Kabul. And because of that girl he never married again. He still sits for her.”

~

Nezar tells me “The mulla in the mosque near my house loved a girl. But he stepped on a landmine and lost his leg. After that her father would not let her marry the girl. So he has remained unmarried all his life for love of this girl.”

~

“There were many people who were killed. Or who disappeared, or were taken prisoner and you never heard from them again. So often the brother would marry the widow.

But sometimes the husband would come back after many years and when he saw what had happened, he would kill himself.”

~

“There was a boy who sometimes went to Kabul Bank and there was a girl there who he saw and who he liked. But then came upon a land mine and lost both legs. He was in the hospital. The girl went to visit him and when she saw him, she couldn't speak. After she left, he threw himself out of the window. When she came out of the hospital on the ground floor, he fell before her and died.

### *On Beauty*

Nezar tells me, “You know during the time of Taliban, women would get beat if their feet were showing.

And you know they would clean their feet and make them white and then take rouge and put it on the bottom of their heel. And then men would see them and say wow, what feet she has. If her feet are that beautiful, how white and beautiful she must be.

It has an effect you know. Not seeing a woman’s face for 4 or 5 years. Their eyes were hungry.

For that reason, now, still the Afghan man’s eye is always hungry, it can never get full.”

### *On Sexuality*

Nezar tells me, “Once I was a traveler. I was going from here to Pakistan. I had no place to stay. I stopped at a house and they were so hospitable they let me stay with them. And they had no space. They all slept in one room. But the father put me to sleep right between the girls. I was so afraid that whole night, that if I fell asleep, I would turn in my sleep and accidentally touch one of the girls. I was so afraid. I didn’t sleep one wink.”

~

Nezar says, “Once I was in Pakistan. And there was this girl, whose a relative of my uncle’s. My uncle put me in charge of taking care of her. She took a liking to me. Once she said, ‘I’d like to kiss you.’ I opened the door and jumped out of the car!”

~

Rose, a midwife trainer, tells me, ‘You know there was a woman who came to clinic to have her baby. And she was so ashamed to open her legs, that she couldn’t give birth. The baby died because she wouldn’t open her legs.’”

### *On Women’s Misconduct*

Speaking with Nezar’s 80 year old, feeble grandmother in the sitting room. We speak of going coming, of Pakistan of life in Kabul.

“Are you able to go out much?”

“No, my legs hurt me. I cannot walk.”

“Then the boys will take you. You can go on one shoulder of Khaled, and on one shoulder of Nezar.”

Laughing, “Well sometimes I do sit in the sun.

But I don’t want to go on the roof now, because in this holy month of Ramadan I don’t want these innocent stranger men on the houses around to see my naked head and break their fast.”

.....The poor innocent men who might lose themselves in lust, if they saw this 80 –year old gray woman bear-headed....

~

In a discussion on gender issues, Zohra, a Regional Education Manager, tells us a story,

‘There was a woman in our neighborhood, who was going home in the early evening in Macrorayan. A taxi was speeding and hit her. After all the *ghal o maghal* (uproar) they got the woman out from under the car. She told the taxi driver if only you would have been going faster and killed me, because if it is better than I were dead, than go home late and get beating from my husband for being so late.

~

Nezar tells the girl on the street, “Don’t wash the windows.”

“I don’t like it when they do this.  
They get used to receiving money.  
And then they receive money for anything.

You see all the women in the ministries. They receive \$40 a month. You cannot live on \$40 a month.

So out of necessity they ‘get into cars’. And from that money, that is how they survive.

Yesterday, when I stopped by the Ministry of Education waiting for our staff, a woman tried to get in my car. I didn’t let her. But the next car, she got right in.

~

In time before Taleban, there was no food. No bread. People would stand on the street on night in front of the bakery to get one piece in the morning. Many times they would die there in the cold. Some women, out of necessity, would become friends with the baker. He would be with her, and she would get a piece of bread from this.

In those days, people were forced to do anything to survive.

But there are those will die before they will lose their honor.

Your honor is given to you by God. No matter what happens, you can choose never to lose your honor.

~

Nezar tells me, When I was in Pakistan, I was a young boy. I lived alone. There was a woman that was older than me. Every day she would say hello. I never said much to her. But I did have *salam-o-aleiki* with her 'I was on speaking terms'.

Then one day she wanted me to help move a dresser. I agreed to help her. She asked me to come inside the house. As soon as I was inside, she shut the doors. And she started to make tea and make me sit down and talk to me. Then I knew what she wanted, so I made an excuse and escaped and I ran out of that place.

~

As we get ready for a training at the university female dormitory, we have to get a special pass for the car, we have to list everyone's names at both gates, and still the guards give us a hard time to let the participants and staff into the training hall.

Sardar tells me, 'This girls dormitory is a very bad place. I can see that all kind of people are coming here and *har chiz* 'all sorts of things' are going on. That's why you see it- it's almost empty all those fancy rooms they built. No one wants to send their girls here.'

~

Nezar tells me "You know whenever we have trainings at the girls dormitory, all the drivers love it. Each girl they pass they always try and give her a ride. Most of them just walk by. They won't even look at some of our drivers.

But when I went there, there was a girl, I asked if she needed a ride. She looked at me and said, "Sure, Green-Eyes"

~

You know while you were in America, I was waiting outside a training and some girls walked by. They said, *Spond bokhorin*, "Take a whiff of incense and say a verse to protect you from the evil eye".

I asked, "Why?"

“Because your eyes are beautiful.”

“What else is beautiful?”

“Just your eyes- that’s all.”

“Nezar That was fresh!

“Yes, the girls of Kabul. They are getting very fresh.

They will do anything these days!

I even saw a situation where a group of guys were standing around making comments at all the girls that passed. One girl passed, a guy made a dirty comment, and the girl retorted with such a dirty comment that you wouldn’t believe it. He was so taken that he almost cried out of shame.”

~

Sara tells me about the wedding ceremony. “After the consummation of the marriage the sheets are collected and shown to the women of the house. The sheets must be bloodied for the marriage to be valid. Many young girls are not allowed to ride bikes or play volleyball for fear that there will be a problem when they are married off.

After the sheets are collected and shown to the female members of the party, then there is a party called the “Sheet Collection Party” where the whole family comes together to celebrate.

You know, I even sent a bride home because of this. In my home I am the matriarch and I have the responsibility to do this. We married off my brother and there was a \$7000 expense. But then it was found that the sheets were not bloodied and she after that herself admitted that she had been with another man. So we returned her. And my family took a great financial loss because of this.”

~

Laila, a powerful female master trainer, must come late one day, so she takes a taxi to work.

On the way, the taxi driver says,

“Where are you going? What do you do?”

She replies with a story...“I am teacher. I am going to pick up my salary.”

“Why are going to that NGO?”

“The NGO pays my salary.”

He says. "Oh this is ok then. It is good you are not working in NGO. Those women who work in NGOs are bad, with bad conduct, and doing bad things inside that place and associating with men. If there were any woman in my family who worked in an NGO, even my own sister, I would run over her with my own taxi."

When she arrives to the office, the drivers all come and say "Why didn't you call us?" They each try to pay the fare of her taxi to the taxi driver...

~

After 6 days of driving together on many many roads through Jowjzan, and visiting many women holding literacy classes in their houses,

'Nezar, why is it that if a woman's clothing is not long enough, everyone says she is bad, but for the man who looks at her, no one says anything.'

'That is bad too. *Chesme bastast*. 'The eye should be closed.'

After a while,

"Why is it that if a woman commits *zena* 'sexual misconduct', they stone her but if a man does, they don't do anything?"

"*Walau, Katy-Jan, nemifahman*. 'Katy, I really don't know.'"

After many more hours of monitoring,

"Why is it that these women are imprisoned in their houses? I can be here and I can feel sympathy and I can work for these women, but I do not have to live that way, inside those 4 walls. All I can do is sympathize.

What can I do Nezar-jan?"

"I don't know. I really don't know."

"Katy-Jan. How is that we came to these discussions?"

### *On Justice*

Rose, tells me how in the Southern Pashtun area where she lives, she is finding out why people are so scared to go out. If one family is warring against another family, they will seek justice by taking the girls from the enemy family and dishonoring (raping) them in front of their men. When girls go out to fetch water they are often raped at the water

source. If a girl is raped, they will usually never ever tell anyone, because she would be instantly killed by her family because of the shame.

### *On Male Misconduct*

Nezar tells me a story,

“There was a Mulla, and a woman came to sleep in the house next door.

During the night the wind kept blowing and the door would open and shut, open and shut.

The Mulla said she was doing bad things, that every hour a new person would come in But in the end, it was the Mulla went to hell not to paradise because his own thoughts were not pure.

~

Nezar tells me,

“Katy! Today was a historical day!”

“Why ?”

“Because you sent me to the Korean restaurant to pick up food.. And I went to find the restaurant but I couldn’t locate it. And everyone I asked, they would say, Korean what’s that?”

I said “It’s like Chinese but different.”

And then each person I asked for directions would cast a long look at me and say,  
“O my son, are you married?”

(Chinese restaurants are famous for being brothels in Kabul)

Zaryalai was with me and he was so ashamed, he just lowered his gaze and he shrunk away.”

“Then I was really lost. Two hours we were looking for this restaurant. There was one car on the street and inside it was a couple. I went to the car, and they were kissing. I wrapped on the window, and said “Excuse if I bother you. Can you tell me where this restaurant is?”

“If I bother you?! Nezar! Yeah, I think you were bothering them!”

“Well even they didn’t know where the restaurant was.

Two and a half hours later, I finally found it.

I never had a day like today.”

~

Nezar picks me up from Capoeira Brazilian martial arts class, where I have working out.

I get in the car and sit down next to the office clothes I had left on the seat

“Katy!!! I got in so much trouble tonight!”

“Why?”

“Because of these clothes!”

“What do you mean?”

“Well after you changed at work into your exercise clothes, you left these clothes here. Then I dropped you off at the Capoeira class and I headed toward Qais’ office to hang out with the guards.

