

SEPARATED AT BIRTH

by MYRA BELLIN

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

Genesis 21:9

Monique's Spa is not a luxury spa with gracious spaces, soft lighting, and plush area rugs surrounded by green slate tiles. I suspect that the floor coverings—thin beige carpet in the hallways and linoleum tile in the treatment rooms—were the most economical way to cover the cement floors. The spa is on the seventh floor of a downtown Philadelphia office building between a dentist's office and an optometry practice. All of its windows face the dark well of the building and the potted orchids in the tiny client waiting area are obviously fake. There is not enough natural light to keep real ones alive. It's not that the spa is seedy; it's just a bit barren considering that it offers services that pamper.

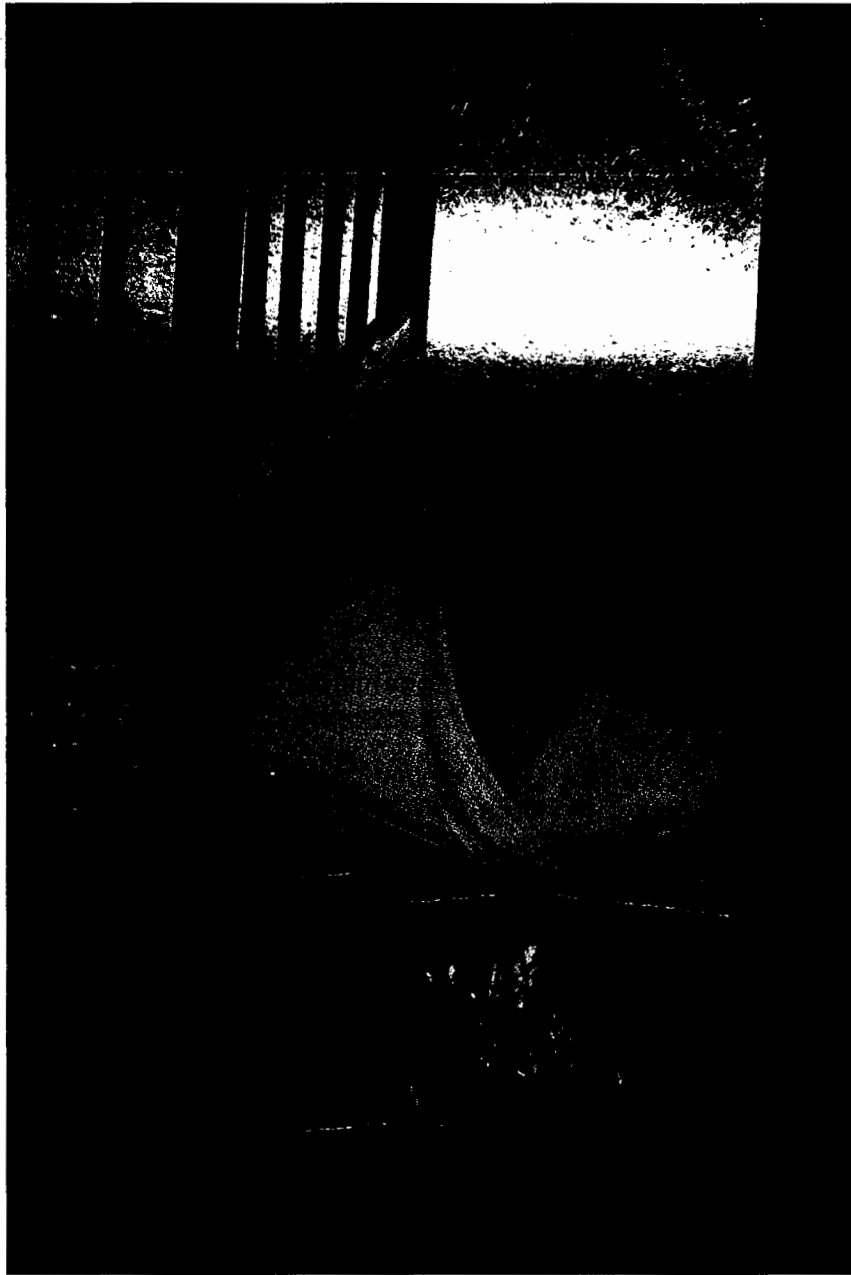
Laila, one of the manicurists at Monique's Spa, is very concerned about the location because there is no street traffic—therefore, no walk-ins. She whispered her worries to me in low tones when the business first opened four years ago. But, having been fired from another salon a few months earlier, she felt her best, and certainly her safest, option was to work at the start-up venture owned by two skin care specialists who had also been fired by Laila's former employer. Most of Laila's clients found their way to the seventh floor because, like me, they are attached to her.

