

Ashnas and Mehboobs

An Afghani Love Story

by AFDHERE JAMA

When the Taliban was ousted from Afghanistan, the media was filled with stories about Afghans returning to cinema halls, flying kites, playing music. And yes, to an Afghanistan where older men were once more openly courting teenaged boys.

As a queer Muslim living in the West, I was concerned. Here we go, I thought, more bad press for queer people. Now we were back to stereotypes of child molesters. But I knew from my own background that the story is not simply about pedophilia—culture and tradition are all woven into it. So I decided to get the story directly from the source.

This is where Sadar comes in. Sadar is a 28-year-old Afghani man who now lives in Pakistan. He doesn't want his last or family name revealed. A transsexual Pakistani friend of mine found him for me.

Until he moved to Pakistan at the age of 19, Sadar was an "ashna," a word that means "beloved" but has the context of "boy toy" in Afghani culture. When he was 14, an older man [who was 35 at the time] from a village near his bought him a cup of tea one day. Sadar was in the teashop and, since it is part of their culture to be hospitable, which includes but is not limited to buying tea for others, he was not alarmed by it. The two talked and the older guy asked Sadar if he would meet him for tea the next day. Sadar says the older man kept making tea appointments for the two of them for about a fortnight. Then, one day the older man arrived at the tea shop with a gift, an expensive shawl from either Pakistan or India.

"I was surprised," says Sadar. "It was a pretty shawl. I wasn't interested in it, though. I didn't like masculine things and that shawl was masculine." Sadar remembers being different as a boy. He didn't "fancy" all the stuff the other boys liked. "I was apart from the boys," he says. "I liked feminine things. So I took the shawl and gave it to my father. I told him I bought it for him."

After accepting that gift, Sadar felt obligated to continue meeting the man. They now started taking walks together and slowly became close. Sadar found a lot

that he liked in the man. "He was tender," he says. "He would ask me if I needed water or anything all the time. He was protective of me and encouraged me to study. He had been a second father to me. Better father than my own because he didn't judge me."

Sadar says that ever since he could remember his own father made fun of him for being feminine. "He would always say something like 'Why can't you be like your brothers?'" and that always hurt because I didn't have an answer for it."

Sadar's friend owned a shop in Sadar's village. One evening, two years after they first met, he invited Sadar to come to the shop and share a dinner with him. Sadar

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was not surprised when his friend approached him sexually. "I did expect that when I went there that night," says Sadar. "I was in love with him by this time, you see."

He says he fell deeply in love with the older man because he "loved me and kept

me close." When asked whether their relationship was remotely sexual for those first two years, Sadar says "No. I did have sexual feelings towards him but nothing happened. I suspect he desired me as much but never showed it." And so the older man became Sadar's mehboob (lover).

The older man continued to give gifts to Sadar and the couple kept having sex for the next three years. He says everyone was aware of their relationship and no one questioned them about it. "People figured it out before I did," he says, laughing. "You just don't talk about those sorts of things, though, so I didn't know." He says he felt it was something that was happening only to him.

But he knows now that was not true. Afghani culture has been replete with similar stories for thousands of years. At the end of his translation of "1001 Arabian Nights," the 19th century British explorer Richard Burton wrote: "The Afghans are commercial travelers on a large scale and each caravan is accompanied by a number of boys and lads almost in woman's attire with kohl'd eyes and rouged cheeks, long tresses and henna'd fingers and toes, riding luxuriously in Kajawas or camel-panniers: they are called Kuch-i safari, or traveling wives, and the husbands trudge patiently by their sides."

Sadar confesses that he did put on women's stuff occasionally when he was having sex or sometimes when he was just around his older friend. "I only did that because it made the relationship more pure," he says, adding that having sex when dressed as a woman somehow made it less "evil", because even though the culture allows it, Afghani Muslims consider sexual relationship between two males a gross sin. "I wore surma [a dark toxic eye liner] and painted my lips. Then I'd put on a feminine shawl. It pleased him. He would get excited even more!"

At this point, I ask Sadar whether his "friend" was single or not. "He was married," he says. "He had a wife and three children. He was devoted to his family." Then I ask him whether he ever entertained the idea of the two of them settling down together. "Well, that doesn't exist in our culture," he says. "I was really happy to see him three or four times a week." For the last three years of