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HAPPY DAYS WITH THE MUJAHEDIN

The talibaan militia, the most recent group to join the internecine fighting in Afghanistan, has alarmed human rights groups with its desire to return Afghan women to life beneath the veil. Described by the Associated Press as “a movement of former Islamic seminar students,” the group took Kabul on September 27, 1996, exactly seven years from the day I met Amun Khan and his friends as they traveled to Darra, Pakistan to join the mujahedin. Amun would be twenty-four now, still a young man by most standards, but perhaps not so young in countries fallen to internecine warfare. Perhaps he has stayed with Gulbidin Hekmatyar’s forces. If so, he would be moving now, in the mountains most likely, readying for the inevitable counter-attack. It is possible, of course, that his religious convictions have swung him into the ranks for the newly formed talibaan. With that in mind, I flip on CNN occasionally, hoping they’ll show some shots of Kabul. Maybe I’ll see him, kneeling with a heroic grin, in front of the bloated body of the ex-Soviet puppet, Najibullah, who the talibaan hung the day they conquered the city.

As a reporter in Washington, I once overheard U.S. Rep. Robert K. Dornan, a member of the congressional committee that approved billions of dollars in military aid for the mujahedin, explain that there were “good and bad mujahedin freedom fighters in Afghanistan.” He seemed to be implying that the “bad” ones were the religious fundamentalists, which was odd because Gulbidin Hekmatyar, the most fundamentalist of the mujahedin warlords, received the bulk of American aid for nearly fifteen years.

Certainly Amun Khan and his friends: Asif, Aziz, Said, and the rest, were fundamentalists. But having enjoyed their hospitality, having attended Said’s bachelor party, having danced with the *ijellah*, having drunk their tea and laughed, it is hard for me to see them as “bad.”

The war is bad, as is the fervor with which the talibaan

have enacted their revenge on their fallen leaders. Certainly their hard-line Islamic beliefs have contributed to their ruthlessness, but sadly, America has contributed as well. It was American money that paid for their weapons: their machine guns, rocket launchers, tanks, jets and Stinger missiles. As the militia groups near their goal of turning Afghanistan into an Islamic theocracy, perhaps it is finally time for the American public to take a closer look at the faces beneath the wool caps on the CNN broadcasts from Kabul. Perhaps it is finally time to react, not with tax dollars and weapons, but with understanding.

Afghanistan became personal to me on September 26, 1989, the day I boarded a bus from Peshawar, Pakistan, the headquarters of the Afghan mujahedin militias, to Darra, a border town where the Pakistani government permitted an open trade in weapons. It was ten months after the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, a time when the fall of the Soviet puppet, Najibullah, seemed imminent and American aid was still an undisputed \$300 million a year. Relations between Americans and the fundamentalist Pathans, who inhabit eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan, were never more amiable. The bus, when it arrived, was packed. The narrow seats were filled with families, the aisle crowded with standing men. Chickens squawked beneath plastic laundry baskets, bundles jammed overhead racks, and passengers crowded the open doors. To avoid the crush, I climbed onto the roof with the younger men and spent the ride among a cloud of broken English questions.

One group of teenage boys was persistent. They started with the typical line of questions—stuff I'd heard a thousand times during travels in Asia and the Middle East—but they carried themselves with an air of self-confidence and pride that was often difficult to find in poorer countries.

“What name?”

“How old?”

“Where of?”

This last was asked by a young man whose bristly mustache

punctuated his sharp words. He spoke sternly, but his narrow forehead, receding hairline, and small, rounded chin made him less than intimidating. The boys around him grinned behind his back.

“American,” I told him.

They spoke Pushtu to each other and chuckled happily and confidently before turning back to me. When they did, a handsome boy with a stern expression edged forward across the slats of the roof rack.

“Pakistan beauootiful city,” he said without a smile. “America baad city.”

I stared at him briefly. He was confusing the word *city* with *country* and he was insulting mine. “America beautiful city. *Pakistan* bad,” I said.

“America bad,” he said.

“Pakistan sucks.”

