

LITTLE KABUL

On the anniversary of 9/11, Toronto's 20,000 Afghans face an excruciating dilemma: stay here and trade their own futures for their children's, or go home to help rebuild and risk everything

A YEAR AGO, ON A SUNNY TUESDAY MORNING, Daud Saba was sitting at his computer doing some last-minute research for a business trip to India. A geologist with an interest in environmental issues, he was scheduled to fly out in two days, on September 13. In his homeland of Afghanistan, he had taught at the Kabul Polytechnical Institute, enjoying the status of a professional and academic, to say nothing of a comfortable lifestyle. By the time he finished his Ph.D. at the University of Bombay in 1995, the Taliban had taken control of his country. Professionals, especially progressives, were targeted as enemies. It wasn't safe to return to Kabul, so he joined a mass exodus of Afghans who found themselves in refugee camps in Pakistan and India and eventually, if they were lucky, in safe havens in Europe and North America.

He arrived at Pearson late in 1996 with \$50 in his pocket. But his wife, Hamida, and their two sons were trapped in Kabul. Hamida, a doctor, had lost her hospital job because of the Taliban. Daud feared for his family's safety. After spending his first night in Toronto sleeping at the airport, he was referred to Seaton House, a homeless men's shelter on Jarvis—and a glaring contrast to the decadent West Daud had imagined. As soon as he could get himself settled, he would begin the long process of sponsoring his family to join him. All told, it would take three years.

In the meantime, like so many Afghan professionals, he was unable to find work in his field. Over the years, he took on odd jobs: working shifts in a factory, making sandwiches, delivering pizzas. From time to time, the family has had to accept social assistance to get by. Hamida got a job in a convenience store and began volunteering at St. Joseph's Hospital. But now the Indian government was paying—if only travel and accommodation expenses—for Daud to take part in a survey of air quality in Bombay. The experience might help him land something more permanent.

Studying his computer screen that Tuesday morning, Daud was lost in his thoughts, feeling optimistic, when the phone rang. "Go, go, go to the TV," urged a friend's breathless voice. "See what's going on!" Like almost everyone else in the western world with access to a television, Daud stared in disbelief as the World Trade Center towers crumbled. But his response was different from that of most Canadians. As terrifying as the images were, he had already experienced inconceivable horrors. In 1990, during the civil war that followed the Soviet conflict, civilian targets in Kabul, including hospitals and schools, had been bombed indiscriminately. By hand, Daud had collected body parts belonging to his students.

