

HAND ON MY HEART

A CANADIAN DOCTOR'S
AWAKENING IN AFGHANISTAN

by Maureen Mayhew

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PRAISE FOR *HAND ON MY HEART*

"*Hand on My Heart* gives us a literally behind-the-veils view of life in one of the world's least understood countries. Maureen Mayhew writes with a doctor's precision and a novelist's sense of story about her decade on the ground in Afghanistan as a physician, gaining rare access to the family and intimate lives of people caught up in the tides of history. The story is by turns sad, wise, and joyful, leaving the reader deeply moved by Mayhew's personal story, the story of Afghanistan, and the deep thread of shared humanity running throughout both."

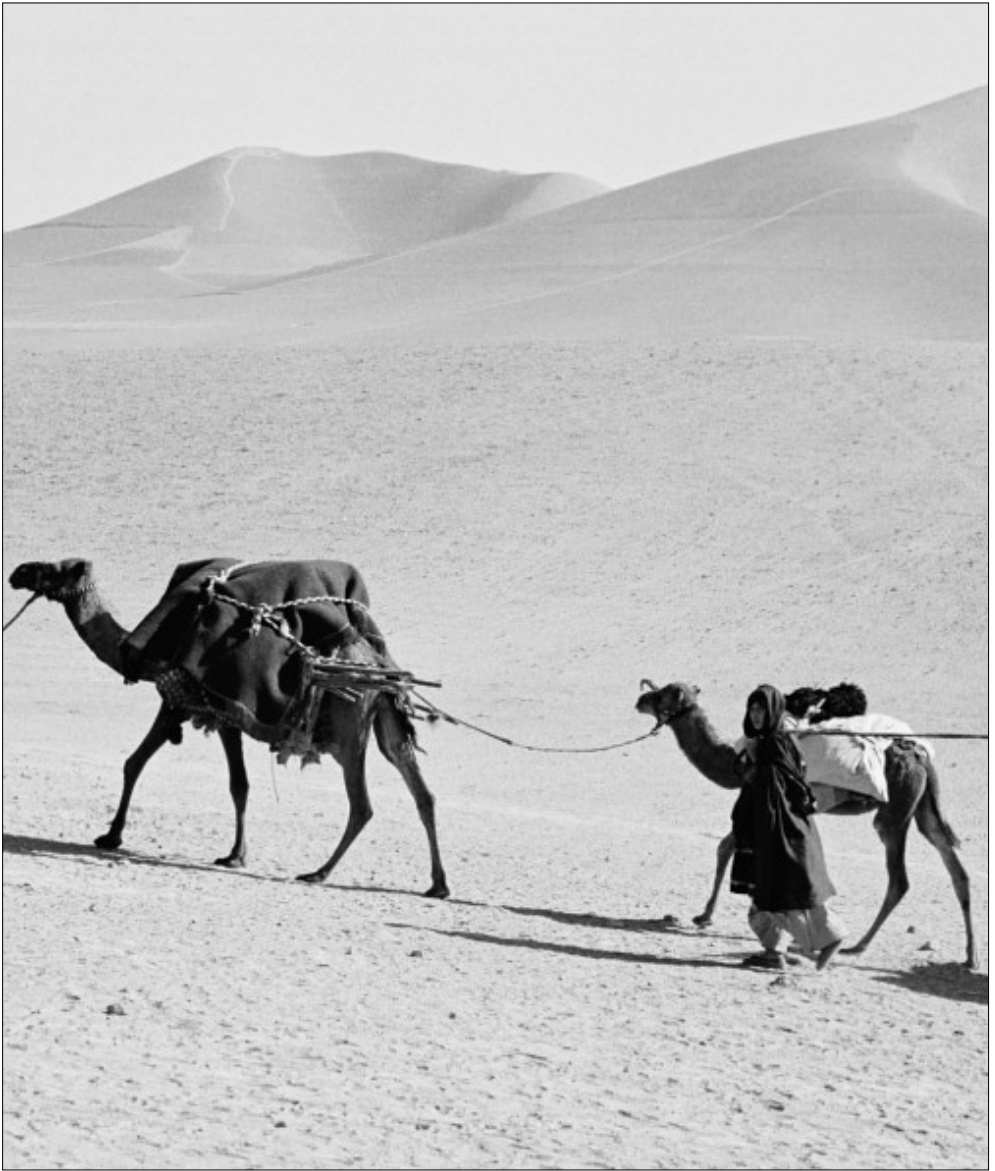
—Thomas Hayden, Stanford University,
author of *Sex and War* and *On Call in Hell*

