Ten Days in Kabul

Adventures with Omar, Oliver, Ahmed, Sal, a pointy camera and a big yellow taxi!

written by Salman A. Nensi, photography by Oliver Strong



"Hello, I just want to say that if something unfortunate has befallen me that Salman is in no way responsible. I went to Afghanistan of my own free will, knowing the risks. Lots of love to all."

Oliver

Text copyright © 2009 by Salman A. Nensi / Nensi.com / SalmanNensi@Gmail.com
Photographs copyright © 2008 by Oliver K. L. Strong / StrongSnaps.com / oliverklstrong@gmail.com

Ten Days in Kabul

Adventures with Omar, Oliver, Ahmed, Sal, a pointy camera and a big yellow taxi!



"Hello, I just want to say that if something unfortunate has befallen me that Salman is in no way responsible. I went to Afghanistan of my own free will, knowing the risks. Lots of love to all." —Oliver

Well I had to get him to write something, didn't I? We were heading to Afghanistan, not Palm Beach, to a country where there were over 2,000 civilian deaths in 2008. The UN estimates that 60 percent of the Afghan population has been directly affected by the war and that a staggering 96% of Afghans have been negatively affected in some way. Kidnappings are routine—they can ask for as little as $1,500 for your return which doesn't sound like much until you realize that the "official" minimum wage is US $42 a month, and hardly anyone gets the official amount, most get far, far less. So it's totally possible that the guy sitting next to you at the restaurant could be either ready to kidnap you or instead harbouring a nice little explosive device under his kurta along with a yen for those seventy-two virgins awaiting his triumphant arrival in the afterlife. The way of life is very different over here and it's important to remember that.

I should, for those of you who don't know him, describe Oliver, my travel companion. He's tall…white…blond…and did I mention white? And blond? All I could hear in my head is my English godmother saying,

"Doesn't he stick out a bit like a sore thumb, luv?" And yeah, surrounded by us darker-skinned, darker-haired lads, Oliver does stick out. It's the hair, really, although there are some blue-eyed, fair Afghans, as well those with red hair and eyes of all shapes and colours. As a result of the history of the place and its geographic location, many would-be conquerors have left bits of their armies and DNA here in this land, and their traits can still be seen in certain individuals and peoples. Humans have been living in Afghanistan for over 50,000 years by some estimates—making this one of the first places humans farmed and had permanent settlements. The territory has been far larger than what we currently call Afghanistan and was conquered by both the Median and Persian empires in their time. Alexander the Great passed through as did the Seleucids, the Indo-Greeks, the Indians, the Turks and the Mongols. In more modern times the Brits, the Russians and now the Americans, aka International Security Force, are all trying to control and subdue the place and the peoples. Soldiers do what soldiers do, and here it has been no different. Afghanistan is a geneticist's dream.

Back to Oliver. Mr. Oliver Kenneth Luke Strong, as well as being white and blond, is also very cute, fit, young and funny. He cooks well, reads books, is a soccer goalie and a brilliant photographer and single. Interested female readers may get in touch with me about him, though you'll be competing for his favours with Naim's father—Naim being a fellow we met at the house of our Afghan driver—but I'm getting ahead of the story.

So the plan was to drive to Kabul from Dushanbe, Tajikistan where we we'd been hanging out with friends for a few weeks. The drive was easy enough—I'd done the part from Dushanbe to the boarder on my last trip. Would take half a day and then apparently 6-8 hours from the border down to Kabul with maybe a small side trip to Mazar, a neat city in the North with great architecture and tonnes of OLD...I like old. Old roads, buildings, paths, gardens, etc...Afghanistan's got a goodly amount of old.

I wanted to go back to Kabul, in part because I wanted to scout out work for my company (which specializes in preparing complex reports for UN agencies and the like) and in part because we'd been invited to the wedding of Omar, an Afghan friend. Omar was going to drive up to the border and meet us with his uncle the "commander." I never did find out what he was the commander of—we met a lot of "commanders" on this part of our journey and figured sometimes it's best not to be too inquisitive.

But as our departure date loomed closer, we kept getting more and more advice NOT to drive down. The security situation was deteriorating as we watched. The number of bombings was up. Some organizations never targeted before were now being hit. Kidnappings were on the rise, the asking figure for getting people back had dropped. The last time I was here you had to BE someone to get kidnapped. Now you just had to look like you had access to a grand. Eventually Omar's mum told him she'd rather he not drive up to the border to meet the foreigners, and my mum was asking why I wanted to do this part of the trip in the first place. Mums are like that. They worry.

The question of why comes up a lot. My usual answer is a flippant, "Why not?" or a "'Cause it's there!" but I know those aren't really satisfactory responses to others as they come off as flippant. Maybe the best answer I can think of comes from a book, *Shadow of the Silk Road* by



Colin Thubron, who ponders the same question and says, "A hundred reasons clamour for your going," and after listing some, he concludes, "You go to see what will happen."

And that's it really. I go to see what will happen. What will happen to me, to friends, to places; what will happen with food, with drinks, with smokeables; what will happen to me after drinks and smokeables. Maybe it's that in all the various places I call home, I know what will happen, and so I need to go places where for once I don't know.

Omar has been patiently waiting at the airport for us for a few hours. Even with the flight delay and our delay with forms, he's smiling his wide, gorgeous smile and is very pleased to see us. I'm pleased to see him again too. We worked together at the Serena Hotel the last time I was in Kabul and became friends. We've kept in touch over the years by email but I hadn't seen him in a while. He's heavier than when I last saw him, which becomes rather the topic for our time in Kabul—what to do to lose weight before the wedding.

Walking out of the airport, we see guys with guns everywhere. At gates, in cars, just chillin' by a tree. It's weird and surreal…and not at all comforting in the way those who like guns suggest it should be. Really, being surrounded by guys with guns, even if they are on my side (and I hope they are) is just not as comforting as being in a place where no one has guns! It boggles my mind that this simple idea, this is such a hard thing to grasp? Yo, Heston—you listening?