But at the Haji Yaqoob intersection, the police stopped me. They looked in the car and said, ‘Oooh! What’s this? Women’s clothes?’

I said, ‘These are my sister’s’

But they didn’t believe me.

They opened the car and searched under ever seat looking for a woman.

They even took a water bottle and started sniffing it. I told them ‘It’s unopened!’  
But they didn’t care- they were looking for alcohol.”

~

Nezar tells me,

“Boys follow girls.

Any woman walking on the street, every van stops and ask if he can give her a ride.

They won’t get in the car. They ignore you. They insult you.

But men are patient.

And women have too much mercy

You ask them once, twice, 3, times. After 4 times, they start to have *Salem-o-aleki* ‘greetings’ with you.

Then eventually when you say, ‘Can I give you a ride?’ Eventually they agree.

On this road, all these cars you see- every 3 cards they are empty , the 4<sup>th</sup> car is carrying a woman in the back.

And sometimes they will buy things for the women.

*Moft kharj nemikonand* And they do not spend money for free.”

“What are you saying?”

“Katy you know I have made an oath that I never lie to you.

It is not nice, but it is true.”

~

“You know even with all these restrictions, I bet you that there is more going on between girls and boys here even than in America. Because this is the way it is. Anywhere in the world.

Boys want to be with girls.  
And girls also want to be with boys.”

~

“Nezar Jan. Look at this girl. She is handicapped and she can hardly even walk. Getting out of the house must be so hard. But look at her in her school clothes. I am so proud of her that she is going to school. Give her your English book. I will buy you another one. I will stay here. You go across the street and give it to her. Tell her I will vote for her when she is president.

“I can’t give it to her. I’m a boy. If I talk to her, she will slap me. If you are a foreigner she will take it from you. “

“Haa! Ok. We’ll do it together. You drive slowly and I will give it to her...”

~

“Nezar. You have told me all these stories. And you have said you never lie. Have you ever had any thing happen with a girl.?”

“No. The truth is that I like to be around girls. But I like talking and laughing. But nothing more.

But once, in Pakistan, I did catch a girl and kiss her. There was a wedding and these two girls kept following us and eyeing us. So in a good place, one boy went to one end of the room and blocked the door and the other went to the other end of the room and

blocked the other door. Then I caught her. I wanted to kiss her but she wouldn't allow it. But then she finally did."

~

I go to an NGO. As I am leading a class activity where the children are drawing pictures. All the children crowd around me to show their pictures. One male teacher keeps coming behind me and pressing his genitals against me. Later as he leaves the room, he touches my behind.

As the children leave, I tell the head teacher and then shut the door and gather all the male teachers together and give the man a heavy scolding in front of all of them. "This man has done something very shameful. I am a guest in your NGO and a guest in your country. I want this never ever to happen again."

"But Sister- You are my sister, I am your brother"

"I want this never to happen again!"

~

In the car, Nezar says,  
"Katy! I'm so sorry I wasn't there. I left only for a minute to take a phone call. You should have told me what happened!"

"What would you have done?"

"I would have wanted to fight.  
But I know you would not want me to fight."

"Nezar I don't need a man to protect me from other men.  
I need to be able to protect myself.  
I need the men to understand that they need to control their own selves.

What do you think should I have done?"

"You could have slapped him."

"But that is one day pain. The pain of the tongue is for 100 years.  
With a public shaming he will never do that again.

Nezar, They wouldn't dare to do that to an Afghan woman.  
Why?"

“An Afghan women, first out of fear and shame she would never say anything.  
But if he did do it, *Jang mikhize*-War would arise.  
100 people would be at his next doorstep in a minute.”

“So why did they do that to a foreigner?”

“They think these things are normal for foreigners  
On the films, it shows people being in the bed together, someone else walks in the door,  
and comes and in out, while they are together and the couple doesn’t even pay attention.  
So that they think this is normal for foreigners.”

~

I tell Sardar, Nezar’s brother what has happened.

Sardar says, “You know Katy. That is why I cannot take my wife to the bazaar.

If I take my wife to the market and someone touches her. There are only two options.”

“What?”

“Either he kills me or I kill him.  
So it is better she stays inside the home.

For my sisters, that is why I do not allow them to go to school.”

“What? Sardar?!”

What?

I am running a literacy project for women, and you, my right hand, will not allow your  
sisters to go to school?

Should I leave Sardar? Should I go home?”

“Katy--This is the situation.

There is no school in our village of 3000 people.

So if I want them to go to school, they have to walk on the main road outside of the  
village.

As they are walking, 4 out of 5 vans will stop. And ask them if they want a ride.

And they can say nothing. Or they can say no.

But the 5<sup>th</sup> van that stops, if they have to raise their voice to say no,

The people will say,

Oh look, she is fighting for her fees.”

~

“Sardar, I want to invite you and your wife Adela, plus Nezar and Arzu to my home for dinner.”

“Katy, Come to our house.”

“No, I always go to your house. I want to invite you over to my home this time”.

“Let’s go to a hotel.”

“No I want to invite you to my home. And we’ll watch a movie and eat popcorn. It will be fun.”

“I’m sorry Katy.  
I can’t.”

“Why?!”

“Because you live in a guesthouse.”

“And?”

“A guesthouse has a bad name. All kinds of people are there.”

Sardar, It’s just me and two other housemates. They are both women.”

“But the guards will say something.”

“So what if they say something.  
What will they say?”

“If they see me bring a women in a blue burqa they will make all kinds of gossip.  
They will say I am bringing them to get the favor of the big boss.”

“So what. We are brother and sister. If they talk, they talk.”

“Katy, I cannot. You can must Adela yourself.”

~

At Sardar’s home, talking to Adela , I say,  
I invite you to my home. Will you come to my house?

If it is a private house.

It’s a private house.

Only me and one other girl live there.

Will you shake on it ?

She shakes.

But I do not find time in the last days of the project.

### *On Marriage*

On the road in Jowzjan, Nezar's mother calls. The phone is given to his wife. She is silent and cannot say hello.

"We never met before we were married.

My wife for the first five months that we were married she never said more than 10 words. I asked for a glass of water and she would send it through one of the children in the house.

But now she is ok.

It's no problem."

"Nezar, are you sure it's ok?"

"She likes me, I like her.

It's fine."

~

"We never met before we were married.

I did not want to marry. But my father wanted me to marry.

So I left the house for a month.

But eventually I had to comply with my father's wishes.

We never met before we married. I was shown a picture of her. I thought she was ugly.

But then she was shown to me at a gathering. It was not so bad. We shook hands once.

*Salam. Salam* But never spoke, other than this, and I never saw her for more than these 2 seconds.

Then we were married."

~

“You know, it was always my hearts wish to have a literate wife. But this was not in my *nasseeb o qesmat*, ‘not in my destiny’. But my father forced me to marry. I didn’t want to marry, and then when I saw the picture, I didn’t like her. I left the house for a month. But then, a father is a father, so I obeyed my father’s wishes.”

“Nezar, this is not your destiny. Destiny is what is in God’s control and out of yours. But this was in your father’s hand. Someone should have talked to him. If I were here at that time, I would have sat him down and talked to him.”

~

“Nezar, You always talk about that classmate of yours. Why didn’t you marry her?”

”How could I ever have the courage to tell my parents. It was impossible”

~

Sometimes I wake up in the night and I am saying (my classmate’s) name.

Arzu says , “What did you say?”

“Nothing nothing.”

“Katy, now she is married and the owner of 4 children. But even if I would give up everything in the world to marry her. I would pay all the money in the world.”

“Maybe, one day you could marry her. “

“No. By the Grace of God, by the Grace of God, by the Grace of God, she is happily married with her husband, and may she have a happy life forever.”

~

“Katy-Jan. I always had a wish. To have a second wife. A literate one. And keep her in Macrorayan. No one would know.”

“But your family would have to know. “

~

Taking our colleague, Aziz home,...

I ask him,

“Aziz, how many children do you have?”

“4”

“And how many wives do you have?”

“1”

“And how many husbands does she have?”

They laugh...

“And what is the question’s answer?”

Nezar says “This question has no answer, Katy-Jan!”

~

“Nezar, How would Arzu feel if she knew of your feelings for (the classmate).”

“It’s no problem.

For men it is permissible to have 4 wives.”

“But what about for the woman?”

“No they must have only one husband.

It is a matter of the children.

If a women has many husbands no one knows who the father is.

But if a man has many wives, the father is always known.”

“Nezar, if .... were your wife. Could you bear it if she spent one night with you and one night with another husband in the next room?”

...

“No.”

“So it the same for a woman. How could she bear that her husband would be with someone else? Does he love her more than me? What about this, about that....

So it is not a matter of fatherhood.

It is a matter of emotions.”

### *On Rights and Roles*

Laila tells me, Nezar tells me, others tell me about the respect Pashtuns have for women. “You know Katy. Pashtuns have a lot of respect for women. If you are traveling on the road, and there is a women with you, they will not stop to bother you.

If there is a fight in a family, it will continue for centuries. But if a women is sent as a representative to apologize. They will immediately forgive.”

~

After visiting literacy classes all day every day, each time I would tell the drivers all the exciting things that had just happened in the class. At the end of the trip, I tell them *Kash ke shoma emtiaz zan budan midashtin, ke mitavanestin dar in senfa mirin*

‘If only you had the privilege of being a women, so that you could go in these classes.’ I will say this prayer for you at the next shrine.”

‘What are you saying Katy-Jan!!! Please don’t say this prayer! I wouldn’t want to be locked in my house and have to ask my husband for permission to go out.”

~

We are together with Nezar and Ramzieh, the girl who cleans my house. It comes up that the first time they met, when she asked if he was married, he lied and says he was single.

I ask why?

“Because I want to have a second wife.”

Ramzieh says, “But I don’t want to marry. I don’t want to be imprisoned.”

“If Ramzieh marries she will have a different kind of marriage. She and her husband will have equal rights.”

