

# OUT of the ASHES

During a visit to a pioneering school in Kabul, *Bella Pollen* is humbled by hospitality in a war zone and inspired by the courage of young Afghans.

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When our plane is struck by lightning flying low over the Hindu Kush, an elderly Afghan behind us springs to his feet and begins shrieking, “God will not let us die!” over and over. Given the trembling fuselage, the black twists of tornado outside, this is not a popular mantra among fellow passengers.

The two women across from us barely react. Fleshy in animal-print leggings, and cooing over duty-free Tommy Hilfiger, they’re united in spite and abuse of their two male bodyguards. Forget the storm, it’s this topsy-turvy balance of power that holds my attention. In a country where to call women second-class citizens is to grossly overstate their position, the humiliation and subjugation of these two men is puzzling. Afghanistan is proving to be a country of bewildering contradictions.

A week earlier, in London’s Afghan Embassy, I’d been interviewed by a beautiful, if surly, young woman.

“You’re visiting a school.” She looked up from my required letters of recommendation.

“Yes.”

“Marefat School.”

“Yes.”

“Does it educate girls?” she asked, and the question hung in the air.

In 1996 the Taliban stripped women of their civic and social rights, banishing them from schools, universities and the workforce. Thirteen years after NATO and Allied forces weighed into the civil war, the issue of women’s rights remains highly controversial.

The embassy woman was wearing a black dress, demure yet close-fitting enough to accentuate the curve of her breasts.

“Yes, it educates girls,” I replied and waited for a flicker of solidarity. Nothing, only a piercing stare as she stamped my visa.

So, what to expect of this proud and embittered country? This Babylonian land of fractured cities and landscapes. Travel tips have been freely offered. Don’t stay more than five days. Don’t take the same route twice. Don’t go at all.

“You’ve been a good wife,” my husband said in a heavy-hearted fashion as I left for the airport.

“Thanks,” I replied solemnly, trying to hide my excitement.

“*Salaam alaikum*,” the flight attendant says, as the plane finally jolts onto the runway. “Welcome to Kabul.”

The airport bus is empty. It has worn pink velvet seats and a bullet hole in the windscreen. The doors are too warped to close.

Nate, our “security guard,” has managed to get only as close as Car Park C. “All our security passes have been confiscated,” he says grimly. “It’s a giant pain in the ass.”

A convoy of US armoured tanks rolls past our Mercedes as we head into Kabul. Nate’s driver pulls

sharply off the main road and into a driveway. Steel doors slide shut behind us and we find ourselves in a compound: two storeys washed with fluorescent light and the smell of new carpet. It’s afternoon, but curtains are drawn, window panes daubed with black paint.

I’ve always wanted to see this country. Pinned to my office noticeboard is a photograph of a beautiful, green Kabul. In it a student, head uncovered, walks alongside two young men with drooping moustaches and John Lennon glasses. Here was an intellectual, progressive Kabul where women went to university in bell-bottoms. That was the ’70s. Today this city is a war zone, ravaged by 30 years of conflict, and the only way I will see it is in stolen glimpses through a car window.

Kabul’s morning colours are Mondrian. Women shrouded in indigo blue glide through the streets. How different, I wonder, are their snapshots of life to mine? A storm hangs over a city holding its breath and there’s a frisson on the wind, of energy, of defiance, of fear. The snows are melting; the elections are coming. A spring offensive is as inevitable as the blossoming of the almond trees.

Our driver makes a U-turn. Nate is annoyed. “If you weren’t sure where the school was, you should have scouted it,” he snaps. We’re happy to be in the care of Nate, a former US Army colonel, even though we’re not exactly sure what he does these days. He makes vague references to eyes and ears on the ground, some sniffing out of al-Qaeda cells. The biggest danger, he tells us, is being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Bombs. Bad luck. There’s kidnapping, of course, and my colleague Christa and I tick a few boxes. We’re both journalists and Christa’s mother, Baroness D’Souza, who co-founded the school, is speaker of the House of Lords. “Take Christa!” I have practised saying. “She’s so much better connected...”

And Nate’s kidnapping MO? “Straight to the cash machine?” we ask.

“It’s not about the money,” he says cheerfully. “It’s about making them understand the shit that’s gonna happen if they harm or sell you on.”

Right. Whatever Nate does, we resolve to do precisely as he says.