He answered in Pushtu, but I heard *America* and *Oosa* among his stream of invectives. His last word was clearly intended as his sharpest barb. “*Ijellah!*” he said. His friends, bareheaded in neat white kurta pajamas and leather sandals, laughed approvingly. Their outfits identified them as middle-class urban kids. The rougher inhabitants of the outlying districts, the deserts and the mountains, wore wool brimless caps and mismatched, ill-fitting clothing with vests.

I pointed back to the boy before me and said, “*Ijellah.*” Unexpectedly, this too drew laughter. Even the target of my insult smiled. I felt my guard dropping and I asked, “What *ijellah?*”

The handsome boy glanced around, nodded toward his balding friend, and said, “*Asif ijellah.*”

I repeated the phrase curiously. “*Asif ijellah?*”

They got a tremendous kick out of that one, all except the shorter *Asif*, and *Amun* reaffirmed his statement. “*Yes. Asif ijellah!*”

“What’s an *ijellah?* *Benazir Bhutto ijellah?*” I asked. They laughed even louder. At the time, *Bhutto* was the Harvard-educated prime minister of Pakistan. I’d finished her autobiography and discovered that Pakistan’s prime minister

retained a fond remembrance of Harvard Square and Brigham's peppermint-stick ice cream.

"Bhutto not ijellah," Amun admitted.

"Benazir good?" I asked, wondering how devout Muslims viewed their female leader.

"No," Amun answered without hesitation.

"No?"

"I am not woman. How she lead me? I am a man!" He smiled and thumped his chest then added, "Zia ul-Huq beauootiful man." General Zia ul-Huq was the military dictator of Pakistan before his plane was blown up by a bomb in 1988. Zia had been a staunch ally of the United States and had coordinated the delivery of American arms to the mujahedin from 1978 until his death.

"Okay, Bhutto isn't an ijellah. What's an ijellah?"

The three looked at Amun for advice and finally Amun looked about to make sure nobody else was watching then he said, "Ijellah," and shook his upper body like a belly dancer. We laughed until we choked on the clouds of dust being churned up by the rumbling bus.

When we arrived, Darra looked like one of those rickety cowboy towns portrayed in Hollywood Westerns, with a single main street that inevitably became the sight of the movie's concluding gunfight. I followed the boys—the oldest was eighteen—as we disembarked and headed south past the line of one-story buildings. They quieted, and it was easy to see why. A lanky man in light blue kurta pajamas stepped out of a store to our right and discharged a double-barreled shotgun into the sky, then snapped it open and peered down the barrel. Another tall skinny man in a loose turban and the white beard of an old mujahedin passed us with a rifle perched on the notch of each shoulder. There were weapons everywhere. Rows of perpendicular machine guns lined the storefront windows; a traileered rocket launcher stood in a nearby alleyway; another storefront proudly featured an anti-aircraft gun; and a few doors down, a mortar launcher was assembled on a shop porch.

"Beauootiful collection," Amun said to me. His grin sparkled through the dust haze of the street as he spread his

palms wide and gestured at the storefronts we happened to be passing. "Beauootiful Kalashnikovs! Beauootiful collection." The others nodded in agreement, but I couldn't help wondering if they weren't really just as happy about Amun's sudden remembrance of a difficult English word like "collection" as they were about the enormous array of guns.

Despite the boys' admiration, we didn't stop in any of the shops along the street. Instead, we walked past them to the ruins of a small house at the end of the shop lane. Atop the remains, a portly kebab maker had set up shop. The boys seemed to know him, and they introduced me as we stepped up into the structure. He looked to be in his mid-30s. He surveyed me warily but didn't complain as I sat down with the boys and waited while he prepared lunch. With a heavy iron butcher's knife, he sliced a great slab of meat off a hanging calf's leg, chopped the beef to the consistency of hamburger, and used his thick hands to mix in a variety of greens and herbs. When he was done, he started a fire by adding chunks of dried dung to embers glowing on a blackened spot in the middle of our loose circle. Once the fire was glowing, he arranged a brazier over it, then balanced a flat skillet atop it. The meat sizzled for a bit, then was replaced by a couple pancakes of flattened dough.