Nezar responds, “Respect of wives for husbands is a *farz* ‘obligation according to Islam’. But respect of husbands for wives, is a *sunnat* ‘a voluntary tradition’

~

~

“Good Morning.”

“Good Morning.

Your shirt was torn. Now it’s fixed! Did you sew it last night?”

“No that’s women’s work.”

“What?! !

What do you mean women’s work?

If one person is earning money it’s ok that the other takes care of the house and the family. Or vice versa. But this does not mean that this is women’s work.”

After a while, Nezar’s voice changes. He says softly,

“Really, they are made to the wishes of the other. My role is make my wife happy.

I must do her desire, and she must do my desire.

Whatever Arzu says I accept, whatever I say she accepts.

The life of a man is in the hands of a woman. It is the woman who makes the life.

If it were not for Arzu, why would I paint my house, where would my son come from?

~

I bring something for Nezar and he wants to repay me.

I tell him, “You can repay me this way. I have one request. I want you to help Arzu and Quddus, your baby, become literate.”

“Now I see the impact of not getting an education on my own life. I will send Quddus to classes and to school.”

“And what about Arzu?”

“She is not interested. She doesn’t want to learn. We brought a mulla to the house. And she wasn’t interested.

But I will send Quddus, and if I have more boys I will send them to school. And to the music class, and the exercise club. I will give everything to give them an education.”

“And if you have girls? Will you send them to the school and all the extra classes?”

“No.

I will bring a mulla to the house. Or maybe I will send them to school “

“Nezar I want you to remember something.

20 years later when I am not here. I want you to promise me to send your girls to university.”

“I can’t.”

“If I were your daughter would you send me to school?”

“I would send you to high school.  
And get you married.  
And after that it’s your husband’s decision.”

“My husbands decision?”

“Yes, if I marry you off, then I would have no say. I cannot interfere.”

“And so if you are my father, and my husband beats me, would you interfere?”

“No, that’s between you and your husband. It is not my role to interfere.”

~

“A woman should be soft. She should have affectionate speech.

A man should be like a brave lion.”

~

Driving along Jalalabad Road...

“Nezar, I’m so so bad with cooking.”

“Cooking is a good skill to know. Especially for women.”

“What?! For women? Why women? “

“Well if someone comes to the house and there is an unexpected guest, food can’t be gotten outside in Afghanistan so its good to know how to cook.”

“But what about for men?”

“It’s good for everyone to know. I know a few dishes. But Arzu knows many dishes.

I learned when I was a cook in jail.  
Also while on travel, when I was a refugee”

“I’m sorry – you are right. It ‘s good for everybody to know. I’m no advocate for women’s rights specifically. Just for anyone who doesn’t have rights. But everyday we talk we talk and it comes up again and again. But I never let you off the hook.”

Katy, speak to me as freely as you wish. I am happy when you speak to me freely.

~

Nezar tells me,

”Women are weaker than men.”

I respond, “No they are just different. Men are stronger in some things that women are weaker—especially physically. And women are stronger in some areas than men.

“Even in Islam there must be 3 female witnesses to equal one male.”

“What are you saying? I can hear many things. But this I cannot take. That the judgment of 3 women is equal to that of one man?

“They are not equal.”

Silence.

“They are.”

“Nezar.

Am I weak?”

“Yes.”

“Your heart is weak.”

~

Nezar says,

“Men are made for women. And women are made for men. They need each other. They are made to be together.”

~

“Nezar, I wasn’t even paying attention. I came out of the restaurant, with out my scarf. And Naysan has just been here a week and not used to things. Without thinking, I said goodbye with kiss on both cheeks. The soldiers were nearby. Is that bad?”

“No Katy. It’s no problem. This is Wazir Akbar Khan. They are used to foreigners. For me, it is no problem.”

“But for others it is.”

“What people do is their own business.”

“But Nezar.

Others don’t think that.

If everyone thought like you do, this country would be a different place.”

~

Nezar says,

“Women will never be equal to men.”

“What?!”

I open the car door and start walking on the road.

“Katy, come.

Come.

Will you make men and women by walking on foot ?”

“No.

But I will not sit here and accept that speech.”

~

“Nezar Jan. Sometimes I wonder. You who I know so well.

You are always peaceful and gentle.

And you who I witness how respectfully you treat women on a day to day basis.

If you don’t think peace will come for three generations,  
if you deep down don’t believe men and women are equal,  
if you wouldn’t stop your son in law from beating your own daughter  
what about the person on the street?

What about that man, right there, in his patu-woolen blanket.  
If you are forward thinking, what is he thinking?

We are still very very far...”

~

6 months after the fact, I learn that when Nezar father's was beating his mother, Nezar told him,

“Do not do this, Father.”

“She is my wife.”

“Sure, she is your wife. But this is not what you take a wife for.  
It is not for the husband to inflict cruelty on the wife.  
Women and men are equal in the sight of God. There is no difference between them.”

**From “*Sar-e-Sarak ba Nezar Jan*”**

***Stories from Riding the Road with Nezar-Jan***

**CHAPTER 3**

**On Family Planning...**



While I am a guest in my driver Nezar's house, his mother and sisters and father are with us. After we have asked the basic questions, hello-how are you- are you well- everyone is silent. Only when the child comes in the room, everyone comments on what she does.

The mother says 'It is so nice to have children, *ke sa'at tir mishe* 'so that the hours pass'

She asks me, "Why don't you have children? You should have children so that the hours will pass. When you feel bored or unhappy, come here to see us and the hours will pass."

She later shows the recent engagement photos.

"With these photos, *sa'at tir mishe.*"

In the span of an hour and a half, I hear his mother repeat *sa'at tire mishe* a minimum of 7 times.

I find later that none of the girls above twelve have gone to school, they are all illiterate and have not studied at the mosque, and their *sa'at tir mishe*-- their daily hours pass-- with children--and with housework.

~

I am in the field in Faryab with Sara. We sit and have lunch with 30 of the village facilitators and the lunch spills into a side room where about ten of us are crowded around the *dasturkhan*, 'vinyl eating mat'. One woman has a baby at the breast and another one-year old at her side. The one year old is carrying a water jug from the bathroom, every where he goes. He cannot get enough to drink. He keeps one hand on the breast that is not being nursed by the infant.

Sara laughingly says to the mother, "This is cruelty. He is dieing of thirst.

The infant has one breast, the baby has the other... Where is your husband going to put his hand?!"

All the women laugh.. ....

~

I travel to Khost, and I am greeted by a trainer. She says "Meet my son. He just received his study certificate today. And he is 25 years old, has had 4 children .. and 3 of them are alive!"

"Congratulations to your son , on both accounts!"

~

On the road from Kabul to Jowzjan.... I travel with my driver, Nezar, to a site visit..

“Katy-Jan. I have a question.

Do foreigners not like children?”

“What do you mean?”

“They don’t seem to have many. And they don’t seem to like them.”

I explain my standard story of how instead of spreading all the seeds around the yard, they collect them and dig a deep hole and plant one or two seeds and put all the water to make these two trees grow strong.

He says,

“Here we say:

*Ruz-e-shan Khodah Pak mite,  
Garangeshan zamin mivardare.*

“God gives their daily needs,  
And the earth carries their heaviness.”

~

Nezar says, “My wife, Arzu, is not literate. Neither is my brother’s wife. They have never gone to school nor have they went to mosque for classes. We got married when she was 14. She got pregnant but she lost the baby. The doctor said to wait. Now she is 16 and she is pregnant again but she is sick all the time.”

~

We travel the backroads of Jowzjan and the drivers and monitors talk. One driver, Esmerai says, you know I only want 2 children. And they don’t need to be boys. Nezar says, *Chi migi???*, ‘What are you saying’, Esmerai?

~

As we travel along the road, while we monitors go to the literacy classes, the drivers and male staff go to the shrines and offer prayers while we are in the class.

When we are together, we practice English.  
(in English) --“What did you pray for at the Shrine”.  
“I prayed that God gives me a baby boy”.

~

“How is Arzu?”  
“She is sick again.”

“It seems like she is always sick. Nezar, you know. I would be happier if Arzu were not pregnant.”

“So would I.  
She herself is a child.  
She was married at 14, miscarried at 15, and now is pregnant again at 16.  
But what to do?”

“You know there are ways to prevent this.  
It is better that you wait 2 or 3 years.”

“You are the third person who has told me this.  
Sara, a Master Trainer and Lila, another Master Trainer also told me this.  
After that, I was thinking about this on my own.”

~

Nezar tells me, ‘I went to the doctor. To her ask her about it. And I just couldn’t look up. There were posters all over the walls. If I looked up, I couldn’t stop laughing. So I just looked down. The doctor was there and I said to her, well how do I say it, where do I start. And I was so worried someone else would come in. And then suddenly in one sentence I blurted out what I wanted to ask.

And for her it was something normal, just something medical. She said that in Afghanistan the medicine is not good. It is expired, or bad quality. But there is good medicine coming from other countries.’

~

“Nezar. I am going to America.

What shall I bring for you?”

“.....Nothing.”

“I see it in your face, you need something. Just tell me.”

“I will tell you later.”

“No tell me now.”

Ok....

.....

Quickly he says,

“Can you bring some family planning medicine?”

~

I bring back family planning medicine from America. In the car, I show him the materials and explain how to use them.

He asks, “Can a mother use these if she is nursing? Can a woman get pregnant when she is sick (on her period)? Is it true that woman have more interest in being together during her period?”

All the basics of ovulation are explained, and off go the materials in a plastic sack to his house.

“But I want you to explain these things to Arzu so she can understand them too.”

”That will be difficult.

Believe me. Sometimes there is a television promotion that discusses these things. And the men and women in my house , even brothers and sisters can’t sit in the same room and watch the television at the same time.”

~

Sardar, the Administration Manager, and brother of Nezar, comes to my office. We finish our work and it is the end of the day, so we chat a bit.

We talk about home, how things are going...

