

# Central Line to Asia

By Annie Mills 15 May 2001. 2173 words.

I'd never accepted a ride in a strange man's car until the night I met Nima. Two days of Notting Hill Carnival had turned me crazy, or perhaps I was just too tired to care? Either way, falling into step beside this moon-faced, dark-haired foreigner as I finally left the carnival floats behind me didn't feel frightening. So I let him drive me home. His mobile rang somewhere near Camden Town and he rattled away in a lisp, a guttural patter I did not recognise.

"What are you speaking Nima?"

"Farsi" he replied.

"Will you teach me?"

"OK"

"Will you teach my mother too?"

"Sure".

I took his number and we started lessons (My Mum and I have a half-baked idea to ride across Iran). Though the Farsi lessons petered out (Mum and I can write the alphabet but we can't pronounce it), a brave new world opened up when Nima became my friend.

Along the Central line I would travel to Central Asia (via Greenford) where I dined on rich, meaty Afghan curries decorously arranged on a light-blue plastic dining sheet he always laid out on the floor. I found myself sitting cross-legged on a particularly tasteless brown carpet in a rented flat above a greasy spoon café, in a part of London I'd only ever passed as a motorway signpost. Listening to a swirling coterie of dashing Afghan men jabbering away in Farsi (Afghanistan's official language) or Pashto (Nima's local language) - how could I tell the difference anyway - I would feel entirely estranged from the London I've lived in all my life.

Nima and his friends were incredible hosts. The first time I went there I took them a bottle of wine forgetting that Muslims do not drink. They poured me a glass in a ceramic mug and waved away my *faux pas* with roars of laughter. I know I am a rarity in their world -- an unchaperoned girl displaying a curiosity about their lives -- but Nima's ever-changing household of young Afghan men never betrayed the surprise they must have felt the first time Nima invited me around and said to me, "This is your home. Do what you like in it".

Most of the time I just listened. Listened to Nima talking about life in Afghanistan before the Russians had invaded, "My country was doing really well then. I remember everyone was wearing flares and listening to the Beatles and getting Beatles haircuts. You'd never believe it now" he'd say sadly. I listened to their stories about being Mujahadeen fighting the Russian occupation. Nima for one had carried a rocket launcher on his back around the mountains of the Hindu Kush or as he put it, "I should have been going to university but instead I was fighting those bustads (Nima's pronunciation not my bad spelling lisa!). And now my goodness, what a bloody mess my country is in now."

"Would you go back if you could?" I once asked casually. The vehemence of his response shouldn't have startled me but it did - Afghan patriotism is a force to be reckoned with: "Of

course I would. My heart is sick for my country. Why else would I have put myself through such sheet? Now my back is fucked, I should not really work because of it, but I do anyway to support all those people back there who are all fucked. My country is fucked Annie. But if I could go back tomorrow I would”.

Immigration issues were merely columns to skip in a broadsheet until I met Nima. But then I saw the helplessness Nima felt in the face of the Kafka-esque bureaucracy which prevented him from getting his passport back. (His sister was stuck in Germany with domestic problems, alone, but he couldn't get to her). For the first time I started to feel ashamed of being British.

One day I took Nima and his affectionate side-kick, Mahmoud, whom he introduces as his brother though they are not actually related. Mahmoud is as quiet as Nima is voluble and together we rode the train to Brighton to see my sister who studies here. As we strolled past James I's Pavilion I saw the chatri domes again, those onion-shaped mounds which crown what I'd always thought of as just an absurd folly. But with Mahmoud and Nima in tow the palace became a chance for me to show them both how Central Asian architectural forms were respected and cherished here in my country. My embarrassment over the cruelty of the Home Office turned to pride in the English king who'd brought Mughal beauty to this seaside town.

My sister was delighted with the exotic company I'd brought her – Afghan refugees are not commonly found strolling the Sussex University campus - and she was even more surprised when Nima insisted on picking up the tab for our lunch. The highlight of the day though was most definitely a go on the bumper cars at the end of Brighton Pier. Though a new experience for Nima and Mahmoud, they still managed to bump Jessie and I mercilessly – much to our fury!

On the train home, Nima and Mahmoud were full of chat about all the pretty girls they'd seen around campus, and the fun of being beside the sea (despite the lowering clouds). On a rare note of dejection as we drew into Victoria, Nima suddenly said “I wish I could have gone to university and experienced all that. Instead of...”. He didn't finish the sentence but in my head I imagined him in Mujahadeen mode, then recalled the four years of my own library-filled existence. The breach between my experience and his had never seemed wider.

A few days later it was Bonfire Night. Nima arrived at my house too late for us to catch the fireworks on Primrose Hill but in my eagerness to inculcate in him the joys of this bizarre English tradition, I insisted we climb Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath to see London ablaze. London was spread out before us, the sky an indistinct orange-red from the city lights, bonfire smoke and flashes of municipal firework displays. Rockets whined and filled me with childish excitement. So I barely noticed Nima's uncharacteristic silence until he pulled me by the arm away from the blood-red sky towards the beech woods beside Kite Hill.