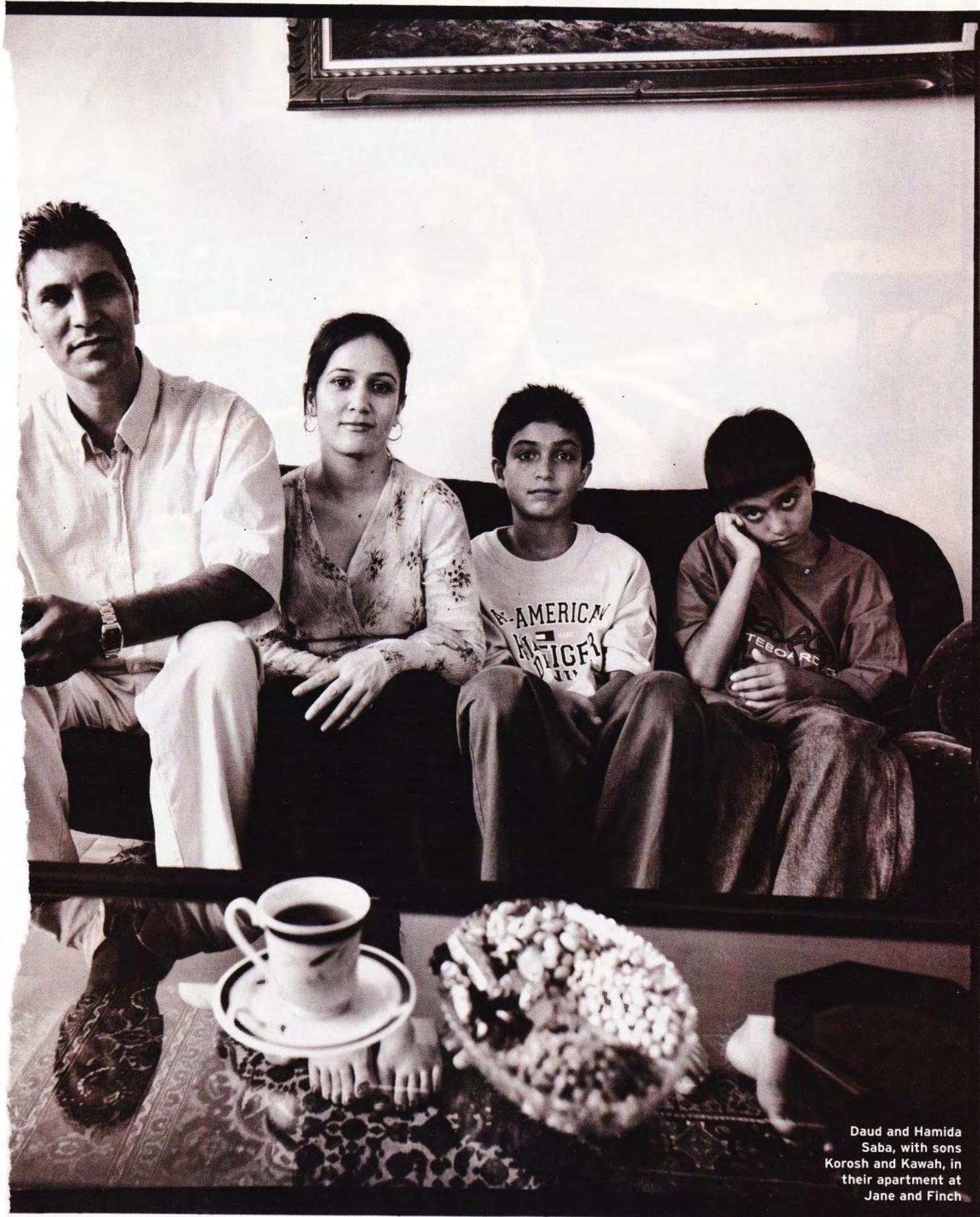
Watching events unfold in New York, his mind was reeling. This is the end of the Taliban, he thought. The Americans are experiencing the devastation we've been experiencing for decades. There will be a dramatic reaction. Maybe it will lead to a better future for Afghans.

Now that a year has passed, members of the Afghan diaspora in the West are contemplating their futures. Since the Soviet invasion in 1979, more than half of Afghanistan's population—eight million people—have been killed, injured or driven into exile. The number of refugees is estimated at up to six million, the world's largest caseload.