I give my advice. Now that he is being promoted, it’s good he will move up. But he should get more professional training. And he should wait a few years before having children.

He looks nervous and goes to shut the door.

“Katy! I think Adela is pregnant! Milad is still nursing. But she has not had her monthly habit.”

“Sardar! Milad is only 6 months old. How could she be pregnant again. She is only 22 years old and this will be her 4<sup>th</sup> pregnancy and she’s already lost one. This will be very be very bad for her health.”

“I know.”

He is nervous. And Sardar rarely looks nervous.

“Do you use protection?”

“No.”

“Listen, I gave your brother a sack of items. In that sack there is a urine test you can use to check if she is pregnant. Bring the sack and I will show you.”

“I cannot bring the sack. It is better if you ask Nezar to bring the sack.

There is a curtain between us. It is better to keep this curtain.”

Aye aye. I realize I know the secrets of the two brothers which they cannot even tell each other.

~

Later I ask Nezar to bring the sack. I find that he had to wait until 12 midnight to bring the plastic into the house while everyone was asleep. Now he has to go home and ask his wife, with much shame, to bring the sack . He told her Katy wants to tell someone else about these things.

After we get to the office, I kick Nezar out of the car, and in the car, the only safe place, I give Sardar background on what each item is and why and how it should be used.

He takes the bag home.

Later I realize Sardar has left the whole bag with his wife.

And Arzu and Nezar have nothing.-- while there is one wall that separates their rooms.

Aye aye aye, so I ask him to bring the bag back to me, in the car, I divide it into two separate bags and confidentially send one bag home with each boy.

Who would have thought? 10 years ago, I never would have guessed...

That I have come to Afghanistan as a Literacy Program Coordinator,  
And I find myself as a part time Family Planning Advisor.

I guess all things come to you - all out of necessity.

~

“Katy- We went to the doctor and saw the television and my baby is going to be a boy,  
thanks to God!

‘Thanks to God! Why do you mean? What if it were a girl?’

‘But if it is a boy, it is better. He can be free, and he can go out.’

But if it were a girl, what if it were like you, “*Nezar-ware*”- ‘like Nezar’. What if she  
wanted to go out all the time and see the world and do things?’.

*Ne, dar in haulat Afghanistan, nemishe. In gap famil ast.*

‘In this condition of Afghanistan, this can’t be. It’s up to the family.’

I keep discussing with him.

After a while, I am dumbfounded.

‘Nezar, I just don’t know what to say anymore. I just don’t know what to say.’

He says,

“Think of your family. A person is happy when they accept what the family says. Think  
about you and your husband. You accept what he says. He accepts what you say. This is  
how a family is happy. Otherwise, they have problems’.

~

Each day I tease Nezar, that I have been praying for a girl.

“When is little Nadia coming ?”

~

Nezar calls me in Faryab.

“The baby was born”.

“Congratulations!!!  
“Nezar, I’m so happy for you I could cry.”  
It is a boy or a girl?”

“Katy I was trembling in the emergency room. I was thinking of your prayer, and my heart was pounding. But then when I went in, I saw it was a boy!!! “

My tears are coming.

“Katy, I have had a baby. Now it is time that you have a baby. Every tree must give fruit. What’s special about the tree is its fruit. The fruit is the harvest. A woman is not complete until she has a baby. And after she is a mother, she is a complete woman.”

~

In the staff car, Nezar tells the staff his new news. Someone comments, “Well if it were not a boy then you wouldn’t have to give out sweets. It’s less expensive, if you didn’t have a boy!”

~

After the baby, Quddus, is born....

“Katy-Jan, You know now I see the patience of a mother.

I used to think I just raised myself. We just got big on our own. But now I see, how much patience, how much effort. All the expenses. Everything the parents have to do for the child.

You know, even by myself I was thinking. All the expenses it takes, just for one child. 2, 3 children is, *bas dige* ‘enough’.”

“Nezar, May God bless you with 2 more daughters.”

Laughing, “Ne, Ne, Kiti-Jan!”

~

“Katy.  
You are here in Afghanistan. And you have come to do service.

But there is one thing which has no replacement.  
That is family.

Now you are free. You can come and go at any hour , you can work, and yes, you can give your salary to your faith.

But remember one thing. A tree is planted, and grown. So that it can harvest.  
All of that work is for the harvest.

When you become a family-holder, it is different. Family life has its own deliciousness.  
And two is better than one.

If you raise a child, may be that child will help 5 more Afghans. Where you could only help one. And that child will also serve Baha'u'llah.

The fruit of a woman is to have a child.”

~

I hear the staff car has arrived in the compound. I come downstairs out of the guesthouse and on the first floor, I hear this incessant scratchy wailing. I think someone must have left a radio on so I go into one of the bedrooms, and lo and behold there is a newborn infant lying the bed. There is no one around to be seen. I pick up the baby and take it into the hallway and at the same time Nezar comes in the front door, and we almost bump into each other.

“Look what I found!  
It’s a baby.  
...I want a baby”

From out of no where tears well up in my eyes.

He wipes my eyes and says,  
“God will give you a baby”.

~

On the last day of the project, I come to the office and we are all in the IT room finishing the last back up of the server. Nezar sits with another driver, Zia, and the Admin/finance Officer. Zia’s wife is newly pregnant. I hear them talking in whispered tones. Their conversation goes on intensely for 15 minutes. “wife.... pregnant... television screen.... No. it’s a sin to know...” . I hear my name come up.

“Ok, what are you guys whispering about?”

“Whether it is ok to get an ultrasound to know whether the baby will be a boy.”

Zia says, “Nezar said you wouldn’t necessarily want it to be a boy.”

The Admin Officer pipes in, “But everyone wants a boy. Just like everyone likes meat.”

“I don’t like meat.” And I tell the background on the health impact of a vegetable based diet.”