As brown-haired Amun talked solemnly with the chef, balding Asif did his best to explain to me what the business was all about: the man was more than a kebab maker. His real job was to recruit soldiers for Gulbidin Hekmatyar, the commander of what was then the strongest and most fundamentally religious of the factions fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The boys signed a small book that the recruiting agent carried in his breast pocket. They would cross the mountains and join Hekmatyar's army in Afghanistan. In return for their enlistment, they would receive one Kalashnikov rifle upon arrival. As each boy finished signing the register, the others joked and slapped him on the back.

At the time of my trip, American money bought nearly a third of the guns entering Pakistan. The United States had been supporting the mujahedin since 1979 and Hekmatyar's

Hezb-e-Islami militia had always enjoyed the lion's share. By 1986, U.S. aid had grown to over \$300 million a year and included Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Two new Stingers were provided for every Soviet jet brought down.

Although the talibaan has drawn international condemnation for its fundamentalist beliefs, the Hezb-e-Islami's fundamentalism has never been in doubt. Hekmatyar first gained notoriety by throwing acid in the faces of unveiled women in Kabul in the 1970s. But after the Soviet invasion, the United States was prepared to overlook such troubling incidents. In an interview before his death, Robert Gates, the former Director of the CIA, revealed that he had no problem funding Hekmatyar provided that he accomplish his main goal of "killing Russians."

As the possibility that Afghanistan will become a radical theocracy emerges (shades of Iran circa 1976), the U.S. government has begun to deny culpability, seeking to distance itself from former allies such as Hekmatyar. Officials claim that there was little direct American involvement in the distribution of weapons in Afghanistan. That duty, they say, was handled by the Pakistanis. However, if the accounts of CIA supporters like James Risen (a staff writer for *The Los Angeles Times*) and Rep. Dornan are to be believed, American agents have often played a more direct role.

In Risen's January 4, 1997 article entitled "In Defense of the CIA's Derring-Do," he asserts that "CIA officers operating out of Pakistan sent their Afghan allies out to scour battlefields and supply depots" for Soviet military hardware to steal and examine. Risen goes on to refer to CIA efforts to entice Soviet-backed Afghan pilots to defect by flying their Soviet jets into Pakistan, and even details an instance in which American agents traded a Toyota pick-up truck and "some rocket launchers" for a captured Soviet Sukhoi-24 fighter-bomber. Clearly, the CIA was more than a passive observer constrained by the decisions of their Pakistani allies.

Imagine their concern in 1993 when CIA investigators of the World Trade Center bombing discovered links between the terrorists and Hekmatyar. Imagine their irritation with the

suggestion that a Stinger missile might have contributed to the recent crash of a TWA flight off Long Island.

The next day, Amun's grinning face greeted me at the door of my sparse, windowless hotel room. A fifth boy had joined the group, a square-jawed fellow who had a couple inches and a couple years on the others. Amun introduced me to Aziz Khan, then explained that Aziz's brother was getting married and they were planning a party for him to be held later that evening. We went downstairs, and Amun flagged down a tri-wheeler. As the light failed, I found myself zooming through the back alleys of the old section of the city, a warren of stone-paved streets overhung with two-story medieval facades complete with studded and chained doors. Amun turned and shouted back to me, "Rambo or Predator?"

"You guys have movies here?"

"Video," Asif corrected.

Moments later, the tuk-tuk paused in front of a store the size of a walk-in closet, and Amun ran in and returned with the most recent Schwarzenegger release. There I was, as far as I had ever expected to be from home, tucked away in a fundamentalist Islamic neighborhood in a city that looked unchanged since medieval times, staring at Schwarzenegger's tanned pectorals on a video box.

After a series of social calls, we eventually arrived at a quiet street before a door with light peeking out its edges. Aziz flipped the driver seven rupees, about 28 cents, and knocked on the door, then we stood on the street and stared at each other. Five minutes later, we still hadn't moved. It was getting pretty cold by this time, and I asked Amun what was up. He bobbed his head at me. I pointed at the doorway we were waiting in front of. "This your home?" I asked.