Laila has a peculiar blend of traits that work well in her trade: she is personable, capable, and far brighter than a manicurist need be to patiently help her clients select just the right peach nail polish. Iron-

ically, she has a trace of subservience that she summons when needed to deal with difficult clients—the ones who insist that their nails aren't perfectly shaped or who wait until ten nails have been polished before they decide that Tutu Pink is just too pink. I wonder at those moments whether Laila learned the downcast eyes and retreating posture as a woman in Afghanistan or acquired this studied meekness once she reached these shores. She has a resigned patience to the hard work she considers her lot. Her late nights at the spa don't end when she gets home because it is then that her role as a good Muslim woman begins—a woman who says her prayers and cleans and cooks, often for many people, and who cares for an aging mother who sounds particularly demanding.

Sometimes I see Laila as a typical first-generation immigrant who, like others before her, is facing the dilemma of preserving her own culture while taking advantage of the freedoms offered in this one. Hardly a week goes by when she doesn't tell me how much easier some detail of daily life would be "in my country." "If I were home I wouldn't have all of this trouble finding a dress for my brother's wedding. All I would have to do is buy some material, and there are many stores that sell it, and take it to a tailor who would make me exactly what I want. And it wouldn't be expensive either." Or she might say something like, "In my country, they start the day with a drink that is very warm and soothing, like a sweet tea. They brew it once a week and heat it every day. It is much better than the things they have here to drink in the morning—much more gentle."

Sometimes these remarks awaken the Archie Bunker in my soul and I think, "If it was so good over there, why come here?" But that myopic view quickly fades. I recognize Laila's peculiar position—she is an observant Muslim who confronts the historic enmity between Muslims and Jews directly every day because many of her clients, like me, are Jewish. World events have propelled her into this country and current events have attenuated her bond with it. I know that it is only natural for Laila to feel homesick and to remain loyal to the country of her birth, especially now that the cultural backlash of 9/11 and the "War on Terror" brands her as an outsider in her adopted home.



Laila's most arresting feature is her smile. It is broad and genuine and shows even, white teeth that look all the brighter against her olive complexion. She keeps her straight, dark brown hair a medium length. On the days when it hangs loose, it reaches her chin, sleek and shiny, and falls around her face as she tilts her head down to study her client's hands. On other days, though, her hair loses its sheen and she pulls it back with a toothed hairband or fashions a ponytail at the nape of her neck, held in place by a cheap gold barrette. Her lightly freckled, pudgy cheeks add to her friendly demeanor. Her dark brown eyes glimmer with intelligence. Full lips and a well-proportioned nose with a gently curved tip complete the comforting roundness of her face.

At fifty, Laila is pleasantly ample, and her silhouette suits her frame and contributes to the warm, motherly impression she creates. She wears the white coat required of the manicurists, but it is not always a bright, starched white. Often her smock is a bit tattered and dull, with a button missing or a tea stain on the front that didn't quite come out in the wash. I easily understand Laila's English, although she speaks with an unfamiliar accent and frequently sprinkles her sentences with very nasal "ummmms," place-savers in a conversational stream that last until she either finds the word she wants or the sound she seeks.