The Admin Officer looks on in wonder. *Chi raqam zan hasti?* ‘ What kind of woman are you?’

~~~~~

This is the fruit .. that after 2 years and hours and hours of laboring together, 3 young fathers for the first time are questioning the never-questioned assumption, whether it’s better to have a boy or not.

When after 2 years, a man who wanted a large family of many sons now only wants 2.

And when a foreigner now believes that “The fruit of a woman is to have a child”, and that...

*Ruz-e-shan Khodah Pak mite,garangeshan zamin mivardare*

“God gives their daily needs, and the earth carries their heaviness.”



**From “Sar-e-Sarak ba Nezar Jan”**  
***Stories from Riding the Road with Nezar-Jan***

**CHAPTER 4**

**On *Biadari o Khoari* - On Brother-Sisterhood**

*On Rasti o Doroughi- Truth and Lies*  
*On Brother-Sisterhood*



Nezar picks me up to take me to work. But today there is some conference at the Serena Hotel. The whole center of the town blocked off. Nezar goes right up to the police blockades and tries to get through. They don't allow him, but when they see my white *khareji* 'foreigner' face they come closer to the car.

"The road is blocked!"

"Sir, I have a guest with me."

"The road is blocked to all traffic."

But she must go to Kabul Bank.

After a second glance and a look at me, he waves us through the blockades.

As soon as we get out of the sight of the policemen we exchange glances and start laughing hysterically, -- oooo how useful it is to have a foreigner in the car.

~

Nezar tells me stories of hunting and leaving late at night, wading through the waste-high water all night and shooting the ducks early in the morning.

"Oh how I loved hunting. But my father would say 'Where are you going?' I would say *Kar daram* – 'I have work to do' But in the end he knew. He always knew."

"Well Nezar, why didn't you tell him the truth?"

"He wouldn't let me go."

"Another time, my friend had a girl he liked. We picked her up and in took her in the car with us. Believe you me, my father had followed us all the way, and when we stopped, he got out of the car behind us and said, "What are you doing?!"

I said, This is my friend's sister. We are taking her to the hospital."

~

“Nezar Jan.  
A Jan. ‘yes’

“With all these white lies you tell all the time, it makes me wonder.

Do you tell lies to me too?”

“No, by God, Katy Jan, I swear on the Holy Qur’an. I have never told you lies and I never will.”

~

“Ohoo. It was a big mess last night!”

“Why?”

“Because I left my phone at home when I went out.  
And so when it rang my father answered the phone.”

“And so..?”

“And so a girl called and asked for Qais, my brother.  
And Qais got in a lot of trouble. Because my father is trying to marry him off. Because he thinks he’s at that age and is thinking about girls too much.  
But the truth is that Qais got in trouble but it was my fault.”

“Why?”

“Because when I was taking home our staff from the BRAC training center there was another girl there and she needed a ride so I gave her a ride. She spoke to me. She asked my name. I told her my name was Qais. She asked if I was married. I said no.”

“Ahh, Nezar! You say you weren’t married. And worse you used Qais’ name!

You also told Ramzieh you weren’t married! You also told Fareeha you weren’t married.  
And you got in a mountain of trouble!

Please!!! This is not something you should lie about!!!”

~

As we travel in the car to work in the staff car with Sardar and Nezar, we discuss addictions and the bad effect they have.

Nezar says, “I have never even tasted a drink , even when other boys tried to hide it in my soda at a wedding. I would catch them. They would drink alcohol and I would drink only Coke.

I’m not addicted to anything.”

“Except to lies.”

Sardar’s eyes flash and with a laugh he says, *Hatman yak gap ast*. ‘Ohoo there is definitely something here.’”

I say “No, I’m just kidding around.”, trying to keep Nezar out of trouble, and backtrack my faux pas in the front of the elder brother.

But he says again, “Oohoo there is certainly something there.”

Now that I know the secrets of both brothers, so much that I am getting one in trouble with the other...

~

We sit with Ramzieh, having just prepared all the food for the guests. As we are talking, it comes out that Nezar told Ramzieh he was not married when they first met.

I tell Ramzieh and the others, “ I can vouch for this boy’s character 100% except for this one aspect- *mohtad-dorough ast*. He ‘s addicted to lies.”

”Why do you always lie about this question!?”

He says, “Well the truth is that I always wanted to marry again. I want to marry a literate wife.”

Ramzieh says, “I don’t want to marry. I don’t want to be somebody’s property and tied to the house.”

I say “Ramzieh will have a different kind of marriage. Where the husband respects the wife and the wife respects the rights of the husband.”

All in laughs, as Nezar knows Ramzieh is Bahai, he says,

“But respect of the wife for the husband is *farz* (an obligation of Islam). And respect of the husband for the wife is *sunnat* (an optional tradition).”

Ooo hooooo! The group is provoked...

~

“Good morning.”

“Good Morning.”

“How was your night?”

“Ohoo what a night!”

“What happened?”

“Well I left your house at 1:00.  
But the battery had died.  
There were no taxis on the street.  
So I called Sardar. And he brought the car from home.  
We restarted the battery and I got home at 2:00 am.  
Arzu was sleeping and woke up. But I told her it was 10:00.”

“Nezar. That is a lie. Why did you tell her a lie?”

“The truth? Well the truth is that if I told her it was 2:00 she would say it’s late, let go to sleep.”

“So?”

“But if I told her it was 10:00 she wouldn’t make a fuss about being together.”

~

Sara calls. Her brother was handling a gun and it exploded in his hands and the bullet went through both legs. I get the call in the middle of the workday and have to rush back to work.

In the evening Sara calls. I hear Nezar speaking in the hallway.

“If it has passed through the meat it’s ok. It’s the bone that is important”

“Don’t worry he’ll be fine”

“Katy is here. She was very worried. She came to me 2-3 times to see how he is doing”

Later we are in a quiet place together. It is my last day in Afghanistan

“Nezar. It’s true I was worried. But I didn’t come 2-3 times asking about Sara. This was not the truth.”

He looks at me, with the look when he understands,

“You are right”

~

Nezar tells me, “Believe me Katy. From the day you left Afghanistan, I cannot tell a lie. Even when the policeman asks me something and I get in trouble, still I cannot bring myself to tell a lie.”

#### *On Brother- Sisterhood*

Neither of us can bear going home early, me to a cold room and him to the 4 walls of his compound and so we cruise around on mini-adventures until 10:59 pm rolls around and we swing in the door of my compound by my 11:00 curfew. After he drops me off, he goes to the shop on the corner near his house, and hangs out with his buddies from childhood, until at 1:00 am when everyone is finally asleep, he goes home.

So we have evening adventures, when we explore new restaurants and hotels, check out the new Islamic university, try out the first Afghan fast food joint, whatever nook and cranny presents a lovely night time adventure, forgetting the cares of the day.

As we are driving around on the streets in the evening, calmly, Nezar remembers days in Paktistan when he would drive with such quietness in a straight line with Ahmadzai tapes playing all the way from Islamabad to Peshawar. He always wished that road would never end.

When I am sleepy but not ready to go home , he sings Ahmadzai and Hindi film songs like “Janam Dekelo” while I fall asleep and again the road never ends.

And so the evenings pass – *saat teir mishe*.

~

I make the Operations staff work on New Year's Day, so whenever I make them work on a holiday I buy them lunch.

It has just snowed and Kabul is absolutely beautiful.

I suggest a snowball fight- and boy do we have a whopping snowball fight with the Operations team, drivers, guards, the whole bit. At first they are shy to have a girl around in such guyish games, but then a few of them get used to me, all become warriors of snow.

Nezar lands a whopping snow ball smack in my face, and rubs it right in. Many times – until I am red and speckled with ice everywhere.

He catches me and holds me, with a threatening snowball lingering over my head- until I say I squeal and say mercy, then he lets me go.

Then the boys have a *pahwalan* strong man wrestling fight. And it's so nice to see boss, manager, driver, all level on the same playing field!!

~

“Nezar, Sardar needs my passport to process the office accounts for the visa receipt. I have to go to the airport now. You are the only I would trust with the key to my money box. Please keep it safe.”

“This key is safe with me.

Until there is blood in my veins, I will be your brother and you will be my sister. You can trust me with anything that you need.”

“If it were not you, I would never give my key to anyone else.”

~

Nezar and I are driving home from visiting Ted Achilles, a jovial wonderful man.

He tells me, All foreigners are not the same, all people are not the same. There are some foreigners who are rude and who drink. But this man is very special- he truly helps people.

We are laughing and joking about our time with Ted as we drive through a roundabout, when all of a sudden, a very stern policeman pulls us over.

He has pulled over 3 cars already.

Nazar gets very serious and motions me not to laugh.

He asks for Nazar's license. No, the duplicate is not accepted.

‘I want to see the original.’

'Is this your wife?'

'No, she is my sister, working in the same office.'

He is giving us a really hard time.

I have been through a million police checkpoints but I have the feeling we are not going to make it out of this one.

Some other car distracts his attention and the other policeman comes to see follow up.

The new policeman accepts the license as valid, and with much difficulty we are finally let go.

I realize later that we were pulled over not because of any license but because a foreign woman was sitting in the front seat with an Afghan man and they were laughing and talking. And this is bad.

~

"Katy-Jan. Max is a very honorable person."

"I will tell him that. It means a lot to him."

~

"How was your day?"

"Good.

And Bad."

"Katy, there are tears in your eyes.

What happened?"

"Max and I are divorcing."

"Katy-Jan! Really?! My liver bleeds for you.

Is there anything that can be done.

Whatever either of you need I am here to do."

~

After Max gets dropped off.....

*KitiJan.*

*Hich Jigarkhuni Nakonin. Hich.*

'Don't be sad. Don't let your liver bleed.'

"Can you tell?"

"Of course, this car is under my control.

I know everything that happens in the car.

You are always talking and happy. I know when you are sad."

Katy, if it was in your destiny that you and Max were to be married.

Then if you are divorcing, it is also in your destiny.

If this is happening, God has something else planned for you.

Don't let your liver bleed at all."

~

I return from a trip to the field in Takhar.

"Nazar. What I told you last week.

I had to tell you or I would explode.

But this is such a bad thing for Afghans, in this society.

People think divorce here is such an evil thing.

I do too.

You promised you wouldn't say anything to anyone, yes?"

"Katy-Jan, I made my promise. And until there is blood in my veins, anything you tell me, stays with me and only me."

~

"Kiti Jan – Can I say something to him? How can I convince him to stay with you? "

"No it's ok."

“What is the problem?”

“Well it’s a long story but in essence, the only problem from my side is an Anjali-ware problem. (Reference to a Hindi film where a woman is married to a man but she can’t stand to be physical with her husband).

I just have this nauseous grossed-out feeling, when I try to be that way with him. And I haven’t been able to get over it for 10 years.”

“Katy – that is strange.

I have never heard of something like that.

No man could take that.

He has been very patient.

You need to be with him. That is the right of a man – to be with his wife.”

~

Nezar comes to my house to pick me up in the staff car, on the day that I am to fly to America.

“How is your day?”

“It is the last day of the Year of Patience”.

Tears start flowing.

In the staff car, Sardar jokes with me as I always joke with him, “Katy you have a commander face today”.

But today I cannot joke back. “*In zendegi khubi dara, badi dara*”. ‘This life has ups and downs.’ He is silenced by my tears and for the first time we ride to work in a silent car.

Upon reaching the office, Nezar tells me, “Katy wipe your tears, the guards are coming. No one should see you cry.” I wipe them. But then they start to come again.

“Nezar pretend to tell me something very important and I will write it in this book.”