"Aziz home," he said.

I nodded, but nobody moved, and it occurred to me what was going on. I was in Peshawar, a desert town that didn't open its windows, even during the heat of the day, because its women were in Purdah, the Islamic holy law that forbids women to be seen by any male except her closest relatives. In order to move

around outside, women are required to ensconce themselves in heavy black chadours, tent-like garments with single eye-holes. We were waiting outside because the women inside needed time to clear out.

Sure enough, when we finally followed Aziz into his family's house, the place was immaculate and empty. Not even the scent of other humans remained. The home was sparse. The only furnishings were carpets and two bright electric lamps. The windows had thick shutters on them and looked like they had never been opened. Their interiors were painted the same color as the walls, which were off-yellow and naked but for an Islamic calendar decorated with Persian script. I looked around but couldn't find a television. A few minutes later, two men arrived carrying one. They were followed by a thickly mustached man with a VCR. Men kept arriving and the room slowly filled with slightly older, more heavily-set Pakistani men. They were the uncles and fathers of Amun, Asif and their friends. They were dressed like their boys, in clean kurta pajamas and sandals, but with Japanese watches and pens that glittered in their breast pockets.

Asif introduced me to a man who had been to Germany and Singapore. We exchanged polite words until Amun returned and led me to a man seated in the most recessed corner of the living room. He was wearing a turban and vest. "This Mohammed. Mujahedin," said Amun, clearly impressed by the mysteries of war trapped within the stoic figure.

The man lifted his eyes and stared at me distantly. His upper lip was naked but his cheeks were covered by a full beard. I nodded my respect. We sat next to him in awkward silence until the arrival of Aziz's brother, the bridegroom, Said. Amun joined the swarm to greet him, while I stayed behind and watched the reaction of the war veteran beside me. He stared contemplatively into the commotion for a brief moment, then dropped his head and examined the hem of his tunic. Asif hooked up the VCR, and we leaned against each other on the floor and watched *Running Man*. I'd been traveling for several months and was excited by the prospect of a Western film, until I discovered that the rest of the party was more intent on

watching my reactions than actually trying to figure out what Schwarzenegger was doing. Perhaps they were excited by an opportunity to confirm in the flesh what they'd only seen in celluloid. Would I enjoy the movie, which seemed to be more of a running gun battle than a coherent story? I didn't know how to respond, and in any event, it was difficult to pay attention to a vapid film while being stared at by a roomful of men. I was happy when the food showed up.

A half-dozen new arrivals carried in bowls filled with steaming curry and bamboo baskets loaded with thick chepatis. As the scent of rich spices filled the air, Amun grabbed my sleeve and directed me to the doorway. Outside stood a burly man with a box under his right arm; behind him was a slighter man carrying a taballah drum set, and between the two was a skinny, hirsute man with down-turned eyes, a big nose and a nylon wig. His face was covered with blush, mascara and lipstick. His chest was adorned with a stuffed bikini top, and he was wearing a pair of silky pantaloons, the type Barbara Eden used to wear when she played *Genie*. "Ijellah!" Amun shouted with an innocent laugh and shook his upper body like he had on the rooftop of the bus. An ijellah was not just a belly-dancer; in fundamentalist Peshawar, an ijellah was a transvestite belly dancer.

After we ate, we left Aziz's home and walked a block to a much larger room whose rugs had been rolled away to reveal a naked concrete floor. While the musicians set up in the center, a group of older men broke open a bag of party goods. They pulled out stacks of glittering paper hats, streamers like you might wave for New Year's in the States, and necklaces made of gold paper and flowers. Their last spangled trophy was a broader necklace that they put on the bridegroom. It hung down to his waist. Amun brought me over to examine it, and I discovered that it was crafted entirely from folded one-rupee notes. The musicians on the floor warmed up quickly. The box under the larger man's arm was a small pump organ, a harmonium, similar to a Western accordion.