“What's wrong?”

“Sit down here”. We sat together, silently, on the bench. I felt confused, my enthusiasm spent. After a long time, he said,

“I don't like it because it sounds like the war. You've never been in a war but it sounds like this.” He took my hand and placed it upon his thumping heart. “I am scared”.

Reeling from his revelation I had no words to comfort, or understand the experiences he grappled with. What could I say? He continued, “You know, one time in the mountains, it was Eid, the festival to celebrate the end of Ramadan. I was with the Mujahadeen on one side of a wood like that” - he pointed to the copse of trees to our left “and our enemies, who were also Afghans but loyal to the Russians, were on the other side of it. At midnight we both set off rockets into the sky and we could hear their singing and we sang songs in God's praise with them. Our rocket smoke and our singing joined us together. And the next day we fired the rockets at each other.”

Since few Afghans have been given Full Refugee Status (this is the asylum seeker's Holy Grail conferred by the Home Office which lets someone bring their family here so they can settle down and start a new life), the Afghan community is very male. I'd discovered this when I'd suggested

I accompany Nima to the Afghan Society end of Ramadan party last December but when he told me there would be no other women there, I imagined 700 Afghan men falling silent as I entered the room on his arm and decided that he might just have been right to dissuade me. I've never met a

female relative in all my time hanging out with Nima and his friends. Nima is not married, his mother is in Pakistan and his sister is in Germany. None of his other flatmates have wives in London either.

So sometime soon I will bring some fun-loving girls to the Kabul Restaurant in Southall where we often go to get those meaty Afghan curries. The restaurant is found in a mall off Southall High Street where the shop signs are all in Urdu, or Hindi, I don't know which. Walking up a broken escalator to the first floor, it is glass-fronted with formica-topped tables and pictures on the walls of Afghanistan. I love going there just for the pictures: the ornate, tiled dome of Mazar al Sharif, Afghanistan's most important mosque, the dizzying passes of the Hindu Kush which Nima always points to with a belly laugh and says, "We really messed you guys up there". He is referring to the Retreat from Kabul when 17,000 Brits were massacred by Afghan tribesmen in the First Anglo-Afghan war of 1842. Only one army doctor, the indomitable Surgeon Brydon (and his pony) survived. Kabul Restaurant gives pride of place, however, to an electrically powered picture of a simulated waterfall.

Along with Mahmoud, Nima will bring Amano on our triple date. Amano is a chubby, chatty neighbour from Nima's hometown of Kandahar. He works as a security guard in an educational institution which he likes because he can eye up all the female students. He's always laughing when I see him - God knows how - considering that like Nima he has lost middle-class position in Afghanistan which afforded him respect, education and wealth and swapped it for the

intellectual desert of life as a security guard in London. Nima wants me to bring my sister along to the Kabul Restaurant too. He says he thinks she'll like the live Afghan music (every Sunday night). I tell him it's because she's so beautiful and five years younger than me. He gets coy, then grins.

Nima later confessed that he only agreed to teach me Farsi because he fancied me. (Men reading this I know you are rolling your eyes wondering why girls ever believe you when you say you just want to be friends in order to

get girls into bed, but I, at any rate, will believe you). Anyway, after much discussion, Nima and I did go to bed a few times. Although it didn't work out I have one deeply precious and enduring memory of sharing his bed. It came the next morning when I awoke under his creme-de-menthe nylon bedspread embroidered with a heart where a matching, frilled pillow was designed to rest (he's very proud of it) to see his muscular frame bent over his prayer mat. Without speaking, I got out of bed, chose another corner of the room and began my own prostrations to the god of yoga. For some minutes the only sound was his indeterminate 'allah akbar allallah', my deep breathing and the roar of traffic down Greenford Broadway.

Surprising experiences have characterized my discovery of Central Asia via Greenford. Being with Nima is never boring, our many conversations often start "In my culture". I am always learning. Learning with horror about refugees who queue for 10 hours in the Croydon Immigration Centre only to get thrown out of the queue with the callous retort "No-one asked you to come here". Learning with laughter about how Nima is always being rung up by his Mum who says "I have new beautiful bride for you" to which Nima replies "What? More beautiful than the one you told me about last week?" Learning with surprise how little life in London actually modifies cultural behaviours. For example, Nima told me about a Pakistani guy he knew living in Southall who had been killed by two scimitar-wielding brothers of a girl he'd been messing around with. The fearsome brothers had flown over to London, done the dirty deed and landed back in Lahore before the police even knew it had happened!

I have also learnt with a sense of awe that the Afghan scene I have discovered is just a tiny part of one community of very many which have been built here in London by people from every

corner of the world. I feel that their gift to London has been to turn corners of this city into corners of their own.

Above all, I have learnt to hope that our London melting pot will result in more people like me meeting more people like Nima. It makes me smile even now - me, a middle-class graduate meekly performing a salutation to the sun as an Afghan Mujahadeen in a tiny flat, in an insalubrious quarter of west, west London sent up his prayers to heaven.