I pretend to write but the book gets wet.

Finally I have to brave the Salams and Good mornings so I just get out and make my escape.

~

As Nezar drives my husband and I to the airport, I'm so slow and lethargic. At the airport, he puts my suitcase on the ground but I can't even pull it. I say, "Will you go in my place?"

Nezar sends us off and waves us through the gate, while I limp along and drag my bag 10 meters behind Max not wanting to make the fateful trip.

~

After I come back from overseas from the divorce trip, Nezar greets us at the airport.

Later, he tells me,  
"I was very very sad for you both when you left.

I fasted three days for you and Max.

My mother asked me, 'What happened?'

'I'm just doing a fast.  
I didn't tell anyone why.

~

"Kiti Jan. This life has sorrows and happiness.  
It has ups and downs.

I want to tell you something.

Next time, look for someone who will stay with you to the end of your life.

And make sure that you find someone who is warm.

Also,

Don't be too busy. There is a time for work, a time for play, a time for family, and time for being with your husband.

Work will always be there.

Make sure you have time to be with your husband."

~

"Katy.

You are here. And you are here to do service to Hazrat Baha'u'llah.

But there is one thing which has no replacement.

That is family.

But now you are free. You can come and go at any hour , you can work, you can give your salary to your faith.

But remember one thing. A tree is planted, and grown. So that it can harvest.

All of that work is for the harvest.

When you become a family-holder, it is different. Family life has its own deliciousness. And two is better than one.

You can help the people here. But if you raise a child, may be that child will help 5 more Afghans. Where you could only help one.

And that child will also serve Hazrat Baha'u'llah”

“So what are you saying?”

“Marry.”

“Who?”

“Whoever your heart wants.

And have a child.

A woman is made to have a child.”

~

From March 2 until March 21, each day during the Baha'i Fast, Nazar comes to my office at sunset and brings me a hot plate of food. He sits with me while I pray. And then I keep working into the evening and he checks every so often to make sure I am ok.

At the moment, I get hungry he brings food. And at the moment I get sleepy, he comes to see if I am ready to go.

Each day he comes and turns off the server and I hold the backpack while he reaches in, finds the key and locks up the office.

~

As we eat popcorn, and go through the checkpoint one night, “Hey, 10 years from now we’ll be saying, remember when we ate popcorn and the police stopped us at the check post”

“Remember the day we spotted the fox in the river bed and chased him”

“And when we explored Heetal Hotel on the hill.”

“And we had the snowball fight with Babajan and Hamed.”

“And we went and got Mt Everest pizza and the guard on every corner kept making us move the car to the next corner.”

“And when we drove around the night it was snowing, and I got to pray in the mosque when nobody was there. And you stood at the door at watched for me. And I got to chant a prayer from Baha’u’llah inside the mosque. Nobody kicking me out because I was a foreigner, or a woman or Baha’i.”

“And the time when we drove around the town singing Ahmed Zaher songs until you fell asleep.”

“Kiti.-- These days. These nights. They will not come again.”



**From “*Sar-e-Sarak ba Nezar Jan*”**

***Stories from Riding the Road with Nezar-Jan***

**CHAPTER 5**

**On Being Disowned...**



“You know, I always had only one prayer. That my family is always together. That I am never separate from my family. I lived as a refugee in Pakistan, 7 years alone and away from my family. And after that I realize the value of my family. I just pray that we are always together.

~

Before each visit to each province he travels to, Nezar’s father calls the commander in the area to let him know his son is coming and to look out for him. The commander calls him to come visit him, but Nezar makes the excuse that he is busy with the office’s work and cannot go.

On Eid Day ....

‘Katy- Guess what I am going to Mazar today. This time I have to go in front of the commander.’

‘I don’t want you to go in front of the commander’

‘I don’t either but this is my father’s choice’.

~

You know a father is a father. Whatever he wishes I will do. I have a special love for my mother, I cannot sleep without her being in the house. But I also love and respect my father, no matter what he does.

~

After 6 months...

~

“My father wants to take the car that I drive.

So I said ‘Here, take it.’ I gave him the keys and said, ‘Take it now.’”

“But, Nezar, you would be without a job if you gave him your car.

“It makes no difference. *Tawakkol ba khodah*. We rely on God”

~

“My father gave me a week to find my own car.  
I wanted to buy a Corolla. But I went to the car dealer’s shop and it was too expensive.  
I don’t have money.

My father thinks I have lots of money.  
He thinks I am keeping something from the salary I turn in to him at the end of each month.  
But it’s not true.  
I give him everything that I earn.”

~

“Katy, I have not told this to anyone.  
My father wants to disown me.  
I said, ‘Are you angry with me? Have I done anything wrong? Tell me and I will correct it’  
‘No I simply want you to be separate’  
‘As you wish father’”

~

“I have not been home early in the last two weeks.  
I get out of bed and leave before anyone wakes up.  
I get home late after my father is already asleep.  
Even if I get off work at 11:00 I go and sit with the boys in the corner shop until 1:00 am.”

~

“My father has called me to come home early tonight.”

“Nezar Jan. Tonight You must go.  
Don’t avoid it tonight.  
For two weeks you have been staying out late and only going home when is away.  
Tonight you must face it.

This is a loan. Pay it back tomorrow or in 10 years. It doesn’t matter.”

“Really I don’t need it.”

“It doesn’t matter.  
Put this together with whatever you have.  
So your father can do whatever he wishes.  
Just so that you have options.”

~

“What happened?!?”

“Last night, I went home early. My father sat me down.  
And he officially disowned me.  
I said, ‘Father have I done something wrong?’  
I didn’t ask for anything.  
Other people would fight.  
They would ask for this , for that. For a tea cup. For an eating mat.  
But I didn’t ask for anything.  
I just want him not to be upset with me.  
This is the one thing in my life that I try to do-  
To behave so that no one becomes upset with me.

My mom did not come down from her room all night.  
She does not agree with this.  
She says it is an injustice  
That my job is ending  
And at the same time he is disowning me.”

“Katy-Jan. Why are you crying?  
Because your mother is sad.  
She is sad for her son.

I am crying for you because you can’t cry.”

~

From tonight Arzu must cook on her own.  
We have nothing. Not even a teacup.  
Now we must build a kitchen outside the house.  
He said for the car, I can continue driving it. But whatever I earn during the day is his.  
Whatever I earn on nights and weekends is for me.  
But that would not even pay for the cost of food and telephone credit.

~

Now we are completely on our own.  
My wife and I have moved into a separate room.  
Not even a teacup or a mat to eat on did he give us.  
Others would make a fuss.  
But I say, ‘Whatever you wish father’.

Now we cannot cook in the same kitchen, so my wife must take the pot outside and cook over a gas tank in the open air. We have no money now, but when the winds and duststorms come I will have to find money to build a mud shelter where we can cook.

~

You know this disowning came suddenly. I don't know if someone told him something. Or he thought something.

But it seems to have no reason.

It must be the will of God. There is some wisdom or some reason that I don't understand.

I never wanted this.

My only prayer was that my family always be together.

But there must be some will of God in this.

~

Now, the whole family eats together. But my wife eats in her room alone.

Katy, you came to my home tonight for dinner.

Now Arzu and I are separated.

The food that you ate tonight, that was from my family.

But the tea and sweets, that was from my side.

Really? I'm sorry. I didn't know. There was only one cup there, so I gave it to your mother. ...If I knew it was from your side, I would have eaten it.

~

Nezar you should try and be at home more.

No I try not to be at home.

I come home late.

After he has gone to bed.

He doesn't know when I come. He doesn't know I hang out with the boys in the shop.

But you should not leave Arzu alone.

But if I eat with her, she says nothing.

She knows I eat outside.

When I come she says, Do you want tea?

I say yes. Or no.

And that's it.  
Then silence.

But you need to be at home. She is alone. How can she be alone like that in her room, with all of them together while you are outside the house

No, She eats alone. But she does sit with them. My mother moved the TV from the bedroom into the hallway for her sake.

I can't take it to be at home. If I have work to do there it's ok. But otherwise, I cant stand to stay at home.

I don't have the endurance for it.

~

I went to the carseller today. The car is supposed to cost \$6000.

I only had 700.

I told brother I had 1000, but really I only had 700.

Because now that I am independent. I have to keep something aside to build a kitchen.

To pay for all the food. Take care of my wife's needs and be prepared if something comes up or someone gets sick.

My brother put in 1000

He would have put in more, but now that I am separated, it's not in his authority.

The car seller gave the rest of 4000 on loan.

How will I pay that back?

How will I get that kind of money?

Tawakkol ba Khodah.

You know you have good days and you have bad days. One day you see someone and he is in dire straights. And then two years later, he has passed through these things. God is kind.

With reliance on God. All things are possible.

~

You know the car seller doesn't do this for anybody. This is a matter of trust.

He loaned me \$4000. But I have helped him.

And now in times of need he helps me.

You know. One time I was with this car seller.

And his brother was killed. And his father. And they were in river.

And I couldn't swim. But despite that, I went in to the water up till it was up to my chest and over my head.

And I pulled them out. And then I helped carry the bodies all the way across town to his home.

So now, in time of need. When I have no money. Now this car seller lends me money.

Other car sellers would not lend you that much or would make you pay quickly.

This is friendship.

~

How was your day?

Good.

Where did you go?

I just sat with the guards.

Nezar. You need to go spend time at home. Go sit with your father. Sit with your family.

I can't take being at home.

And these days I don't want to go to my relatives.

Why?

Because where ever I go, they ask what happened?

What happened.

They are talking about it.

I don't want to tell them not to talk about it.

Better to avoid a fight with the road, rather than the tongue.

Nezar, you are a like a thread in a rug. Because one thread is cut, it does not mean you are cut off from everyone. You need to go to them. Sit with them. Let them know you are still with him. And just because you are disowned from your father, you are not far from them.

It must be the will of God.

One thing that is important in life is family.

You have sat with all these hours.

You have never heard one bad word come out of my mouth towards me.

He has separated me.

But I have not separated him from myself.

All good actions have good effects.

And all bad actions have bad effects.

So this must be the will of God.

*Khodah Mehraban Hast  
Tawakkol ba Khodah*

But God is kind.  
May we rely on God

~

Today I called the car seller.  
He told me, Nezar, if you need any other car, just tell me.  
I will put the keys in your hand.  
He would front me from his own income.  
That is friendship.

~

Sardar, can I ask.  
Why did your father separate Nezar.

I don't know.  
We asked the reason.  
He said nothing.  
We said, if you disown him, we also separate from the family.  
But his mind is set.  
To other people you can say something.  
But to your father you can say nothing.  
What he decides is what he decides.

~

~

I got my salary today.  
How much was it? 59,000 Afs.  
That's about 1200 dollars.  
First there are expenses. Then out of what's left., of that, my father will give me \$120.

Nezar, that's enough to pay for a couple of phone cards, and a bit of food.

~

Today I had to buy a bed for Quddus.  
How much.

\$95

That's almost all your last month's salary.

~

Nezar, here is money for the telephone card you spent to call me.

No, I don't need it. See this used scratch card, I already put in a card.

~

I come back from Khost. Sardar is at the office. His father and brother in law are also there.