Moments later, Asif arrived with a chair. He explained that Westerners weren't accustomed to all this kneeling,

standing and squatting. I protested and said that the guest of honor, the bridegroom, should have the chair. Said assured me that he was not the guest of honor but the host, and he would be dishonored if I did not accept the chair. And so, enthroned like a lord in some medieval mead hall, I watched the musicians come to life and the festivities began.

The ijellah spun in, looking like an actor snatched from the set of *South Pacific*, stolen from the number where the sailors are spoofing the showgirls. Still, he did his best to mimic a sexy starlet, wriggling seductively and ignoring the hoots and derisive laughter from the packed room of men.

Tea was available in small glass cups, and Asif handed me one then insisted that I eat a pink ball of something from a tin that he had just opened. I hesitated, and he showed me they were okay by popping one into his mouth. I took a bite. They were incredibly sweet and tasted a bit like soft macaroons. Amun added to the revelry by dumping perfume on my head. A bottle of scent was making its way around, and the guys were having a good time anointing each other with it. Meanwhile, the ijellah was grinding with abandon, trying to lose himself in the squeal of the squeezebox and the beat of the taballah player. When he was moving about as fast as his body could take him, he made a beeline for Said and began rubbing against his body, swiping at the rupees on his chest like an unkempt termagant. The bridegroom took this for a few minutes, to the general enjoyment of the assembled crowd, then yanked off the necklace and hung it on his brother. Aziz laughed and accepted the physical attention of the ijellah. The ijellah, for his part, seemed none too happy about his role or the derisive cheers, and he chopped away at the money necklace with heavy hands.

When the money ran out, the men began chanting Aziz's name, and Amun pushed him into the ring with the dancing ijellah. He was pretty good, a bit better than the poor guy in drag, and he took it fairly seriously. After a minute or two, a new cry went around the room with various names being suggested. I think it was the guy who had been to Singapore who started chanting, "Steve Khan!" At some point during the

day, my friends had flattered me by adding their surname to my Christian name. Soon the room was filled with it. Amun nervously assured me that I didn't have to dance, but I was already on my feet. "Don't worry," I told him, trying to talk like Arnold. "I'll be back."

Afterward, Amun and Asif pounded me on the back and assured me I was an acceptable dancer. I glanced around at the swirling shadows of the room and laughed to myself. I was in a room packed with men of all conceivable ages who had gathered to drink tea, eat macaroons, smear each other with perfume and watch a transvestite dance. It was quite a party.

The national sport of Afghanistan is a game called Buzhashi in which over a hundred men on horseback compete to carry the slicked-down body of a headless calf into a marked circle for a cash prize. Guns and knives are outlawed, whips are permitted. A warrior culture still prevails in Afghanistan. Over the millennia Afghan people have seen armies of just about every race and religion troop through their jagged mountain passes. The Peshawar museum, which I visited with my friends on my last full day in Peshawar, was a testament to these conquests. One hallway was devoted to a long line of life-sized Ghandaran sculptures. The Ghandaran culture evolved from the remnants of Alexander the Great's army and the armies of the Buddhist general, Ashoka, who conquered the region four centuries later in the second century A.D. Theirs was the first culture to make Buddhist figurines. As we walked down the hallway in the dusty museum, Amun and Asif competed to see who could slap the wooden faces of the sculptures the hardest. I tried to frown my displeasure, but they egged each other on until thousand-year-old paint chips fell from wooden chins.

News reports have indicated that the talibaan, the latest militia to join the internecine battles for control of Afghanistan, arrived on the scene in 1994 with an arsenal that included over a hundred tanks, two dozen jets and truckloads of rockets. None of those weapons were for sale in Darra. Clearly, outside forces continue to take an interest in the region. Despite conflicting reports in French newspapers, the United States government

claims our involvement ended in 1992. Whatever the current truth, American money contributed to the civil war still raging in Afghanistan. American influence brought captured Kalashnikovs from Lebanon to Afghanistan. American advisors oversaw the distribution of rocket launchers and sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles. As the area continues to disintegrate beneath the rubble of a seemingly endless war, what is our responsibility? Are we accountable?