The room dedicated to manicure and pedicure services at the spa is just behind the receptionist's desk. The wall at one end of the room is covered

with cheap, sheer, floor-length curtains in spite of the fact that it has no windows. Laila and Irina, the other manicurist, each work at tables that are specially designed for their trade. These black lacquered surfaces appear, at first glance, to be simple oblongs measuring approximately two feet by four feet. But closer examination shows that they each extend another foot and a half beyond the working rectangular surface at an angle. This irregularity makes room for a column of small drawers under the angled extension. These tables are, in effect, the manicurists' "desks" and Laila sits at the one furthest from the door. An architect's lamp screws onto one edge of the table's surface. A small sampling of the shades of peach, red, blue, gray, and pink available for polish sit on the end of the table that extends into the room. The implements of the trade are scattered about next to the polishes—shiny steel nippers, flat-ended cuticle pushers,

pointed cleaners, emery boards, pumice stones, buffers, nail polish remover, and a small, plastic container of pink hand cream nestled in a electric well that warms it. Laila sits at the long side of the table with the drawers to her right. Her clients face her, hands palm down on a cushion of white terry-cloth towels. It is in this posture, as a client, as someone who pays for services, that I have come to know her. And although the chasms created by religion and nationality and social status open between us, I feel a deeper affinity for Laila than I do for many women with whom I share more superficial qualities.

There is a comfortable routine to my weekly appointments with Laila. We have developed rituals that safely define the space between us but also let us explore it, which begin as soon as I take my place opposite her.

"How are your boys?" she asks

as I sit down.

"Which one?" I reply on cue. "The big one (my son), the bigger one (my husband), or the hairy one (the dog)?" She always smiles at this, and asks after each in turn. After I have responded, it is my turn to ask.

"And how is your family?"

"They are doing good. Thank you very much for asking." Her thank you is a bit too obsequious for my democratic tastes, but the discomfort it causes is minor, and I ignore it. We are now free to broach other subjects. By this time she is studying my hands for the damage I have inflicted while working at a potter's wheel several hours the week before—an avocation I love but one that leaves my hands dry and painful.

"What you do to your fingers?" she scolds, surveying the damage wreaked by the clay and my own bad habits. "Did you bite my cuticles again? Why you do that? Don't touch my cuticles." Reaching for antiseptic for the sore perimeters of my nails, her eyes begin to twinkle mischievously. "The next time you want to bite something, don't bite your nails. Bite your husband." Laila laughs at the thought of it. "And tell him I say to do it."

There have been times when Laila's family is not "doing good," like the time her husband was laid off in the mid-nineties, just before the economic boom of the Clinton years arrived. She wanted me to keep my ears open for jobs for him. But I didn't know of any openings for automobile mechanics.

Three years later, she was concerned about her daughter. "I told my oldest daughter not to tell anyone where she is from," she confided one day, leaning slightly over the manicure table so that only I could hear her lowered voice. "If anyone asks where you are from, I said, 'Tell them you were born in Turkey. Don't tell anyone you are from Afghanistan.'"

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I didn't understand the necessity for this caution until I learned that Laila and her husband entered the United States as political refugees, a fact I discovered when she asked me to help her get U.S. passports for her children. "Could you help me with this?" Laila asked me one day as I slid into the seat opposite her. I thumbed through some letters she handed me from the U.S. Immigration Bureau and the Passport Office as she explained her dilemma. The immigration office needed affidavits about where and when she got married and where her children were born.

"Can you do this for me? I will be glad to pay you," she said. I refused to take money from her; these were not difficult documents to prepare.

The affidavits gave me a reason to delve into Laila's background with pointed questions I had previously avoided. I learned that she and her husband married in Kabul, Afghanistan, in 1976 and that her three children were born there in 1979, 1980, and 1985. She left Kabul in 1988 and came to the United States in 1989, two years before she and her husband were granted political asylum. When I asked why she was eligible for political asylum, her dark eyes filled with tears and her lips trembled as she examined my outstretched hands in prelude to my manicure.

"In Kabul," she began, "my father, he was, how you say it, ophthalmologist. He had many patients. He study medicine in Oxford." She related these facts without pretense as she expertly wielded an emery board. I was impressed by her father's profession and training. My own father, born in Russia, escaped that country as a child during the pogroms of the early twentieth century. But his father was a shoemaker in Russia and barely made a living plying his trade in the United States.