I greet and speak with Nezar's father.

He is very respectful and thanks for me for all the assistance given to his sons.

After speaking a few minutes, ...

Padar Jan

These boys are my brothers so I call you father

I have not spent that much time with you

And I do not know all your children only these two.

But when I see the character of these two, I always thought, you have been a good father, this must have come from somewhere.

Because Their character is top.

This one is good but not the other. (I am surprised)

Padar Jan.

Can I ask you a question.

Why did you disown Nezar?

He doesn't care about me.

He makes no efforts for me.

He has ugly behavior.

For a long time he has had ugly behavior.

One thing I tell you.

I have spent many hours with these brothers

He always lauds your praises and has so much respect for you.

No he just says that to your face.

Maybe the reality is not known to me  
Maybe the reality is not known to you.  
But the reality is known to God.  
You know, one day he said.  
You know . I have one prayer.  
That I am never separate from my family.  
That we are always together.  
I love a shared life. This was 6 or 9 months ago.  
I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting to cry . Sorry that I interfere.  
I was not expecting this.

I'm sorry that you are unhappy.  
Says to the brother in law  
You know foreigners have a pure heart. A good heart.  
Tell stories of Afghans behavior with him when he was imprisoned. How he had to carry stones on back. How Afghans have treated Afghans badly. But foreigners have good behavior.

Padar jan .  
You have seen many things. And I have much respect for you.  
The things Nezar has seen in 25 years, others have not seen in 200 years. So you being 45 and living through this, this is like 300 years of the life of others.

Padar Jan. I have one wish to ask you.  
Say it.  
These economic problems are temporary. They come one day and pass the next. But separation of the heart. These things last forever. The heart always has pain.  
I ask one thing. This economic separation is no problem.  
But this separation of the heart. Please don't disown Nezar.  
If one has unity, one has everything. Without it, we have nothing.  
I have felt it. It is painful.

He thinks for a while.

“What are you doing tonight.  
Please come to my home for dinner.”

“If the father invites, I must follow his orders.”

~

Nezar.  
I didn't know he had hard feelings.  
I thought this was about economics. I thought he just wanted to use his car.

Since when did he feel this way.

Since I came back from Pakistan.

What age.

13, 14?

You are such a noble person. Not just in front of me. But I have seen it with many people. In many situations.

I don't understand.

Have you done something that your father says you have ugly behavior?

Maybe.

He shrugs.

What it is that from when I was 7, I had to work. Early in the morning I went to the cooking pot factory, then in the afternoon I went to school. Then later for 7 years I was in Pakistan working. When I came back, my father always acted like a stranger to me. So. That is how it has remained. I would leave early, come late. Not see my father much. So that conflict would not arise

~

How was your night?

Good

Where did you go?

I went to see Qais, my brother.

He just bought a new car.

What kind?

A white SURF.

Really?

How much?

\$16,000.

Where did he get that kind of money?

Well of course, from my brother and my father.

I 'm angry with your father.

Why?

Because that's not just."

“I’m not angry. I want them to be together. I want them to be happy.  
I pray that my brothers will never be disowned from my father.

~

When my father disowned me, it was not somber, but amicable. It was done with smiles.

But it’s different now. It used to be that when I went on a trip they would all come and greet me and say goodbye.

This time, when I went to Pakistan, no one in the house came to say goodbye.

~

You are serious and wrapped up in thought today.  
What happened?

Well I went home. I was up until 2:15.

Why?  
My father was talking with me. He made me very sad.

Why?  
Well, he came into my own room! (usually we always sit in the sitting room).

So he talked , he talked.  
He told me, “I got this new car. What do you think of it. Etc etc. “  
Then he said, there is \$2000 left to pay on it.

He said, how much did you borrow from your brother?

Then I understood what he wanted.

~

My father has completely changed. It’s as if I am a stranger to him.

He doesn’t want me to succeed.  
He called the carseller and told him. Nezar is going to be without work.  
The carseller knows us both but of course he stands on the word of my father more than me.  
Today I went and talked to him.

Having a loan here is not like in America.  
If you don’t pay,

One day, two days, the third day they make war with you.

Now everyday the car dealer is calling me, asking for his money.

It is better that I don't go home at all.

There is no way that I can be there, with out some bad talk coming

It is better to respond with the road, than with a fight.

~

You know, you have seen – I have never said a word against my father. I have worked since I was 7, I gave up my education , my own literacy for my father- so that he could support the family, and send my youngest brother Qais to school.

I don't understand.

~

One month later.....

How are things going with your father?

Believe me he has not spoken one word to me in the last month.

Not one word.

I say Salam to him and he passes saying nothing. Or he says salam as if I were a stranger.

But I am not a stranger.

~

You know, now that I am having no car, I had to walk all the way from Kolola Poshta to my village. By the time I got to the area near my village, it was very late at night and there was no one on the road.

At that moment, my father drove by, passed me on the road.

He passed me walking on the road. And did not even stop to see if I needed a ride.

~

“After the project ended, I was 10-15 days with no work and there was no way I could pay the loan. Every day, every day the carseller was calling and harassing me.

So I told my brother,

“I think I want to sell the car”

My brother said, “Sell it.”

So I went to the car dealer and sold it for 1300 dollars loss.

And then the next day, my father went to the car dealer and bought it.

And now he has parked it in the yard.

It was sitting in the yard here for 2 weeks and if my father had wanted to buy it he could have bought it directly from me. But he waited till I took a loss with the car dealer and then he made a gain on that.”

~

“The other day, I was taking a day trip to Ghazni. The Taleban caught me, throwing rocks at the car and shooting at it. They finally were able to stop the car and they took me captive.

They opened the glove box, and so ‘Ooohhhh? You work with a foreign NGO?’ “I said there were foreigners among them, but most were Afghans.”

They slapped and hit me 10 to 15 times. They put us on the side of the mountain and kept us confined late into the night. And my beard was very short, so they were giving me a lot of trouble.

You know being taken hostage is not an easy thing.  
From being a man, they make you into a mouse.

But when the Talebs took us, all the other boys were very scared that they were going to kill us at any moment.

But I said, I laugh they kill me, if I don’t laugh they will kill me.

So why not.

I told them my whole story. And because of this story they let us go at 1:00 in the morning.

That day I am lucky I made it out alive, especially after they found out I had worked with an international NGO. The only reason I am alive is because of God.

I came back at 1 am in the morning and the car was totaled, they had thrown rocks all over it, bullet holes were everywhere, and all the glass on the windows broken.

But no one in the house, asked one word.

They didn’t even ask what happened.”

~

“My father came to me today and asked for \$1000 dollars. He is buying land and needed more money. I said *hezar dafe* ‘a thousand times over’ and I went and borrowed money in my name from several friends and I gave this money to him.

~

Riots occur in Kabul. Nezar gets stuck while driving and his windows are broken and the car is smashed. Later he makes it to his job for the night shift starting at 4:00pm. The city calls a curfew at 10:00 for the first time in 4 years. However, Nezar’s night shift ends at 11:00 pm and the office does not allow him to leave early.

When he leaves at 11:00, as he is walking home, the police catch him and throw him in jail over night with all the rest of the rioters.

~

You know with the damage that the Taleban did to the car I was driving, this loss of \$1000 is on my shoulders. During the riots, I suffered another \$600 loss and through work I do in the daytime of trying to sell cars, I go into the hole more than I can earn.

Believe me, in this month, my problems have become great. And no one knows. But I have never extended my hand to anyone. My wife asks should I buy this? I say ‘Sure, go ahead. Believe me my life is the same as it always was before, it has not changed at all. Everything she asks for I give her. She thinks I am *paisa-dar*, “a money-haver”. While little does she know I have nothing.”

~

“You know I am thinking I cannot tolerate to be in this house any longer, with my father treating me this way, with no recourse and when there is no work, just casual labor here and there in Kabul. I am thinking to go to *kharej*, ‘overseas’. Maybe Germany or London. As for Pakistan and Iran, Kabul is better than these places.

But I was thinking to take my wife and child and go to Europe. I would go illegally, it would take \$10000, and then once I get there I would bring them later on. What do you think *Kiti Jan*? *Amr Kon*. Order me.”

“Nezar, I am your sister. I cannot order you. I can only give you advice.

Really... it is your choice what you are going to do with your life. You are the one will make the decisions.

But if you chose to go to *kharej* 'overseas' it will not be easy. There will be things you never expected.

Remember you told me once, that of all the things you have seen during the war, and all the suffering that has come during the war, you had never experienced the kind of mental suffering that has come recently.

Well it is like that. There are mental tests, tests of the mind, that you could never never imagine you would have. And it would be very very difficult. Especially in the first 2-3 years. But after 5 years, maybe 10 years it would get easier.”

“So what do you think I should do? “

*Mishnavin? Mishnavin?*

Can you hear me, Kiti Jan?

The line is cut off.

~

“Listen Nezar, I spoke with Max and there are a lot of dangers. Since September 11 , they crack down on illegal immigrants, especially Afghans. And you could be put in prison on the way or held, and not reach your destination and its easy to die. And Nezar - you always told me that Pakistan was awful because of the aloneness. If you go to the west, you will really face aloneness. Even they themselves are alone. My brother, who himself is a westerner, lives alone, works alone, has few friends. So for you, not speaking the language, not having family, it will be much more so. I do not think you will like the culture, it is not warm like Afghan culture. Here, though your family has distanced you, you still have Fakhruddin, you have this friend and that friend, and you know the language, you know the system.”

“Katy, I well understand these things. Believe me.

*Ya mimoram, ya miresam.*

‘Either I will die or I will reach there.’

Did you hear in the news? There was a bus that was smuggling Afghans through Turkey and it caught fire and 33 of them were burned alive. In this group of people in Turkey who died, 6 of them are my friend’s family members. And they brought the bodies back to Kabul and I saw them myself. There are many dangers along the way if I go abroad. I have known people who have gone. They say, you must expect that you will be locked in a closed place like cattle where you almost suffocate. And you will go 3-4 days without food. And you endure horrible conditions. And you will not go directly. You are

smuggled from this country and then even if you do make it to Greece or somewhere, many get deported and sent back after all that.

Even if I do not go abroad, there are dangers everywhere. To try and find work, I was thinking even to go to Herat and drive cars from the Iranian border to Kabul, but I just heard that a group of people doing this were caught by the Taleban and the throats were slit, all of them.

And about being in the west, I know about this too. Their level is very high, they all use computers. I don't understand their language, let alone I am not even literate."