We get to the taxi we've hired for the week. Ahmed is our driver and we quickly christen him Mario Andretti. He's like a daemon in the car and I'm both very pleased by this and scared shitless. Speed means we can get away fast if we need to. Speed also means higher risk of crashing into some other git, also speeding around! There was talk of hiring a proper 4x4 large white SUV like so many of the foreigners and diplomatic corps have here and in other third world places. We discount this for several reasons:

- The taxi is yellow and can easily blend in with the other yellow cabs. Yes, just like NYC, it's all yellow cabs here. (Of course these taxis are older than I am and they look like papier-mâché because the metal's so crumpled, with all the bends and scratches and accidents banged out of the chassis over and over and over again. Nothing here is terribly roadworthy in a Western sense, but then the roads are not terribly roadworthy in a Western sense either so it's all good.)

- Large white cars are a bit easier to hit with rockets than a small yellow cab going fast.
- The cost of a large car, driver and our own guy with a gun is just silly.
- Ahmed, our driver, is well experienced, having driven taxi in Kabul for years and also having spent a few years driving in Tehran. The man can drive.

Ahmed's smile is wide and broad with a few teeth missing. His face is warm and friendly, suggesting that he's happy and content. Hair akimbo under his traditional hat, his face is a bit weather-worn but he's got a great handshake. So, feeling good about our choice of transportation, we head to our guest house. There are still very few or no trees on roads. The drought continues mercilessly, nothing is growing and a layer of fine, grey-brown soot the consistency of dust has fallen on everything. You get the impression that if you stopped outside to smoke a cigarette you too would come back inside with a layer of dust on you. I did and I did.

The guest house is a large old family dwelling that is walled. The place is tatty— rugs, wallpaper, paintings, sheets, carpets, all faded and threadbare. It's as if you were staying at your grandmother's place that might have had grandeur fifty years before she was born but is now just a pale and ghostly remnant. We are two of about ten guests, most of whom seem to be Indians and Pakistanis. They're here working because no one else will. Many of them work for Japanese engineering firms and travel all over the country—Japanese engineers won't come and work in Afghanistan. The first time I sat down at dinner with the other guests, I grabbed some bread and chillies and munched while others grabbed the rice and curries. Several of the guys were looking at me a bit askance but then approval crosses their faces. Even if I was born in the West and have a funny accent, I'm still one of them at heart! Chillies save me again.

Chillies and bread…that's all I need. I have the same non verbal communication with all the guys working at the guest house, "No, nothing for lunch, but please leave two loaves of bread and some fresh chillies in my room, thank you. Breakfast? Ah, no thanks…but if you have some chillies and some bread I'll munch that in the car." They think I'm nuts. I know I am. But being nuts over chillies is cool here.

I have to take a moment and rapture about the bread in Central Asia. It is phenomenal. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe it's the clay ovens it's baked in? The onion seeds sprinkled on top? The water in the region? The unbleached, unprocessed flour, butter and salt? All I know is I put on a lot of weight on this trip—all due to the bread in Dushanbe and Kabul.

The staff at the guest house are all male except for, surprisingly to me, one older woman. She might have been the mother of one of the workers, not sure...she looked old enough to have children in their thirties. She'd show up in the morning after the Indians had all gone to work and I was never sure what she did besides give me lovely smiles and do a little ironing. Not that one should underestimate the skill it takes to iron here. The iron is an ancient lump of metal, like a mini anvil with a handle welded to it. There is a cord for the power but it's all frayed and looks like the iron might explode if you plug it in and left it alone. Mind you, the power here is only on for *some* time (sometimes a long time, sometimes a short time—you know, on for *some* time), then you have to switch to a generator. So the whole house has two sets of plugs, one for regular power and one for the generator power, and

every time the regular power goes off, you replug everything over to the other set of sockets. Everything has to be switched—refrigerator, water cooler, Internet routers, etc. Oh, and FYI, there's no ironing board, it's a piece of wood on the floor covered by a towel. How people here can iron shirts properly without that curvy bit on the end of an ironing board I'm not sure. But they do.

Ahmed is waiting in the car, Omar has come inside to get us. Before we go out we check through the peephole in the door. Yep, Ahmed is there, his awesome grin lighting up his face. Across the small street I can see the two guards who operate the single pole barrier and a few of the other guard houses down the road. It all looks calm and safe. Like I would know what to look for anyway, but I'm somehow in the lead again and so it looks good and we go. (You people really trust me to know if we should open the front door or not? You're all balmy!)

A few moments later you hear five gun shots and you know you will never see your relatives again.

Open the door. Go. No dawdling. No waiting. No lingering goodbyes. Around here you MOVE! Kabul is not a place you hang out outside, especially in areas full of foreign types. Your shoes, coat, bag are all ready. You check the door and head straight to your assigned seat in the car. You get in fast and shut the door, locking it right away. All three of us are in and we're moving again—fast. The barrier guys have opened the gate and we pull into traffic. It's like a segment from a ballet that, with a bit of practice, soon becomes one coordinated, smooth manoeuvre for us. Every time we get into the car, get out of the car, head somewhere—it's the same ballet piece.

Our first stop of the day is to see one of my Beyond Reports new staffers. Maryam is an interesting lady. Most of the senior male members of her family are gone. Dead in various wars, skirmishes and terrorist acts that have plague Kabul for decades. It is always surreally funny to me that in the West we make such a big deal about terrorist attacks and security, etc. when in places like this "terror" is just a fact of life. In places like Kabul it's actually not so terror-inducing to be there, it just is. I suspect it was like this in London in the '70s while the IRA was going nuts. It was common to hear a bomb blast a few streets over and then read about the damage in the evening paper. It didn't seem to be all that terrifying because, after a while, humans get used to anything that's around them. Admittedly I was a child back then in the UK so of course I wasn't terrified of anything. For one thing I had my brother, Grieg, on my side. He could and did take care of pretty much all that ailed me as a kid.