"When the Russians came, in

1980, it was terrible," Laila continued as she picked up the cuticle nippers. "They not want my father around because he was against them, against the Communists. One night, the father of child who was his patient come and tell him that the Russians, they make a list of enemies and my father's name is on it. He say that my father must leave or he will be killed in the next two days. It was big risk for that man to do that, but he like my father, so he tell him. My father took my mother and they left the next day." I had to listen closely to this tale because Laila's distress sped her narrative beyond her abilities in her second language, and she stumbled over her sounds and words, groping for the right ones.



Laila told me she graduated from the university in Kabul with a degree in architecture. She went to work for a construction firm after graduation and it was there that she met her husband, a mechanical engineer working for the same firm.

"But after my father leave, then I stop work. I not want to be seen because I was afraid that I would be jailed." She was now matter-of-fact and calm as she continued talking and working.

"My brothers, they were put in jail and tortured. But they manage to get out and they escape. So I was afraid. And then I have my children, and I stay home to take care of them."

"What finally made you leave Afghanistan?" I asked, soaking my hands in heated cream.

"All the fighting from the Taliban," Laila replied without hesitation. She lifted one of my hands from the container of cream and rubbed the residue into my cuticles. "When the Taliban come, they fight the Russians. Then it not safe to even go out on the street. And I want my children to go to school. But it was very dangerous to take them, so I left."

As she filed and buffed and cleaned my nails, she told me about the Afghan refugee community in India, the first stop on her journey here. She stayed nine months with her three young children, all the time applying for a U.S. visa. Then she told me about her life when she got here, working at first without a green card because she needed the money, and how her fear of exposure led to exploitation. She got official working papers after a year.

"Why did you decide to train as a manicurist? Why that?" I asked.

"Ummm," she filled the pause as she thought. "When I look in the newspaper, I see that it is only three-month course. It was the most quick."

This story made a profound impression on me. It has been easy for me to forget, in my relatively safe world, how national and global affairs can actively shape a life, or end one. Laila's story made me think of the stories my father used to tell me when I was four or five about his early childhood experiences in Russia—hiding under the bed when the Cossacks tore through his village looking for one of his cousins whom they eventually found and shot; escaping the country when he was five with his mother and five older siblings, all buried beneath the hay in the wagon of a farmer who agreed to smuggle them over the border for a fee; Cossacks chasing them on horseback, shooting. My father's stories were so far removed from the world of brick row houses in Philadelphia where I spent my early childhood, playing with the neighborhood kids in the street and watching "I Love Lucy" and "Howdy Doody" on TV, that it seemed as if he were rooted in another time quite distant from my own. I had the same feeling about Laila's story—jails and torture for political affiliations; revolt against Russian invaders; the Taliban, a collection of bearded, robed religious fanatics, who were medieval

relics unimaginably cruel and hypocritical in the name of piety—all of these so foreign to my world that her story seemed more like the plot of the latest blockbuster political thriller than reality.

I tried to comprehend the odd twists of fate and personal history that led Laila to train as a manicurist and me to use one. It's difficult. Laila's family seemed far more prominent than my own. Her father was an Oxford-trained physician; mine, a butcher. My father dropped out of high school after tenth grade to go to work because his father, a shoemaker, was only barely making a living. My parents never devoted time or energy to social or political causes. They never would have been singled out for a political hit list. And while my mother was the driving force of education and achievement in the family, I can't imagine her encouraging me to study architecture. I can almost hear her becoming hysterical at the thought. Anything beyond the four walls of her limited experience and vision was strongly condemned. Male children had to become doctors, lawyers, or accountants, with dentistry as an alternative for those who could not get into med school. Female children, according to my mother, should become schoolteachers. As far as my father was concerned, sending female children to college was a waste of money. Though I managed to burrow out from under the most suffocating of these attitudes, it has only happened through small degrees that have taken the better part of my life. As I listened to Laila's story, I thought that it was partially due to the luck of the draw that our positions at the manicure table were not reversed.

When Laila finished her story, she quickly shifted gears, as if to reestablish the boundaries of our relationship. "What color today, Madame?" she asked. "How about bright red. Or maybe blue?"

She teased me as usual by suggesting colors that are glamorous or trendy.

"No, I don't think so." I did not deviate from my routine and chose, as always, a barely tinted polish, more concerned about neatness than style.