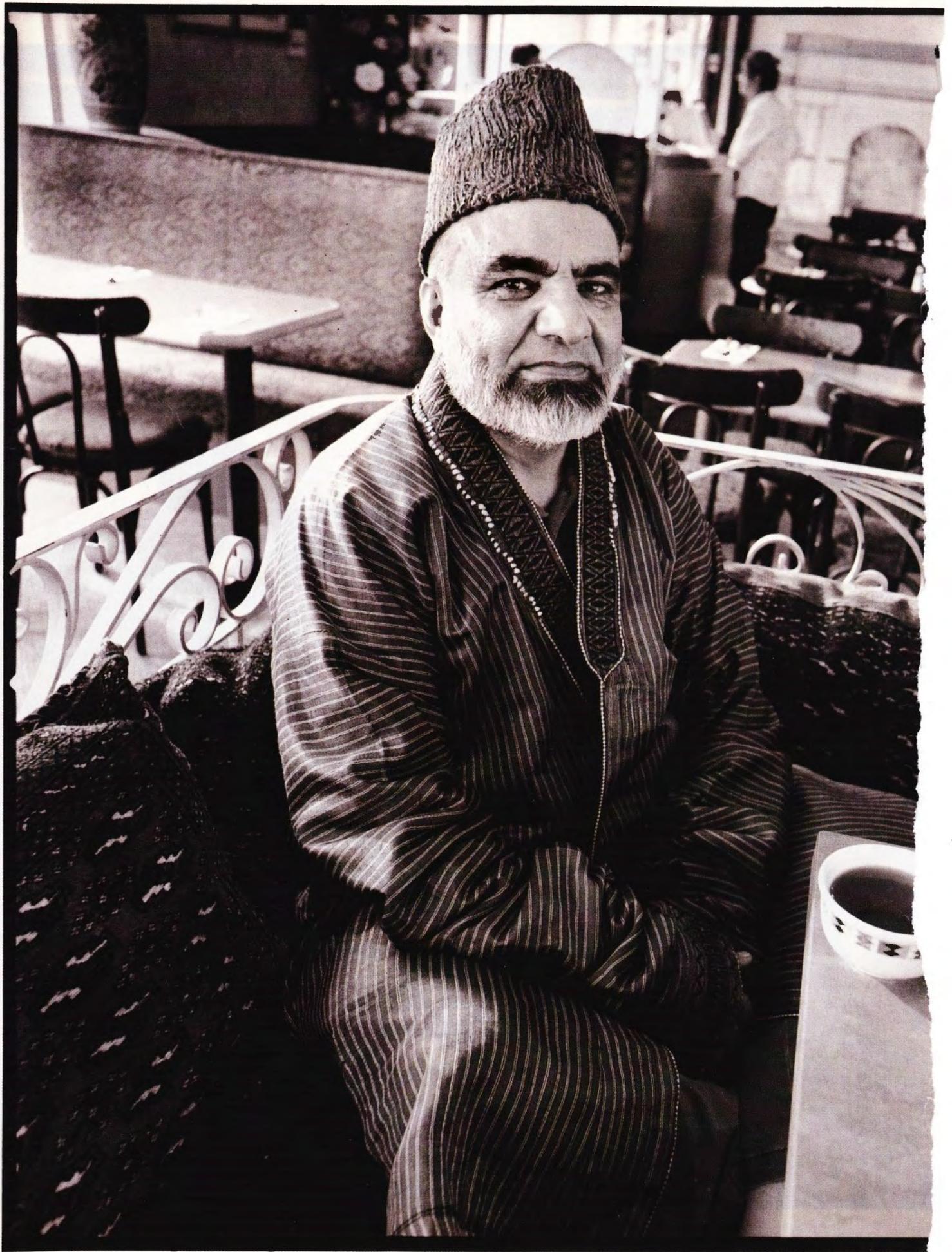
Along with the usual challenges confronting those escaping war or brutal regimes, Afghans face a unique dilemma. Since September 11, there is the potential, with the support of the world's most powerful nations, to transform their ruined country from a backward dictatorship into an emerging democracy. The pull is powerful. The Afghan Association of Ontario already has a list of more than 250 expat professionals—doctors, engineers, architects, teachers, public administrators—signed up and waiting for the word to go back. Still, whether they've recently found their way to safety here, or been in Canada long enough to put down roots and watch their children thrive, the prospect of returning to Afghanistan fills them with a confusing mixture of exhilaration and fear.