Terror for the Afghans happens in ways we in the West just simply can not comprehend. Try this one: Karim, 24, cook. We meet, become friends and one day, on the top of a mountain overlooking Kabul where we sit with his friends he asks me, "So, tell me true...do they all think we are terrorists?" And by "they" he means us...us Western types who have money and arms and control over the world... do we all think all Afghans are terrorists. It breaks my heart. I think about it for a bit and have to say yes, the answer is yes...in my view a vast majority of those living in the West would look at Karim and his group of friends—all

20-something lads who know how to use guns and have ALL killed at least one human—and see them as terrorists.

Imagine you are at home. With your wife, children and perhaps brother with his kids. You live in a nice neighbourhood, suburban with trees and kids playing in parks... you know the type of place, Western looking, peaceful. There is a knock at the door. You open it and there are 5 guys with guns at the door. They wish for all the male members of the family over 12 to come with them. What do you do? Well. You go...they've got guns and your children are targets. Now you are sixty members of your family in one jail cell. It is a box with bars. No toilet, no running water, just one very small and insufficient bucket in the corner for defecating into. Each morning they show up and take five of you out of the cell. A few moments later you hear five gun shots and you know you will never see your relatives again.



Out of sixty male members of his family, fewer than a dozen survived the Taliban's visit to his town. He survived as he can cook. His cousin can cut hair, he also survived. Someone explain this to me. If I hate you enough to kill all your family, how do I then internally rationalize keeping you as a my cook or haircutter? Is that a bit daft? Or am I the only one who thinks so?

So back to Maryam. Because most of her family is gone, she's taken over providing and caring for those that are left. She's a bank manager and responsible for a large branch of tellers and staff. We arrive in the morning and are served hot, milky tea and coffee and a gorgeous deep glass plate with raised dividers sectioning off different fruits and nuts—and really tasty and delicious stuff too! Every house, every meeting, everywhere, it's all about the super-sweet tea and coffee and the fruit and nut plates. Made a nice change from the weird Soviet type candies we were served when visiting friends in Tajikistan.

Maryam's smart, funny, personable and capable. Most of her work really takes place in the late afternoon after the tellers are closed up and she has to do the reconciliations, etc. We've given her a cell phone that can access the Net and during the day she's making calls for us trying to sell the various services Beyond Reports offers. I can't imagine her staying at home, making curry and waiting for her man to come home with orders and demands. She is what I think of when I read stories about Kabul in the '70s—full of smart, progressive women in all aspects of life.

As we leave the bank, it is brighter, the sun is climbing but the town still looks grey. We're at a strip mall somewhere in a 'burb and the parking lot and structure look just like they would in any American or Canadian town.

Except that there are barriers on the parking lot entrance and several guys with AK 47s floating around protecting us and our car. I worry about two foreign guys emerging from a bank. Don't they just scream "target" and "money?" I think too much. It's not that bad here. We'll be fine. Maybe we should run anyway? Ahmed is dutifully waiting for us, as he always is, and we jump in the yellow taxi and are off again—destination lunch!



We pull up by the side of another busy road—three lanes of traffic each direction with a wide avenue-style median which was, I'm sure, lined with trees at some point but is now just a garbage and dust collection point. We park the car, leaving our belongings inside, including Oliver's bag with his cost-more-than-you'll-make-in-a-year-or-possibly-two laptop. I'm not so sure that's wise but we've paid a kid 10Afg (21 cents US) to watch the car and he seems to be a part of the restaurant we've just parked in front of so that's a comfort. In Kabul, as in other places I've been, kids of all ages are everywhere doing all sorts of little gigs for a pittance here and a pittance there. I understand child labour laws but these kids have a simple choice: work or starve to death...what good are child labour laws in places like this?

The entryway is small and there are kebabs being grilled out front in massive quantities. Spindly metal legs hold up at least four metal trough of four feet by half a foot, full of red hot coals constantly being fanned by a man we'll call the Kebab Guy. Atop the trough are laid skewer after skewer of gorgeous-smelling meat. Kebab Guy turns them, spices them, fans the coals and it's like a factory. Waiters come to collect the done skewers while kitchen staff bring out fresh ones for roasting. This



place does over 200 kilograms of mutton every lunch time, every day of the week, every day of the year. We enter the place and it's full of locals sitting on low raised platforms that are covered in carpets eating around low tables, quintessential Asian style, with piles of bread and mounds of kebabs. Apparently it's one of the most famous kebab houses in all of Kabul, and Omar figures since no foreigner has ever come here (and the restaurant staff confirmed this) we're safe. I'm not so sure about his logic but how does one turn down a meal in a famous Kabul kebab house? Simple. You don't.

The restaurant keeps going and going. It's obviously taken over the store next door and the house behind it and the one behind that and, just for good measure, the one over there too. We keep walking farther and farther inside and I'm getting more and more concerned. There is absolutely no getting out of here fast if we needed to and we've walked past hundreds of local guys any of whom could have Talib sympathies or simply see us as a good way of getting a few thousand by holding us for ransom. Each face is a potential threat as well as a potential friend. How to tell the difference? Am I any good at reading people, faces, body language? Nope!

Putting aside the fear and trepidation, we keep following Omar and eventually end up at the back of the place in the far corner and finally get to sit. My back is to the wall… my back is almost ALWAYS to the wall and I realize that I'll get to see them coming for me and there's nowhere for me to go, except through the wall.

Ahmed takes a small three-foot-by-two carpet off one wall—many prayer carpets for customers to use line the wall —and goes to the other side of the room to pray; Omar and I are bad, we're not into that so much. We are, however, both into kebabs and soon enough we are all deep in a glorious heap of deliciousness.

Ahmed rejoins us and wastes no time digging in. And it keeps coming. Waiters roam the dark passageways with several fans of six skewers each, laying them artfully down on the naan being used as a plate. You get a tray, it's layered with bread and then with the barbequed lamb. The meat is still hot and still frying, so the drip-



ping fat makes the bread mouth-wateringly ready for eating too. Extra salt, pepper and chilli powder are available for sprinkling onto the skewers and we eat and eat and eat. Omar orders more kebabs and we think this is way to much food but again it all disappears.