"Nezar, right now the situation is dire. You have just been disowned by your father, you suffered losses from the attacks of the Talebs as well as the riots, you suffered a loss by giving up your car. These are difficult moments. But these moments will pass and this pain will lessen and 2 months, 3 months, 5 months, things will get easier."

"Katy, today I heard about something with the army where they send you to Hindustan to move cars back and forth. I went there, I gave my name, I filled out the papers."

"You filled out the papers?!"

"Yes. Because I want to be far, completely far away from my family."

"Nezar! Because you want to be far from your family???"

Listen, Nezar. You are filling out papers for India to be far from your family. And you are planning to enter the army when you are the person who always hated soldiery. The time has come that you talk with your father. All this time you have said nothing. You have accepted everything he did. But his behavior with you has been very ugly. You are not a stranger! You are his son!

He sat you down. Now it is time that you sit him down.

There needs to be communication. He needs to be accountable for his actions."

"Katy, I have never asked anything from anyone except God. And I never will. My father has done these things. But I will never stretch out my hand in front of him and ask for anything. I ask only from God."

"Nezar, money is one thing. But unity is another.

So do not ask him for anything. But at least sit down with him and have communication. Find out the reason for which he has disowned you."

"Money, work, it all comes and goes in this world. Katy, I have told no one of the things that have happened, not of my father's behavior with me, not of the suffering I endured at the hands of the Talebs, not of my economic problems, none of these things. You are the only one who knows."

~

I had earlier written a letter for Nezar's father, asking him to reconsider the disowning. I realize I have been in Afghanistan a long time when I start to think like an Afghan-- following the tradition of "intervention" on someone else's behalf. I know that there is no one who has the authority or the courage to question his father. And that I, as the boss of his two sons, and holding a special place in his house, I am the only who could question him. I had writtend the letter, but had refrained from sending it --not make a difficult situation worse.

But now, that Nezar has said he will never outstretch to ask his father for anything and now that he is considering illegal smuggling to get out, now it is time to send it.

I send the letter through his brother, Sardar's email, without telling Nezar.

~

"Katy, I went home. Believe me. I tried.

I gave a salam,  
but their was no aleiki."

~

Katy I went to speak to my father.  
Just because of you, I went to speak to him.  
And it made me very very sad.

I went to see him at the Ministry of Interior, during his work hours.  
He came outside and e sat in the car.

I said, "You have let me go".  
Is there something bad you have seen from me?"

"No, there is nothing at fault. "

"Why? Then why is your heart like this?"

"There is no reason.  
It doesn't have a reason."

"Please don't be angry with me."

He said, "You are not with sin."

He said, "What kind of work are you doing?"

I told him I am driving.

"Do you have a car?"

No, I drive the office car.

What kind of father are you, that you are living in the same house and you do not know whether I have work or not?

There were many things said.

It made me very sad.

He said, "After this don't come after me.

Not for asking my news or how I am.

Just don't come near me."

"I will go to Europe."

But I knew he was thinking I would ask him for money.

So I said, "But I will never ask any money from you."

He said, "Go.

The farther you are away, the better."

"You say, go and I will go.

Anything you like, I will do."

"Whatever you want to do, do it. It's your choice."

I'm not angry with you

I just tell you, don't come near me again.

~

"Nezar! Are you serious- he said that? The farther away from me, the better?"

"Mara jawab dad. (He kicked me out)

What do I do now?"

I am quiet.

"I am lost without a path, and now you are at a loss too.

I went to talk to him because of you Katy."

“Nezar, you have done your responsibility. Now no one can fault you for not having tried, and not having done your part.”

“Hich Nemifahman.  
I don't understand anything.  
I don't know what to do.

I want to leave this world.”

~

“Katy did you say something to Sardar?”

“Yes. I sent a letter to your father through Sardar.

Why do you ask?”

“Because Sardar called me,

He asked , “Do you have contact with Katy? Did you tell her about the situation?”

“I said, ‘Sometimes she telephones.

I have said the reality to her.’

She told me to go speak to Father. So I did.

He told me the farther you away from me, the better.

I said, *Sais*. Fine.”

“What did Sardar say?”

“He didn't say anything.”

“Katy, what did you write to my father?”

I read him the contents of the letter.

*Dear Padar Jan-*

*How are you? I hope that you are well. I am now far from Kabul in another country. But I write to you because I have one request. You can accept or reject my decision, it is your choice. I write this letter to you because I have worked with two of your sons for these years. They have become like my brothers to me.*

*In this one and a half years that I have worked with Nezar, he has always told me the utmost respect that he had for his parents. He would tell me that he could never sleep until his mother was in the house. He told me of the utmost respect that he had for his father and that when there was a fight in the village they would bring the warring parties to your house and that you would make peace with them. He has never said a word against his parents, and a hundred times he has praised them. To the point, that I was impressed to what level of respect Afghan children have for their parents.*

*He also has told me that the time he passed in Pakistan was the lonliest time and that he missed his family so much. He gave up his schooling so that he could work to earn for his family and send his youngest brother to school. He told me, that after all of this experience, he had only one wish, -- that he always be together with his family and that he never be separated from them.*

*During these months, Nezar has become separated from your family. This has been a firm decision, but it has had a large effect on your son.*

*Father-Dear, even though I am not in Kabul, I have heard that Nezar has become jobless, has become completely alone, and that his health condition has become very bad.*

*Believe me, that from the moment this separation has occurred, he has never uttered a bad word against you. And he has continued to praise you and have a pure intention toward you. This type of pure intention is hard to find. I have traveled to many countries in this world, and I have not seen this kind of respect for parents and this kind of endurance with one's fortune. I honestly tell you I have not seen this anywhere else.*

*Father-Dear. I have only one request for you. That for one moment, think, and decide that this separation is enough. That what has happened till now is enough, and that once again, just like one family, you can live together again.*

*I have not mentioned anything of this letter to Nezar. He has no knowledge of it. I send this through Sardar.*

*Please forgive me that this is none of my business, and I do not want to interfere.*

*It is only that for more than a year, I worked with your two sons, I have become like brother and sister with Sardar and Nezar. So from this family relationship, I ask your permission to make this request.*

*After this, the decision is yours. I hope that you are well, you are happy and that you have a long life.*

*Like a daughter of yours,  
Katy*

“Nezar?

?

Are you angry with me?”

“No, I am not angry at all with you.”

(In fact he sounds delightfully pleased)

~

I have not heard from Sardar since I sent the letter to his father.  
I wonder if he delivered it or not.  
I write to him and ask.  
“Sardar? Are you there? Are you upset with me?  
Have I interfered?  
I will not interfere again.  
I just pray for the unity of your family. And that it may always receive blessings.”

Sardar responds,  
‘Katy, are you not a member of our family? Yes!  
Then you always have the right to do this. To do whatever is needed to solve any  
problem”

~

“Katy  
Since you left India, there has been so much trouble.  
The whereabouts of Jawed’s brother and the car is still not known.  
*Zende ya mordeyesh malum nist.*  
‘Whether he is dead or alive is not known.’  
I went to Kandehar.  
I went to ask the police commander where he is.  
Tomorrow I am not on night duty, so I will go to Kandehar again.”

“Nezar you don’t see the news. From outside I hear it. And each day there are people  
being killed.  
Please don’t go to the provinces right now, especially Kandehar.  
I am obliged to go. Jawed is my business partner. I have taken a loan of \$30,000 from  
Kabul Bank to bring these cars.”

“Did you say \$3000 or \$30000?”

“\$30000?”

Nezar? \$30,000 dollars?

Yes, that night you called me from the Bombay airport I was not joking when I asked you  
if you needed money.

If this is lost, I will drown.

.....

But beside this, the cars do not matter. It is Jawed's brother, and I am obliged to be with him. I will go wherever he goes, until we find his brother.

.....

~

I pray to God to keep Nezar safe.  
But I know he will not.  
I don't understand why.  
But whenever there is danger it touches Nezar.  
Whenever I call something has happened.

If Nezar is going to find a man who has either been killed or captured, .....  
In a province where there are bombs and killings everyday,  
There is no way he will not face danger.

I write to Sardar ask if that if Nezar travels to Kandehar, please keep an eye on him.

Please let me know if something happens to him.

~

Sardar responds angrily,

“Nezar did not inform us he is going to Kandehar!

My family has good communication, but he does not like to have communication with us.”

~

“ Katy I left at 2:30 in the morning, drove to Kandehar by 7:30 and after much searching and talking to the commander of security, I found that Jawed's brother and been driving through and had hit someone on the road. And that persons leg was injured. So they had captured him and seized all the cars. There was no telephone system working in the area so he could not call.

I went down and came back up to Kabul and I got two men from my neighborhood who are Pashto-speaking natives of Khost. I drove back down to Kandehar the same moring. And I pleaded. I have never pleaded so much in my life. And I pleaded and pleaded.

There was a white –bearded man. And he was very kind. And he freed Jawed's brother for us. He told me, 'It is only because of you. Your respectful behavior. Your flawless character. Because of you I will free this man'.

.....

So they freed Jawed's brother, and I rushed back to Kabul, and made it in time for my 4:00 pm night shift.

Oh in these two days I was so so stressed. I did not sleep at all last night. I paced around the yard, thinking if this money is lost I will drown. I asked myself, 'How can it be that in this short time, my father has disowned me, others have left me, and I will now carry \$30,000 debt?'

Now that these cars were found, I will sell the cars and pay off the doubt and I will never take a loan again."

.....  
~

Months later.

You know it seems everyone has left me. My father, my wife, the only person I ever loved.  
But to each I say, "As you wish".

My father was not happy with me because I opposed the beating of my mother, but I ...

"What? You opposed the beating of your mother?"

"I could never say this, Katy, because I did not want to expose his faults.  
But I know why he was unhappy with me.

When I was small, one time my mother came home late from a wedding. And she was with 150 people so they were all together and she was not alone. But she came home later than usual. And he beat her. I went to him and I opposed this.  
I was small not even a teenager.

And another time, this was during the time of the Taliban, I came home.  
And my mother's collar was torn. I said what happened mother?  
Nothing.

Mother, what happened?

When I understood it was my father who had beat her I was very angry with him.

Many times he would beat her in the middle of the night.

When I opposed this beating and he said, 'This is my wife.'

'Yes, she is your wife. But that is not why you take a wife, to beat her.  
Men and women are equal, equal in the sight of God. Why should being the husband give you the right to beat her?'

Another time, he was beating my mother, and I opposed it and we fought. And he threw me through the door and I fell into the bathroom.

I always defended my mother.  
From that time, he was *chap* 'at odds' with me.

My father has committed many sins in front of my mother.  
But I will always love my father.

But I love my mother more.”

~~~~~