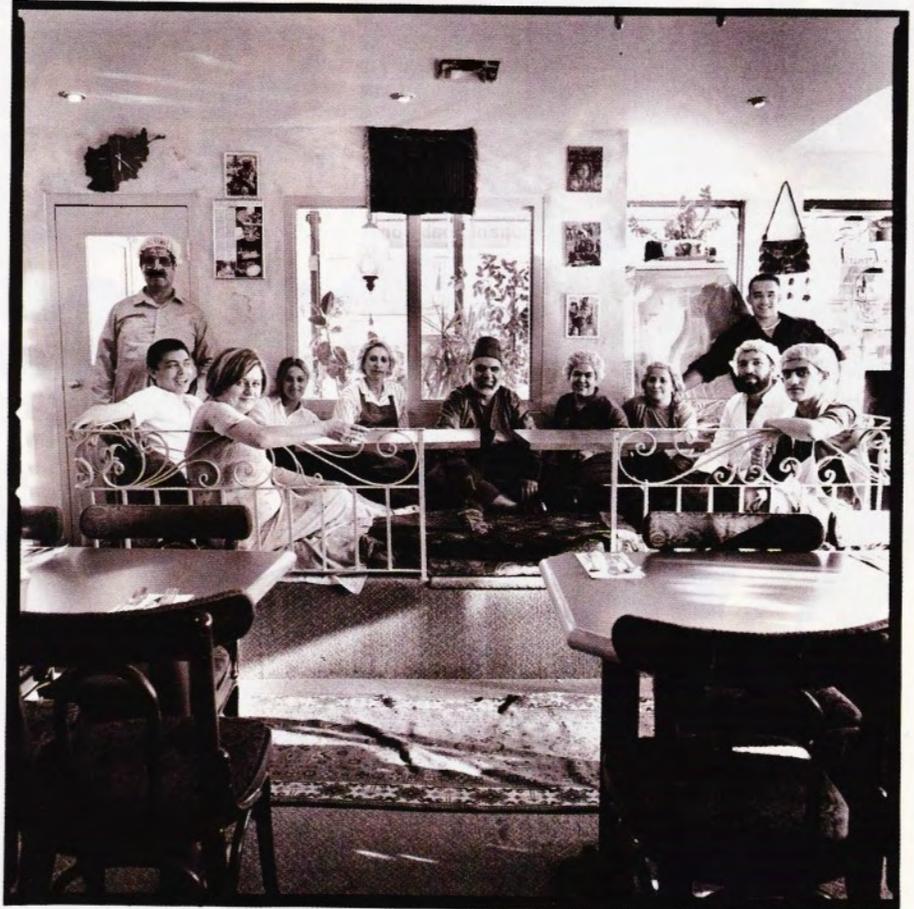
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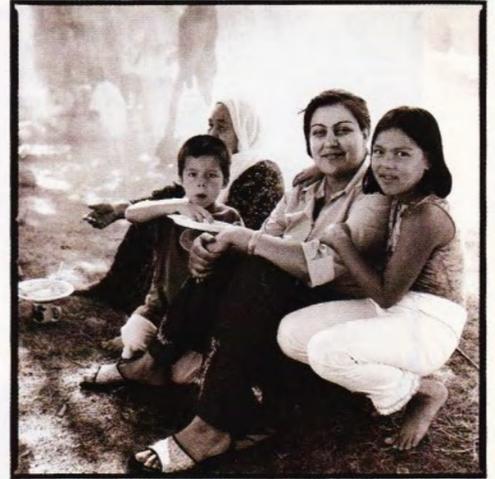