Omar's weight comes up again, and we try telling him to go easy on the bread but he's a Kabuli and that's like telling a Korean to go easy on the rice—just not going to happen. The chef has come to the back to see us eating, and a few more of the locals have stopped eating to watch us. An older man, eighty or more, I'm sure, tells Omar it is good that he brings us here, so that we can see how Afghans eat and that sharing bread and food with foreigners is a good thing. Omar tells the old man we are friends from years ago and have kept in touch. The old man's eyes crinkle with smiles and warmth—he clearly approves of our friendship.

Well fed again, we pile into the car; all the belongings are still there and the kid asks for a bit more money as he had to take care of the car with the foreigners' stuff in it. Ahmed gives him a telling off about treating foreigners properly and pays him the standard amount and, zanily as always, we pull into the flow of what constitutes Kabul traffic—kind of like you'd imagine —no rules, everyone jockeying for position, speeding along with strange looking contraptions that have motors on them, cars and trucks and busses that look like they were made a hundred years ago and then put through a dishwasher and of course the occasional donkey and cart. Surreal. Over and over again this place is just surreal.

Later we pull up to a very large brown wall—The Babur Gardens.

A few years ago I was here when the Gardens were being restored. The same man who had overseen the restoration of the massive park in Cairo's city centre was brought over to work on this site, which is over five hundred years old. Back then Kabul was so lush, so green, so fertile, so beautiful, that Muhammad Zahir al-Din Babur, founder of the Mogul dynasty (1526-1857), determined to be laid to rest here. So he created this garden—

his favourite of ten he had constructed around Kabul during his reign.

Reading ancient accounts of the gardens one is awed; travelers of the time never failed to be impressed by their scale and beauty. They included a huge gateway with golden cupolas; several pools; marble channels through which water cascaded down twelve terraces; large, lush trees providing shade in the hot summer months; and the magnificent mausoleum that houses Babur's remains and which survives today. But what was once an eleven-hectare garden of avenues that spanned the western slope of Kabul has been reborn as a modest park for locals well within the city itself. It's nice enough—until one thinks back to what it was.



To restore it, local Afghanis had to be re-taught carpentry and stone masonry. Those overseeing the work had to import marble and craftspeople from the Middle East and India and Pakistan, because there was no one left in Kabul who could have made what Kabul was once famed for. Artisans, craftspeople, stone-workers…all are gone, long dead in one war or another and dead long before they could pass on their knowledge to anyone else. Who cared how to carve marble? People wanted to learn how to take apart their AK 47s. So now they do, and the glory of Kabul will never be again—unless the Aga Khan Trust for Culture AKTC (a Muslim philanthropic organization with strong connections to Canada) has a say in it, and luckily it does.

Babur still lies in the brilliant white, hand-carved marble mausoleum, atop the final terrace of the garden. Garden? Sigh. It is all dust and grey and a shallow shudder of what once was. An earthquake in 1842 and the myriad subsequent conflicts have taken their toll on the site. The trees have been cut down for firewood and the majority of the walls have been destroyed by years of neglect and fighting or have otherwise been carried away, piece by piece, to be used as building materials for newer constructions. And the years of drought have done little to help.

The rebuilding of the garden is just one of many projects being spearheaded here by the AKTC. The idea is to make a place where the residents will want to live with respect for their own culture and their own history. The Aga Khan believes development should be multipronged: you should give people not only ways to learn again and grow food again but also ways to take pride again in who they are, where they are and what they have accomplished and can accomplish. Sounds like a nice idea. I wonder if it's working?

Unfortunately for us it will take a long time before this garden will be anything resembling "magnificent" again. Currently the almond trees look as if they will not be producing anything besides sad yellow leaves until sometime next century. Lights have been set up to make the garden a lovely place to visit in the evening, but there is no electricity. There is a wa-



ter channel, but no water flows in it. Oliver has the sense that one day things will turn around, but I'm more pessimistic. Up near the mausoleum is a pool of water—or what should have been a pool of sparkling, fresh, clean water. It is now a low, sunken pool of green gunk full of plastic bottles, potato-crisp bags, cookie and candy wrappers, pop cans, cigarette butts…I could go on. Someone explain this to me. Why does any fenced-off area or any body of water encourage humans to dump their trash in it? Is it a sign that Kabul is getting wealthier again? If a country is really poor, nothing is thrown out, it is all reused until it really has no life left in it and then it is recycled. The garbage was sad, disappointing and typical. Humans really are pathetic…capable of such magnificence but all too often the base nature of just not giving a rat's ass comes to the fore.

The mausoleum, at least, is beautiful, its marble work intricate and breathtaking. Carvings of Arabic script flow over the tomb, caressing and swaddling it like a comforter of vines. The walls surrounding the tomb are all carved in a design of lattice work, through which you can see the outside world. It is cold, the marble. This place is a bit cold too. I keep trying to picture Kabul as a garden the way it's described in history books, but it's not so easy when everything around you is blanketed in dust, and the distant sound of car horns ensures you know you're in the 21st century. Up here we're a bit away from the traffic so there is a smidgen of peace. I've been resting my hand on the marble trying to feel something—a connection to the past, maybe…? But I feel nothing. There is no mystery left here for me. I can sense no power, no connectivity. I only come off as a hippy when not with my hippy



friends and I don't often search for the "energy" of a place, but from time to time I feel it and find it. I was hoping the same would be true here, but there is nothing for me.

I looked up the translation of the inscription after getting back to the guest house: "Only this mosque of beauty, this temple of nobility, constructed for the prayer of saints and the epiphany of cherubs, was fit to stand in so venerable a sanctuary as this highway of archangels, this theatre of heaven, the light garden of the god-forgiven angel king whose rest is in the garden of heaven, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur the Conqueror." Might be a bit much for my tombstone but it's got a ring to it.

Over the walls to the west, the hills continue to rise up and are covered with dwellings almost to the top. All the hills that surround the city are home to people. Poor people of course, as on the hills there is no plumbing and are no power lines. In the courtyard of one of the walled compounds on the hill we can see people in colourful outfits—there's a wedding going on—but it's too far up too make out much more than people in colourful clothes. Oliver wants to take pictures and I think he snaps off a few before Omar warns that there might be trouble if someone thinks we're taking photos of their women.