"From first touchdown on a desolate airfield, *Hand on My Heart* travels beyond the journalistic and political images of Afghanistan and lifts the veils to reveal the hearts of the Afghan people. Through the lens of a physician, Dr. Maureen brings the reader on her daily adventures, confronting fears and isolation with respect and joy. Building trust and learning the language, she bonds with men and women to confront the web of religion, gender, and health. Always teaching yet learning even more, she explores the relationships of men and women and sees herself. The book demystifies the human side of Afghan life and reminds us of the universal connections we all share."

—Thomas A. Burke, PhD, MPH, Professor Emeritus, Johns Hopkins
University, Bloomberg School of Public Health

"A remarkable and revealing journey into the heart of both Afghanistan and the insightful narrator. As this compassionate and nonjudgmental narrative unfolds, Dr. Mayhew immerses herself in Afghan customs, including the importance of family and belonging, and discovers a new way of seeing and knowing herself. *Hand on My Heart* is a compelling story of medical aid, of discovery, and personal growth."

—Barbara Sibbald, former MSF volunteer, medical humanities editor and
author of *The Museum of Possibilities*
and the forthcoming *Twelve Annas to a Rupee*



In remote Afghanistan, these nomads moved with the seasons in search of pasture for their animals.

CHAPTER ONE

A DREAM

“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass, the world is too full to talk about.”

— *Rumi*

Holding my breath, I licked café au lait foam off my upper lip and hovered the mouse over the envelope icon, but my finger doggedly refused to press the button. A prayer came unbidden, one of those selfish negotiations that some of us make with God when we pine for something so badly that we think our life will be ruined without it, or when we are utterly terrified. I don’t recall what my promise was, but God must have known that my pledge was hollow because when the little mouse opened the envelope, AFGHANISTAN bellowed at me from the first paragraph. Below it in bold script, “nine months” caused my heart to beat double time. What were they thinking?! When answering the question in the application to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) about where I would refuse to work, Afghanistan was the only country that I had listed. I hadn’t minced words. I had plainly printed “Afghanistan” on that line and nothing else. You would think that organizations like MSF would respect a volunteer’s request, wouldn’t you? At the time, the amount that they offered to pay me wouldn’t even cover my furniture storage fees and professional dues.

Two months earlier, in January 2000, I hadn’t even known where Afghanistan was on the globe. During the orientation course for new MSF volunteers, a psychologist had introduced me to the country by mentioning that women were forced to wear head-to-toe coverings called burkas that hid even their faces. She said that Sharia law involved thieving hands being sliced off at the wrist and women being stoned to death for having sex out of wedlock. Her contract was already signed. She would counsel Afghan women who had been locked in compounds or widows who the society discarded like used baggage. Despite her expectation of being stuck in a compound most of the time, her voice bubbled with excitement.



Travelling the world as a doctor, camera in hand, I wanted to understand everyone I met.

Gosh, the job sounded dreadful. Why give up nine months of your life to live like a prisoner? And how on earth would she meet these persecuted women?

Hoping that the email might have been addressed to the wrong person, I verified the name written in the salutation. “Maureen Mayhew” stared brazenly at me from the top of the page. I placed a hand on my heart, breathed in deeply and tried to calm its rapid rhythm. With more than two hundred countries in the world, how did they manage to assign me to the only one that I had vowed to refuse? You don’t have to go, I told myself. But what if they stopped offering me positions?