"My hands are the hands of a peasant," I told her, just as I do every time she wants me to switch colors. "They are the hands of Russian villagers who worked in the fields. No need to pretend they are anything else."

"Don't say that," she chided me. "They are beautiful hands. Working hands are always beautiful." And she took my fair complexioned hands in her own darker ones, the tips of her strong, coffee-colored fingers capped with short, even nails, neat and clean.

I don't quite understand Laila's mischievous streak, even though I really enjoy it. It puzzles me, because it doesn't fit with the image of Muslim women I have developed, mainly from the media: shadowy figures, totally anonymous in suffocating burqas. I know that moderate Muslims have abandoned, or at least lightened, the burqa, but every time I see American Muslim women with their heads covered, dressed in loose black clothes, I am reminded that these women must obey religious and cultural imperatives that demand they be hidden.

Laila's spunky streak doesn't fit with my notions of such a culture, but she also doesn't wear a headscarf or loose-fitting black dresses, at least not to work. Yet she is a dutiful and observant Muslim. She fasts during Ramadan, indulging in a light meal only in the evenings. She hopes some day to do the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. I couldn't imagine that women were permitted to participate in this pilgrimage, but she told me that one of the perks for women who go to the Hajj is shopping for jewelry. She seems to

throw an endless stream of dinners for twenty or thirty people at a time, celebrating the events of an extended family. She explains to me that as the sister of a prospective groom, she wants to observe the traditions of her culture and entertain the family of the bride or that, as a member of the Muslim community, it is only right for her to cook once a week for those who are donating their time to build a new mosque.

I must confess that I have great difficulty relating to Laila's extreme deference to the needs of others. I want to offer her pointers in assertiveness and teach her how to speak up for herself. Maybe I'm too close to a culture of immigrants myself and to a religion that, in its strictly observant form, insists that women cover their heads in public. My own background mimics Laila's; whether by scripture or culture, women are relegated to subservience. I feel a blend of anger and annoyance when Laila tells me about large family and community events that mandate long hours in the kitchen after long hours in the salon. These tales push my own buttons.

"Does anyone ever cook for you?" I ask her, bristling just a bit from the faint echoes of mostly resolved guilt about abandoning a somewhat similar role. "I hope that you are appreciated." But Laila just looks at me when I say things like that, as if I am speaking a foreign language.

Laila and I love to complain to each other about the high price of meat and poultry that is prepared according to religious principles. She moans about the prices charged by the halal butchers, who sell the meat of animals that have been slaughtered according to *Zabibah*, or Muslim ritual. I commiserate with my own tales of the prices charged by my kosher butcher. I have learned that the halal and kosher rituals of animal slaughter are very similar—each

requires a religious figure to slit the animal's throat quickly, permitting its blood to drain. Pork is forbidden to both Muslims and Jews. The laws are similar not only in content but also in their attribution to divine origins.

"But kosher chickens really do taste much better," I tell her as consolation for the high prices. One day I asked her if she had ever cooked duck, having just embarked on the preparation of this fowl myself.

"You know, I never have." My question surprised her. "I never thought about it."

"Are you permitted to eat duck?" I asked.

"I don't know. I never have, but I don't see why not, as long as it's properly slaughtered." She seemed uncertain. But after a second or two she flashed her bright grin and said, "I don't know why not. If you can eat it, then I can too."

When Laila told me of her path to this country, she only hinted at the pain of unfulfilled dreams that she must have buried in order to function in her new world. But this pain resurfaced when she brought in her wedding pictures to show me on a pre-arranged day.

"I want you to see that, in Kabul, it used to be just like it is here. My wedding was just like a wedding in this country."

So I made my appointment for a Wednesday afternoon, a day when Laila is not busy at the spa, and she hauled in two shopping bags packed with albums. We pulled chairs next to each other in the empty manicure room and she began explaining each photo to me and who was in it. Her albums were bursting with memories and her face quivered as she pointed out all of her friends and relatives.

"It has been such a long time since I looked at these." She sighed, holding back tears.