I was admonished for the same type of thing in the car at some point. I was in the back seat and we were stuck in traffic. There were two adorable kids in the car next to us and they of course could see that I was a foreigner. I smiled and waved at them. They smiled and waved back. Omar told me off. There were women in the car and I needed to be more careful or the husband would assume I was trying to contact his women and this would be enough for him to cause trouble. What type of "trouble" I figured I didn't need to know. I mean, it's Kabul, everyone has a bloody AK47…is there any other type of trouble around these parts?

Ahmed and I walked slowly around the gardens together communicating without using words. My fault, not his: he speaks a number of languages, none of which I speak. Ahmed speaks Farsi, Dari, Pashto, Turkish and something else I can't remember. We communicated pretty well though. I'm getting quite good at these non-verbal, non-English ways of talking. Being a bit of a ham and being good at charades helps. Context helps too. If you're in a restaurant, it's easier for the non-English-speaking person to assume you want food and drink. And a surprising number of words in Dari and Farsi are similar to words in Gujarati, the other language I claim to be able to speak well aside from English—my godmother will tell you I speak dreadfully ever since I moved to the "colonies," i.e., Canada!

So…what should we do next with our sightseeing day? Well I already know what I want to do next and Ahmed is in agreement (context and miming and we are now FAST friends) and since he's the driver we're off to his place for a sheesha and smoke with some friends. Some friends? Hmmmm. Okay, is this a good idea? We don't know Ahmed very well, nor do we know any of his friends. Who are these people? I haven't even had a smoke and already it feels like my buzz has been killed by my over-thinking the security again.

Omar may be sensing I'm a little apprehensive and goes on a bit of a monologue about how his part of town is not a problem part. It turns out Ahmed is Omar's neighbour, literally. No one would do anything against foreigners who are Omar's guests or Ahmed's guests. Omar insists, and Ahmed nods in agreement, that their honour and their families' honour would protect us. Nothing to worry about! "Well then, why didn't you boys say so…off we go then." The phrase resounds in my head in a very English sing-songy voice: Hi ho, hi ho, it's off to be killed we go…

Hi ho, Hi ho, it's off to be killed we go...

They live off a main road in walled-off homes. Their front road is a small dirt road parallel to the main road but separated by a divider two cars wide of what should have been grass and trees, avenue style, but is now just scrub vegetation, dust and waste. We park the car and get out. Kids play in the dirt. This must be a good sign. Many years ago when I used to hang out in LA and drive around I was told it was cool to park my rental car anywhere there were kids outside playing as this meant the likelihood of drive-by shootings was less there. I wonder, does the same hold true here? There is a corrugated iron shack a little further down the road with smoke coming out of it. We drive by it later and are told it's a hash shack. Looking inside there are a few older Kabulis, dressed in more traditional outfits, huddled round a small fire with a few sheeshas. It reminds me of an ice-fishing cabin. The fire casts dramatic shadows on their well-cragged faces and I have a *National Geographic* moment.

The houses each have a courtyard, poured concrete mostly, with some small green space for a tree. In front of the house, where perhaps a North American house might have a garage, is the "front room." It's here that guests are entertained. We were never given access to any of the actual homes on this trip, only the front rooms, and we never saw any of the wives or sisters. Which I have to say was at times a touch weird, like you're in some sci fi novel where all the women are dead or captured or something. They are just so very absent in certain situations that the oddness of it screams out loud to your senses, and I wonder do other Westerners who come here feel this too?

The front room is just an oblong-shaped room with nothing in it. Well, almost nothing. In Ahmed's there's a built-in cabinet that looks very old and worn. As do the rugs on the floor, as do the curtains and everything else. Central Asia may once have been the Centre of the Universe but all its grandeur seems to have disappeared, to be replaced by 1970s home furnishings that are then never to be replaced, destined to just keep fading away more and more each year. We're sitting around the room on Tajik/Afghan style kurpuchas—cushions about three feet wide and ten feet long and two inches thick. The large cushions ring the room



so we can all have a place to sit large and room to spread, with throw pillows for arms and backs and propping one's self up as one sinks lower and more horizontal as the smoke does its work. I wonder at the way men sit. Some sit small, scrunched in on themselves, legs crossed tight. Here men sit large—legs spread wide, arms back and relaxed. Here men take up a lot of space, which comes off as very macho. There is much testosterone in the room—there always is around here.

Friends arrive. One is an ex-commander, of what? We never asked and are never told. I'm wary of asking too many questions about what people do now or did during this war or that war, and not just in Afghanistan. I'm overly cautious about making faux pas or snubbing someone's honour, and since no one is volunteering any additional information, I decide it's best to be less inquisitive than I really am. Another of Ahmed's friends is a very rich guy—you can tell by the way he's dressed and the way he sits that he thinks he's important, which usually means the guy isn't important, just rich enough to have delusions. This one lives in Ukraine, near Odessa. I've been interested in Odessa for some time now and would love to see it. I tell him this and I'm cordially invited to come and stay with him. There is great smoke to be had there and the women are beautiful and easy. Nice to know…

Moving on, we're introduced to a few other friends, one of whom invites us later in the week to his place. We're not scared to come, are we? He laughs. I look at him and say we are guests of Omar's and you are his friend,

therefore we are your friends and we feel no fear. (Hinting heavily that if anything happens to us it'll be on Omar's honour as we are his responsibility.) Honour is important here, still. It is not a weird concept for fairy tales and fantasy stories as it is in most countries and most people's lives, but something almost tangible. People here live and literally die for their honour, so I thought it prudent to intimate that we understood how things worked here and were all friends. In my head I'm thinking, "Are you M-A-D? I'm so not disappearing into some suburb with you to go to your house…at least not without Omar and our get-away driver!" Of course later we do almost exactly that and I remember on my last trip I went off with some random guy to go find an antique door to turn into a desk. Only realized I might have done something daft after we left the city. But I'm still here.