We’re in the district of Dasht-e-Barchi now, where the school is located. Faces in the street have changed. Wider eyes, a flatter bone structure attest to the Mongolian ancestry of the Hazara. Dasht-e-Barchi is one of the poorest areas of Kabul, but these Hazaras are lucky. Many of those who fled to Iraq, Iran and Syria have not fared so well.

It’s break time at Marefat High School and the courtyard is jostling with kids. The school began as barely more than an ideal. While teaching the tenets of democracy in a Pakistani refugee camp, a fiercely voluble young Afghan, Aziz Royesh, dreamed of building a centre of academic excellence in his hometown of Kabul. First, he established Marefat School for Afghan refugees in Pakistan in 1994, then eight years later realised his dream and moved the>

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## DISPATCHES

Opposite: Afghanistan National Army soldiers and Kabul’s destroyed Darul Aman Palace.



school to Kabul, with the support of Christa's mother. Marefat now has more than 3000 students, almost half of whom are girls. Virtually all progress to university, many scooping up scholarships around the world. It's one of the few schools in the country with programs in fine art and civic education and, despite government constraints, it's teaching human rights, including women's issues, an extraordinary achievement.

In the afternoon we hold a debate with senior students. "What happens when you're married to a girl who's earning good money but has a child?" we ask the boys. "Who makes the supper? Who changes the nappy?"

The boys exchange panicked looks. Their culture has taught them Afghan women must accept the authority of men, but Marefat is teaching that it is their social responsibility to help their sisters reclaim their rights.

"We are as good as men," one of the girls cries, "and we will prove it." But these girls will also have to square the ideals of democracy and feminism with being a good Muslim. The boys caution patience; the girls are on fire. Not for them the long arm of political change; they see education and employment as their generation's revolution. As I watch them, hands in the air, so desperate to be part of the argument, part of the solution, I fear for them. There are always those who must pay in blood to live in a world of their choosing and as the withdrawal of 130,000 NATO and Allied troops slides into view, the future looks frighteningly unstable. What will happen to these girls should Marefat fall under a revived Taliban?

It's dusk. We're on a rat run into the mountains, on a road of built-up rubble, flanked by the ruins of the old city. Children stalk the verge wearing a mishmash of polyester and traditional dress. When we arrive at

the home of Jawed, our academic friend, his brother is roasting lamb speared on two-metre-long blades. Talk at dinner is of NGOs, gender mainstreaming, activism versus advocacy. Toffees are washed down with hot sweet tea and it's late by the time we head home. The streets are curfew empty. Torches flash. Our driver slows the car, shows his pass; the police wave us on.

I wake to the sound of gunfire, the soundtrack of Kabul for the foreseeable future. We're leaving in the morning, but I want to stay. I'm beginning to feel Afghanistan's pull.

There's no hugging permitted in Car Park C at the airport. We thank Nate with a terse nod, then shuffle through security, secondary security, extra security – our luggage, eyes and souls examined.

The flight is delayed. We buy a \$15 bag of almonds. "A rip-off," another passenger pronounces, but the nuts buy us conversation. A pharmaceutical rep tells us Afghanistan's cache of onyx is being plundered by the allies and Chinese. A young Afghan whose uncle was publicly beheaded: "I'm dying to go into politics," he says without irony. "Make this country great again."


On the plane I fiddle with photos on my laptop, changing the Kabul sky from grey to blue, as though that might be all it takes. There's a guttural sound and I realise the man occupying the window seat is watching me. Cleric? Talib? He leans over the middle seat and stares. "Kabul?" he asks. I nod warily.

The street scenes scroll onto an image of the Marefat girls in their distinctive uniforms. Panicked, I switch files, randomly landing in snaps of Vietnam and the famous wartime photograph of a wounded US soldier falling from a helicopter. I stab at the keyboard, but the cleric-Talib stops me with his hand.

"Good," he says.

I look at him even more uncertainly. His beard is made of a thousand wiry springs.

"Good photo." He nods at the fallen American hero and smiles slyly.

For more information or to support Marefat School, see [christaandbellasschoolproject.tumblr.com](http://christaandbellasschoolproject.tumblr.com) 

## CLASS ACTION

An Afghan woman carries her child past a destroyed building in Kabul (left) and young students at the beginning of the school year at Marefat School.