I think we are. In Darra, I watched Amun Khan sign away his future for a machine gun. His culture was as foreign to me as any I had seen in my travels, yet the gun awaiting him on the other side of the Khyber Pass was financed, in part, by my tax dollars. No matter how distant Amun's world is, the people I voted into office have affected his life. As if that isn't enough, Hollywood continues to reassure him that the ascetic life of the fearless warrior is a worldwide aspiration. In the U.S., we chuckle at movie heroes who fire missiles from their hips, but we stop short of letting the CIA sell Stingers to our kids. In the heart of Islamic Peshawar, American movies and arms continue to stir up a hornets' nest of trouble, not only for the locals, but through the long arm of international terrorism, for the world.

My friends assembled the next day to put me in a tuk-tuk for the train station. I gave Asif a special grin as we shook hands then turned to say good-bye to Amun. He waited for me with his hand outstretched and a confident grin on his face. I ignored his hand for the moment.

"You go Afghanistan?" I asked him.

He lowered the hand slowly and cocked his head to make out what I was asking.

"You go Afghanistan?"

He got it, and his smile returned. He nodded his head happily. "Yes, yes. Afghanistan," he said.

"Fight in war?" I asked pointing my hand like a gun.

"Yes, fight."

"In war, people die," I said. "You will die. Don't go." His smile dropped. I climbed into the back of the tuk-tuk. The

others were waving, but Amun just stared at me. "Don't go," I said and the tuk-tuk drove me away.

I live in Missoula, Montana now, amidst the arid peaks of the northern Rockies. It's pleasant here. The streams are cleaner than they were thirty years ago, and environmental groups are fighting to preserve the forests and the wildlife.

Thirty years ago, before I was born, things were different. In the 1960s, when this was still a logging and mining town, the government co-opted a firefighting facility on the west side, near the airport, and used it to train Special Forces units, Green Berets who were heading into Laos and Vietnam. Ten years later, those Green Berets returned and, in an effort to save some of their allies from the aftermath of a war the United States had helped provoke, they brought several planeloads of Laotians back with them. On the outskirts of town now, Hmong villagers from the tropical hillocks that surround the Plain of Jars cultivate small farms in the cold, infertile soil of western Montana.

People don't like to talk too much about war anymore. Each day it seems to grow more distant. The Am-Vets bar has been turned into a gay nightclub, and the town's most visible veteran is a man who asks for spare change in the parking lot of the Safeway. In the diners and bars, young snowboarding and rock-climbing hippies, employed by eco-tourism companies, are slowly replacing the cowboys, miners, foresters and pulp mill workers. The hippies are mostly under thirty. That's my generation, the so-called Generation X. I've heard it said that we're apathetic, that we don't care, that there's nothing that we're willing to fight for... but that's bullshit, of course. The other day, a group of friends chained themselves to a gate at the entrance to a logging road in an effort to stop the logging trucks. They unlocked themselves when a frantic lumberjack convinced them that he was going to be late for a child support hearing.

The mountains that hang over Missoula often take me back to the days I spent in Peshawar, where the towering Hindu Kush looms over the downtown like a row of giant earthen

teeth. It's mid-October here. Already, low clouds are tracing the peaks with snow. I thought of Amun yesterday when I stepped outside to watch winter move in. I want to imagine that he's not in Afghanistan now, that he's not cold and scared awaiting the next assault. It's night there now, and I want to imagine that Amun is alive and in his home in Peshawar. I want to imagine that his friends have gathered, that Asif, Aziz and Said are all alive, and that the rugs in the room Amun shares with his mother and sisters have been rolled up and pushed against the back wall. I want to imagine that right now the taballah player is keeping the beat and the harmonium is wailing and Amun is dancing furiously with the ijellah. I can see him, powdered sugar dusts his light mustache, he stinks of perfume, and his eyes are creased with a nervous smile because tomorrow he will begin a family with a woman he has never seen. I want to imagine that the war is forgotten, and all the romance he will ever need is hiding beneath a veil, is dancing in pantaloons, is slapping him on the back, is in his laughter, and is dusting the mountaintops with snow.