We'd forced Ahmed to stop by a roadside fruit stall on the way to his place so that we could pick up something. He was insisting that we didn't need to bring anything but we both told him that it was OUR culture to do so and that OUR honour would not let us come to his home without bringing something to share. And seriously, I'm an English Indian Persian African Canadian—NONE of my cultures allows me to visit someone new without taking something with me. Ahmed stopped insisting—if it's your culture, then by all means. Afghans are VERY civilized in regard to others' traditions and rituals. Is it odd to think the world could learn a few things from them?

We discussed what might be good to eat with tea and sheesha so Oliver and I decided on a watermelon. No, not because it goes well with a sheesha and cake but because they looked so damned good and it was November! When we get to Ahmed's place and are all finding places to sit and saying hello, he passes the melon through some long curtains in the back corner of the room. A short while later a pair of hands emerges from the curtain with a large tray full of nicely sliced and arranged watermelon. That's the closest I come to seeing any female member of anyone's family—one pair of weirdly disembodied hands.

As the lads—and they are total lads in the UK sense of the word—as the lads fuss and muss with the sheesha and the pipes, etc., the mysterious hands behind the curtain proffer many other items. Tea comes through, along with small bowls to drink it from—piyalis is what they call them, same in Tajikistan and, strangely, the same in Gujarati…but perhaps it is an Arabic word that has fallen into our family's common usage. Many words are similar to me, like dil for heart, bucha for children. I really should research the language trees



around here. I'm picking up 20 percent of the conversations, mostly just the gist of things. The hands reappear with a platter of cake—dry and a bit crumbly, it has a very thick, very sweet layer of solid icing on it. There is also the prerequisite plate of dried fruits and nuts.

More rearranging of plates and cups and hot sheesha coals that come out in a brazier so we can finally get the sheesha going. They've filled it with the Arab tobacco mix, which contains fruits and molasses. The mixture is placed in a ceramic holder like an egg cup. Cover that with foil and seal in the tobacco. Taking something sharp like a pen, you make holes in the top of the foil and then connect the ceramic holder to the rest of the sheesha—there are holes in the bottom, small enough for smoke, too big for chunks of tobacco. The coals go on top of the foil, the heat is drawn down into the tobacco by someone sucking on the pipe, which is connected at the bottom end of the sheesha in the glass bowl part that's full of water. The tobacco burns, gently, and the smoke is drawn down the pipe and into the water so it's both cooled and filtered by the time it reaches your lungs. This isn't some small puff on a cigarette, this is a long draw on an Arab pipe…fruity coolness, tinged with tobacco hits my lungs and I visibly relax—shoulders down, smile on my face. Omar comments and laughs at and with me. "It's been two days since I had a smoke! Leave me alone!" I grin.



As the pipe is sent around the men, the curtains part once more and a small boy is pushed through them. He's Ahmed's son and dutifully he goes around the room giving proper, respectful hellos to each of his father's guests. He's shy around the foreigners, especially Oliver, but he does as his father bids him with a bashful smile that is so Disney-esque in its sweetness. This kid is going to be a looker and break many hearts! Then he's promptly handed back through the curtain into those hands—his mother? Sister? Auntie? Who knows. The pipe's back to me again and I'm sitting cross-legged. Long hair around my shoulders, inhaling and becoming wrapped in billows of smoke. The sheesha is nice, I like it better than cigarettes or cigars, but it's still tobacco and that stuff just makes me a bit zooily lightheaded. Everyone's grinning at me as I pass the pipe along to Naim, who is sitting next to me.

Naim is an interesting guy. He's got a couple of kids and we get to meet them later. He's a hash smoker. Daily, constantly, he smokes. Never quite understood what he did for a living, some type of store. His friends all tell me he is the "strongest" hash smoker in their group, and this is where we learn his father's bi and would love Oliver's blond hair. I look over at Oliver to try and figure out how he feels about maybe meeting Naim's father and I laugh and turn back to Naim who is grinning at me as he hands me a chunk of Afghan Black. "For you," he says, "for smoking later." He smiles, I thank him, one toker to another.



He knows. He understands both my desire and need. We both have the same vice and really need no words, just as Ahmed and I didn't earlier in the garden.

Now that the showing of the kid is done and the refreshments are out and the sheesha is going nicely and we're all a bit relaxed and grinning at each other, what do we talk about? What topic is appropriate to a very conservative, religious and restrictive culture? What do these men, the ones who hide the female members of their families, want to ask two foreign lads?

And here it is, folks: Which countries in your travels have the best women—the best girls for fucking and the best girls for marrying?

These two categories are very separate to these men. We are told a few times that there are Russian and Chinese prostitutes available all over Kabul, including in the Serena hotel. Not in the Aga Khan's hotel? Surely not? But of course they are there…they are everywhere I travel, all over the world they go to make some money. It's the same all over Kabul too. But, someone adds almost conspiratorially, of course they cost more at the Serena! Omar knows a great place and the others agree, it's a good place. The girls will let you "go" twice for only fifty US dollars. And remember the minimum wage is less than that a month...so the gang we're hanging out with is rich and not just rich compared to other Afghans either. Oliver is a freelance photographer, I'm a freelance writer and project manager, yet these guys are richer than we are but they'd never understand that. We're Western.

This topic of conversation—which women are good for fucking—lasted for bloody ever. I've no idea what to say and the idea kinda grosses me out a bit, but I have friends who tell stories and I read so I just make up some stuff—I'm good at telling tales so I do. Oliver participates and probably sounds more knowledgeable about the topic than I do. It's all very weird. This was not what I was expecting to talk about. It's crass, rude, disrespectful in many ways but to them it seems okay as we're

talking about non-Afghan women and of course we're talking about girls to fuck, not to marry. It does seem to me as if they've all been cheating on their wives or fiancèes constantly, but of course it's not considered cheating here or in other parts of the world for that matter. The idea that their wives and girlfriends are anything but 110 percent faithful to their men will never even cross their minds. They can do what they like to whomever and however because they are men. It's just that simple: a double standard. Women, even in countries where they are legally equals, just don't get anywhere near the same freedom.