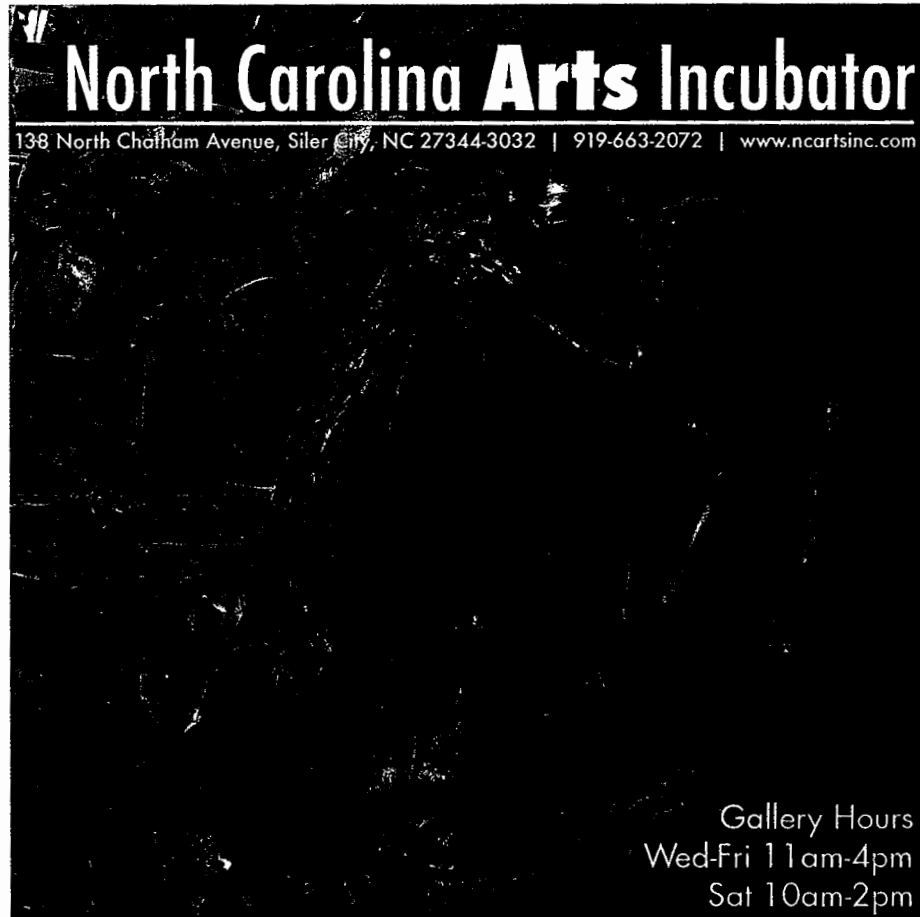
Laila was a magnificent young woman, a dark, sultry version of

Kim Novak with a wasp waist and high, sculpted cheekbones, sexy and sophisticated in her white wedding gown. She radiated assurance and pride as well as happiness, her head held high as she posed for photos, an educated Muslim woman of privilege. Her husband, olive-skinned and serious, posed proudly in the pictures; he was the male equivalent of her own intensity and allure. There were photos of her in two different bridal dresses for two different ceremonies: one was pale blue for the traditional Muslim ceremony; the other was a bridal gown identical to the customary white gowns of the Western world. I did not have to fake my reaction to the photos. She was so beautiful, young, and happy. I had a hard time reconciling the slightly pudgy, always dutiful woman sitting next to me with the proud almost haughty persona of the bride in the picture.

"Can you believe it?" she said to

me after we had looked at the albums, somewhat incredulous that she and the young woman in the photos were the same person. "Can you believe that was me? Looking like that, so skinny, so beautiful. And now look at me." She walked over to the mirror above the sink as she said this, studying her complexion. "What has happened to me? Now I am fat. And old. And ugly. I never thought then I would end up with this life that I have."

There was little I could say, except to remind her that all women get heavier as they age and that none of us can recapture our younger selves. But it is undeniable that the peculiar hardships of her life have taken their toll and that had her life been easier, she would more closely resemble the bride in the pictures. I see the strains in the crinkles around her eyes, the slight droop in her cheeks, and the dark hair pulled hastily away from her face with lit-



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tle thought to the strands that escape the bobby pins. And I could think of nothing to say about how her planned career as an architect turned into the trade of painting fingernails and toenails.