Three documents were attached to the email, a fact sheet from the Central Intelligence Agency and two MSF documents describing the war in Afghanistan and the project. Afghan men and women lived an average of only forty-one or forty-two years. The average mother had nine pregnancies, and very few women could read. A place couldn’t get much worse than that, could it?

I was being offered a position as medical lead in a four-person expat team based at a refurbished primary care clinic in a remote part of Western Afghanistan, near the border with Turkmenistan. Getting there involved at least four flights, then a two-day drive to a village with no other foreigners. What if the team didn’t get along? The

driving distance was said to be 180 kilometres. How could it take two days to drive a distance that I usually covered in less than two hours?

I learned that the civil war had been fuelled for years by a long list of other countries and that Afghanistan was one of the most heavily mined countries in the world. As a result, a mine-awareness course was mandatory.

I thanked my lucky stars when I read “under no circumstances will any expat woman wear a burka.” Apparently the Taliban insisted that foreign women wear a *shalwar kameez*, a pajama-like outfit from Pakistan that would distinguish us from them. Every time she left the compound, a foreign woman was to be escorted by a foreign man, not an Afghan. No exceptions. The “male escort” was referred to locally as a *maharam*.

I squinted at the words as if they were the enemy and my eyes were the barrel of a sniper’s rifle, primed to shoot them off the page. How could an independent doctor and outdoor enthusiast survive under rules like that?

With a huff, I stood up, then slipped into a pair of spandex tights and a long-sleeved, skin-tight shirt. I ran down the street to the beach, then upped the pace. My muscles pumped hard and my breath found its rhythm. Inside me, a battle raged. I swore. I bargained. I dreamed. I criticized. And eventually, the blustery March wind blew my thoughts away.

An hour later, as sweat trickled down my temples, my head was clear and I felt at peace. Kneeling before my newly acquired, second-hand computer, a bargain at \$100, I crafted a response.

Dear Sir/Madam:

Thank you for considering me. I feel honoured at having received this offer. But Afghanistan really isn’t a good fit for an athletic woman like me who needs to go outside every day, especially when feeling stressed. Perhaps a more sedentary person would be a better fit. I hope that refusing this offer does not jeopardize my chances for a different mission. I look forward to hearing from you in the near future.

Sincerely,
Maureen Mayhew, MD

If they didn't offer me something more suitable, I would give up on the idea—which would delight Peter, my boyfriend at the time. Although our relationship was pretty good on many fronts—we both loved cooking, reading, entertaining and spending weekends exploring the outdoors—it wasn't enough for me when, over the previous two years, I had felt so stifled by my life as a family doctor in Vancouver. Another opportunity would appear. I was certain of that. I just needed patience.

Over the next week, MSF recruiters somehow convinced me to speak with volunteers in Canada and in Amsterdam who had worked in Afghanistan. They expressed either love or contempt for the experience. There was no middle ground. A call from a Dutch woman in Herat, Afghanistan, nudged the door wide open. The far-away voice with the eight-second delay told me how much the team on site loved their work and how fantastic the Afghan staff were. The outgoing team swam, hiked and visited villagers! My heart swelled when she told me that the three years I had spent in the Canadian Arctic was the best preparation for this kind of mission, and that the physician's position in Bala Morghab was made for someone like me. I knew she was selling hard, yet I latched onto her words. I so wanted to believe her!

Intrigue and adventure finally won. I could add a novel country to the list of forty-five that I had already visited. The following week, I signed a contract. From that point, my life moved along a conveyor belt as I acquired vaccines and visas, packed my belongings into a storage locker and said goodbye to friends in a whirlwind of events. In the end the decision to go had been quite simple.



In Afghanistan, a land so different from Canada, how would I fit in? Photo credit: Kareem