I'm really getting tired of the conversation: there are great prostitutes in Odessa. There are really good ones in Kabul too but the Chinese ones aren't as good as the Russian ones. Well hang on now, another friend disagrees. The Chinese ones are better, they know how to treat a man, not just his member. They are more polite and willing to go a little bit further. Am I really hearing this? Am I really a part of this discussion? I start looking around. There is almost nothing on the walls, they are white, well, were, once upon a time. Now they are stained and yellowed and old and cracking. In the cabinet that holds the sheeshas (and there are half a dozen of them) there are also a couple of Qurans. On one wall is a large poster-size piece of calligraphy done in a gaudy, gaudy style, all gold and shiny. It's some passage from the Quran I'm sure. I can recognize the first word in the first line: Bismillah, "In the name of Allah." That's an easy one to spot. In the name of bloody Allah can we get off this topic of conversation? I'm dying inside…begging the Universe to make this all go away. It's so weird, so incongruous, so just not fun anymore and yet it continues.

They are a very curious bunch these guys, they really want to know answers. We talk about women from South America and France; Thai prostitutes vs. Chinese; Korean women vs. Westerners; all the time it's the same information they want. Who makes the wildest women in bed? We never do come to a conclusion. Which country makes the best women for marriage? Well, that's easy: Afghanistan, of course!

Back in Dushanbe we'd gone to the Tajikistan International Film Festival and seen an Afghan film. It was about two American soldiers, a captain who was white and an enlisted man who was black. It got major applause and the director and writer and film crew were all there in Dushanbe being celebrated and fêted but the film was dreadful, an absolute piece of crap. From the writing to the acting to the direction, it was all, to me anyway, horrid. The cinematography was great and the music neat and the very fact they were able to make a movie at all deserves applause and kudos, but the content was just wrong.

In one scene a group of women walk single file through some desert. The Americans are hidden behind a dune watching them, trying to figure out if they are really women or if they're Talibs in disguise. Then the black soldier goes nuts. He can see the ankles of the women and turns into a stupid horny teenager. No, worse—no American teen sex film has guys that go as nuts as this guy does. He makes oodles of rude comments and salivates and writhes about in ecstasy about the prospect of female flesh—all from having glimpsed an ankle. An ANKLE!

Is this what the Afghans think we're like in the West? Maybe. This whole women/prostitute conversation has set me off just a little. Is this why we can't take a photo of a wedding

party? Is this why I can't wave at a couple of kids in a car? Is this why the burqa found acceptance here? Is this why women are removed from society? Are all Afghan men depraved animals who just want to fuck prostitutes as often as they can? Are they so sex-crazy or sex-starved that they can't imagine anyone else not wanting to fuck their wives or sisters if they get a glimpse of an ankle?! Does the glimpse of a woman's ankle really turn them on so much that they need to go out and find some whores? Bloody hell!!!

Doesn't one first ask, "How may I help?" before buying a fleet of trucks?

As we finally get ready to leave and say our goodbyes, Omar tells me again that Naim's father would have loved Oliver. Apparently Naim's father is really, really into blonds and maybe we'll meet him later in the trip—did I see Oliver shudder? GRIN.

Ahmed has been dutifully waiting for us listening to the radio while we're in yet another meeting. It doesn't sound like Arabic (which is what Dari and Pashto sound like to me) and it's not. He's listening to Iranian radio—Persian. We get back in and head to our next destination. He weaves in and out around cars like an expert. The man has a lead foot and I'm not sure if I should be scared because he does look like he's in control and he does look like he knows what he's doing. Besides, I sure as hell don't want to be behind the wheel of the car, not here and not in ANY Asian country! He tells tales of driving a taxi in Tehran (hence the radio station) and makes it sound like driving in Kabul is dead easy in comparison. I guess it is as the "rules of the road" seem to be only suggestions here and I'm not even sure if there is a Ministry of Transportation yet. There wasn't the last time I was here. If you had a car and could afford gas, you drove. Some German NGO had given Kabul 250 traffic lights, which back then was just daft. There was no electricity in the town, let alone cops to worry about who was doing what at an intersection. There are cops now; they stand in the middle of traffic, waving their arms around and accomplishing nothing. If they would shoot a few people that might work here, but waving and pointing, yeah, um—no.

Oh and the daft gift of traffic lights is common. I don't mean specifically lights as gifts, but donors giving aid agencies and countries things that just don't make sense. I heard one agency got a donation of some jeep-type vehicles to help with off-road food-aid delivery. Nice idea, but the place the food needed to go to had no roads and is quite mountainous. Much better if the donor had instead purchased a herd of donkeys and hired guys to mush them along. The donor of the trucks of course gave no money for gas or maintenance. Are people really this stupid? Doesn't one first ask, "How may I help?" before buying a fleet of trucks?

I'm far away now, dreaming about how to get donors to pay attention to needs, how to coordinate this and how to "monetize" my role in it all. Do you like that word? It's a new one to me along with "capacity building," "outward-facing," "mainstream" as a verb and a few others. I want to say that language out here in NGO land gets massacred but I'm not sure that's the image I want to use, as so much out here get massacred. Yo! You writer/editor types reading this: what am I trying to



say? The jargonistly twisted English used out here makes my brain hurt sometimes. How does this one grab ya:

> *"Mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) can be described as 'negative investment' or 'investment in reverse', since they can permanently detract from the physical, human and social capital."*

No…really? Permanently, you say? Wow, big surprise. And what exactly is "social" capital? I figure "human capital" means humans, so basically, "Mines bad for humans" is I think the gist of it…. sigh.