Although Laila told me that it was the desire to educate her children that drove her from Afghanistan, she panicked in the fall of 1998 when her eldest daughter and son were ready to apply to college at the same time. "It is so expensive," she told me one day. "I think sometimes it was mistake to leave Kabul. At least their education would have been paid for in my country." She asked me if I knew anything about financial aid and I pulled information off the Internet about the universities that her children could attend while remaining at home.

"My daughter wants to live in the dormitory. But in my country, girls stay with their parents. I told her she must stay home. Maybe, if she goes to medical school, then she can move away. And it is so expensive; she cannot go unless she gets a scholarship. The state school offers her full scholarship. Do you think it is so much better to go to private university? What difference does it make?"

I didn't know how to explain to Laila that the status conferred by the private university would be helpful and that, for most people, it would be the better choice. There were other considerations for her, considerations beyond those of either education or status. At the private college, the culture of wealthier students on a primarily residential campus could pose a danger. It was more likely to make her daughter dissatisfied with the traditions of her family and unhappy with the lifestyle that was her legacy.

The first time I saw Laila after 9/11 she was unusually quiet. Her eyes were downcast and her shoulders were hunched. "They

I could think of nothing to say about how her planned career as an architect turned into the trade of painting fingernails and toenails.

should boil that bastard in oil," she hissed under her breath, referring to Osama bin Laden. "I hate him," she told me, the venom spilling into her voice. Her pure, strong hatred seemed to transcend that of other people. For Laila, this was very personal.

"In my religion, it's not like that." She almost pleaded with me, wanting to explain this terrible perversion of the things she believed. "Jihad, it mean, it is like something that you do your whole life. Like a struggle to be holy for yourself. It not mean fighting and killing. It means that you struggle to be a good Muslim. My religion is a religion of peace, not war." I caught Irina, the other manicurist, a Jewish refugee from Russia, glancing at her with disgust. I knew that life at that moment had to be very difficult for Laila.

She seemed very depressed every time I saw her in the months that followed. Talk of al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, the debate over violence and Muslim beliefs, sleeper cells, and the war in Afghanistan filtered into the world of the spa. Laila's eyes were vacant and downcast and her face wore a studied blank expression. Many members of her family still lived in Afghanistan, and the American bombs were threatening their lives. For the first time in the years since we had met, critical remarks about America passed her lips, but she spoke them quietly, wanting no one else to hear.

"Why they must bomb innocent people?" she whispered to me through gritted teeth. "I understand about how terrible the attack in New York. But what good is it to bomb innocent people?"

Sometimes she even came close

to admitting impatience with some of her customers, a crack in her normally deferential mask. "Everybody in this country thinks my country is so backwards. But Kabul is a big city, just like here. And before the Taliban came, we were very modern. People seem to think we live in caves. I am sick of stupid questions. Everyone ask me what my country is like. They think it like they show on TV, but it is not like that." She was vehement, and although I wanted to ask her what it really was like, I didn't dare, for fear of upsetting her more. I shared instead some of my impressions of her countrymen and asked what struck me as neutral questions.

"The men in your country are so handsome," I said truthfully, for the majority of men before the television cameras presented smoldering good looks, staring with deep, intense eyes, rich dark hair, and olive skin. I saw Laila relax at my words. I told her that it was impossible for me to distinguish the natives of Afghanistan from the natives of Israel. At that time I was still laboring under the impression that Afghan Muslims are, like Arabs, Semitic in origin, confusing their religion with their ethnicity. Located east of the Arabian Peninsula, the land of Afghanistan is populated by descendants of central Asian as well as Semitic tribes, and over the centuries the lines between them have frequently blurred. But in those days following 9/11, I had not yet made the ethnic distinction between Arabs and Afghans. "There is something that I don't understand about the men I see on TV," I continued. "They all look like they are wearing eyeliner on the lower lids of

their eyes. What is that and why do they wear it?"