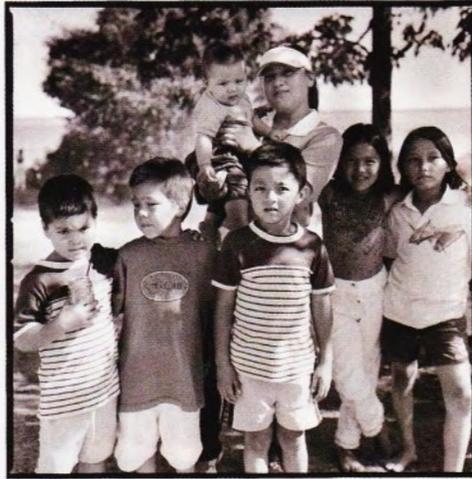
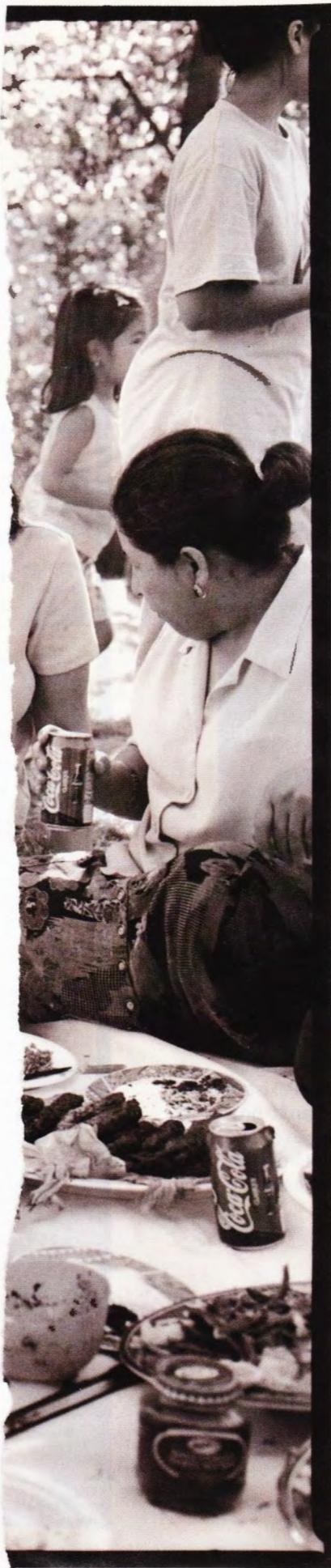
Daud and Hamida Saba, with sons Korosh and Kawah, in their apartment at Jane and Finch