"Ahh," she said, smiling for the first time in months. "That is, how you say it, a substance, like a powder, kohl. They put it under their eyes to help protect from the sun."

Not unlike football and baseball players in this country, I thought, who smear black under their eyes for the same reason, although not with the same precise delicacy.

Business was slow at Monique's Spa after 9/11. In the aftermath of attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, luxuries like manicures seemed frivolous in the face of a world filled with terrorists and death. Laila was worried about money. I knew that she could read and write Farsi, one of the main languages spoken in Afghanistan. The federal government was looking for people who could read and write Farsi, so I pulled a job description off the Internet and brought it to Laila. After all, I reasoned, Laila is an American citizen and very bright. She has a skill that is in high demand. The pay would be phenomenal for her, and benefits like health insurance and pension plans would offer more financial security than she had at the moment.

As soon as I handed her the papers, I knew I had made a mistake. The light in her dark eyes flickered briefly and I realized in that instant that she could never help the United States in its efforts to capture bin Laden. Her head bent down as she accepted my papers, murmuring that she would read them, but I could tell that the thought of becoming a translator for the government was repulsive to her. She would be helping her adopted country kill her relatives and bomb her homeland. I realized that such a job might brand her as an outcast not only in her own community but also in her soul.

I worried about this, and for the first time I wondered about Laila's Muslim community. Was it harbor-

ing terrorists? Sleeper cells? It's possible, I reasoned, because they would blend in. I never thought that Laila would knowingly help terrorists, but what about unknowingly? Were people preaching hatred at the mosque where she worshipped? Did it reflect anti-Semitism? I was uncomfortable with the questions and mildly nervous about the answers. I still am.

I went to an Orthodox Jewish wedding last September and when I saw Laila the next week, I told her about it in great detail. I had requested a variation in polish for the event: a French manicure, still pale but a bit more festive than my usual fare. As Laila used polish remover to erase her efforts of the week before, I described the *tish*, the signing of the marriage contract before the ceremony, and the *bedeken*, the lowering of the bride's veil that followed.

"The men were in a separate room," I reported, telling how the fathers of the bride and groom sat around a big conference table haggling out the terms of the marriage contract—how much the bride's father will give the young couple and how much the groom's father will donate. No women were permitted at the *tish*, but the room was mobbed with the groom's friends and male relatives, all wearing identical dark black suits with long coats and high black hats. I described the large reception hall where the bride sat, greeting her guests, waiting for the end of the contract negotiations. There were food stations set up around the room to feed the guests as we mingled and waited. Finally, I told her, we heard the men singing, which meant the contract was signed. The groom's friends hoisted him on their shoulders and they entered the banquet hall where the groom lowered the bride's veil, which would not be lifted until after the marriage ceremony. I explained that in modern times the veil is only down for half an hour

or less, but in the days when the tradition originated, many months would pass between the signing of the contract and the wedding ceremony.

Laila's mouth dropped open as I recounted the event. "That is just what my people do for a wedding. It starts with the contract. And the men are separate from the women."

"That's right," I told her. "I could not sit with my husband during the ceremony. The men were on one side of the aisle, the women on the other. And later, during the reception, there was a wall down the middle of the dance floor. They call it a *mechizab*. It was a row of large potted trees."

"It is the same with us," she said. "But we don't have the wall—just the separate dancing."

"Is it really wild?" I asked her. "This was really wild. I kept peeking through the trees to watch the men. They were jumping around, throwing the groom in the air. Some of the ushers were on the floor, dancing Cossack style." I folded my arms in front of my chest and kicked my legs out straight to show her what I meant. "And one guy even got a flaming torch and swallowed the fire, like they do in the circus."

"It is the same," she nodded. "It is the same. Except for the fire eating. I never saw that one."

Then Laila asked about my mother, whose stroke and recovery she has followed with interest. I told her about how I had to force her to go to the wedding and what a good time she had once she got there and how much she complained on the ride up and the ride back. Laila looked up from her emery board with a level gaze.

"Do you think that our mothers could be related?" she asked me. "Seriously. My mother is so much like how you describe. Maybe they are twins."

"Could be. It's a thought," I replied. "Twins. Separated at birth."

We both laughed. ☺