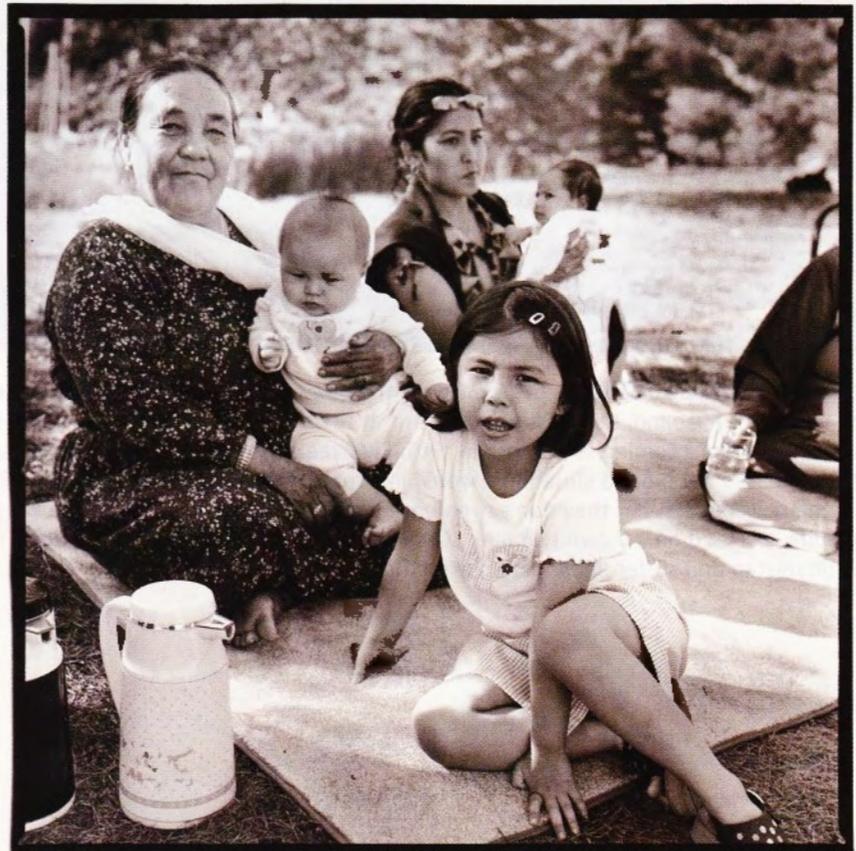


FADA ALAKOOZI, owner of **Chopan Kabab House**, Pape and Danforth. Alakoozi fled Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, arriving in Canada in 1981. "Myself, I would like to go and rebuild my country. But how can I go there with my kids and open a restaurant? Guys would come and say, 'They lived in Canada for 23 years, they have money, let's kill them.' So we need to wait months, or years, to make a constitution, make laws, get guns away from people."





SULTANI FAMILY, Bluffers Park, Scarborough. Dispersed across the GTA, the Afghan community (the second largest in the West) has created "Little Kabuls" in Parkdale, Rexdale, Mississauga and Scarborough. Dozens of families congregate on summer Sundays at Bluffers Park—nicknamed "Afghan Park." It's not unusual to see children flying kites (a pastime banned by the Taliban) or playing *tukhom jengy*, in which opponents try to break each other's hard-boiled eggs.





MARYAM MAHBOOB, editor of *Zarnegar*, the biweekly Afghan newspaper, at her office in Scarborough. She and her husband, Babuqi, now a writer at the paper, left Afghanistan in 1980. They lived in Pakistan and India before coming to Toronto in 1987. Five years later, she founded *Zarnegar*. "I had a plan to go back. But it's not a good situation. I would like to work as a journalist again, for Radio Afghanistan or one of the newspapers, but they don't even have paper and pens. In Toronto, I've worked very hard to better my life, to stand on my own two feet. *Zarnegar* is like my baby. How can I leave everything to go back to Afghanistan and suffer again? I've suffered enough, I think."



ASSADULLAH ORIAKHEL, executive director, Afghan Association of Ontario, Weston Road and Finch. Trained as an engineer, Oriakhel worked for the UN in settlement camps at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border before immigrating here in 1999. He has applied to various reconstruction programs and hopes to go home soon. "It's an emotional feeling. Patriotism. After 23 years of war, you can't expect people to know the latest technologies. They've been away from education. The community is not able to bring itself into the mainstream. They need people who are educated to help them. I think those in Toronto who are over 25 would like to go back to help rebuild their country. They feel guilty that they're here when their country is in crisis."





MEHMOOD HSOHMAND, NADER SHAH AND AHMED WAHEED WAZIRI, co-owners of Afghan Auto Repair, St. Clair and Runnymede. Every few Fridays, in an open bay at the back of their shop, the guys host a barbecue, replicating the street corner kebab shops of Kabul: enough grilled lamb, pita bread, salad and *ahore angoor* (a spicy dipping powder for the lamb made from finely ground sour plums) to feed the neighbourhood, plus Thermoses of chai served with dollops of *qaimaq*, which looks like curdled yogurt but is an immensely rich cream. Customers who arrive to drop off their cars are enthusiastically invited to lunch. Spoken in Farsi, the conversation here—and everywhere Afghans gather—is about whether or not to return to Afghanistan. "This is part of our culture," says Shah. "People can talk about what matters to them and eat well. I enjoy making that happen here. It makes me feel good."

WALID SHARIF, founder of the Web-based forum Afghan Network, at his home in Pickering. His mother worked for the UN in Kabul, teaching English to adults. His father taught political science at the University of Kabul. Walid was only 13 when he arrived in Toronto in 1993, but he feels a powerful connection to his homeland—thus the Web site. On September 12 last year, it received 300,000 hits; 24 hours later, hackers who were determined to shut down any domain bearing the word "Afghanistan" crashed it. "We're the transitional generation: one part still very much in the Afghan culture, the other part integrated into Canadian culture. I think the younger you are, the more likely you'll choose to help from afar. I like it here in Canada; I can live comfortably. But I want to help out as many Afghans as I can."