We're in the middle of three lanes, going fast as usual. There is a large median and another three lanes of traffic going the other way. This is one of the new roads and it's nice and straight and smooth and not bombed to crap like so many of the others. I'm lost, dreaming about language and idiots and such, when I notice the car on our left starts to slow down as does the car in front of us. It's a sudden enough change in speed for me to notice, to break my reverie and make me pay attention. Ahmed sees an opportunity to move us ahead so he pulls into the now vacant lane on our right and steps on the gas. He's going to pass on the right, which is a no-no in North America but as I said, there are no rules here. I can see in Ahmed's body language that he's got that race-car driver stance, he's about to let his car out for a burst of speed and pass



Messrs. Slowpoke. He gracefully manoeuvres the car and the gears make nary a sound and instead of the speed I'm expecting, we too slow down, BUT FAST!

From time to time on this road there are breaks in the median to allow traffic to cross, turn or U-turn. Some of these breaks have lights and cross streets and others not. We're slowing down because across our path is an army convoy from the oncoming lane crossing all of ours as they turn left into their army base. The other cars must have seen this and were slowing down to let the convoy pass. Ahmed has slowed our car but he's still moving forward. Like many drivers he's positioning and edging up so that he can be first away when the flag comes down. But this is not the time and certainly not the place for edging the car up. The cars in the other two lanes are NOT edging up, they're stopped dead. Hmmm…stopped DEAD…ahem, Ahmed!

We're now in the curbside lane and there are several guys in fatigues all brown and dusty, not patchy green, because this isn't a jungle but a desert high in the mountains. A couple of them are in the other lanes, controlling and stopping traffic, and a couple on our side. They're facing all ways and watching and they have their guns at the ready, just in case. None of them are paying much attention to us as we edge forward until, of course, one does.

He's now pointing a gun directly at OUR CAR! Holy shit, he's yelling at us and it should be English he's yelling but I can't make out what he's saying. Sounds vaguely Italian. It's definitely not English and he is very obviously not pleased and very highly agitated. Okay, fine…I'm not pleased either, that gun looks bloody loaded! (hell, they ALL look loaded to me) And now he's PISSED OFF! Why? We've stopped! Instinctively—have we watched too many movies?—Oliver's got his hands up as do I. Ahmed is attempting to tell The Soldier with the Gun Pointed at Our Heads that he's not running the road block or trying to do anything bad. At least that's what I hope he's trying to say but he's babbling and getting agitated himself and he's talking in Dari or Pashto or both but it's not English and it's certainly not whatever language The Soldier with the Gun Pointed at Our Heads is yelling in. No life flashing before my eyes, but I gotta tell ya I was a touch nervous. Oliver and I keep repeating something like, "Omar, tell him to put his hands up! Put them up, off the steering wheel! Now! His hands! Tell him now! Ahmed, your hands!!"

The Soldier with the Gun Pointed at Our Heads gets closer and closer and Ahmed's arms finally go up off the steering wheel and The Soldier with the Gun Pointed at Our Heads finally decides we're not a threat and lowers his weapon. Either that or, as the army vehicles had all turned by now, we were no longer a threat? Who knows? And I wonder, since this is an ancient warrior type culture, did Oliver and I just brand ourselves as cowards? Breathing again is a nice unexpected pleasure, and we continue along our way to our next meeting as if nothing happened. I guess around here, that was nothing.

I don't want to meet anyone else this afternoon. I'm pissed off and upset and infuriated and disappointed and fed up. No one seems to care about doing a good job. USAID just paid $8,000 for a job that would have taken my people a few hours to do. Even after explaining this, showing our work, having them ADMIT the quality difference is huge, even then, nothing! No work. It's exhausting to have people be impressed by you, your team, your materials, and then get nothing in return. How can you see my stuff is better and know we are faster and cheaper and still not give us work? Everyone's got a hand out for a bribe and no one wants to hire us. I'd pay the bloody bribes if it would get me a gig but it won't. Because it's not just the bribes—everyone here bribes and is bribed back. The brown envelope is part and parcel of doing work here. I need both the money to bribe AND the cultural/friend con-



nection. I hear stories from Afghans that what upsets them is not so much the paying a bribe to get, say, a driver's licence, but the fact that you pay and then you don't get what you paid for. And then? To whom do you complain? According to a report from the UN, Afghanis pay over $2.5 billion in bribes a year or about 23% of Afghanistan's GDP!

Too much has happened here. Too much misery, too much of everything…it's a weird combination of high-energy, cut-throat bribes and overpayments and such, and the "we've given up" camp. Very strange to spend your day in that milieu. Oh, someone slap me for using that word!

In between meetings we stop to get some vodka. Ahmed drinks (Omar does not) and we know we'll all be hanging out again soon enough so we agree—get some now for when we need it later. Now I thought we'd end up at the Italian or American PX to buy it as I did on my last visit, and indeed we did look for the US Army PX but to no avail.

There are tons of US Army buildings, compounds, camps all over the place. Driving up to one in a yellow taxi looking for vodka with two foreigners in the back is…well it's just sketchy. I've been in a few sketchy situations and I'm kind of okay with it all but this is really sketchy and strikes me as a touch dangerous too. Wonder what the US guards made of two nutty Canucks in a taxi trying to score some booze in the weird army sections of Kabul. No one we meet knows where we can go to buy booze so—off to the black market it is.

We're now in a residential neighbourhood. Apartment buildings in a group, some single family dwellings and parking lots in between. It looks very North American. We pull into a parking spot and this handsome young man comes over to talk to Omar. We figure on some surreptitious passing of a bottle and US funds ($28 for 1L of booze), but no. The guy is not suave at all—he's uncoordinated as hell and we don't have exact change. Omar pulls out a $100 US bill, and back and forthing goes on with change and bills in full view of anyone watching. Does anyone else think this is a bit nuts?

I've said before that the guys we meet here are all rich...they are but they don't think they are because they compare things to the West. They earn money from doing all sorts of stuff—everyone here has their fingers into as many pies as possible and so this, and the culture, leads to them having cash in hand. So Omar pulling US$100s out of his pocket is no big deal to him…bloody big deal to me, Oliver and I are scraping coinage together for most of this trip just to make it to the next plane or hotel or train. I'd certainly love to have a wad of US hundreds in my pocket!

So the Black Market Guy makes change and disappears for a few minutes, and I think, because I've been in this situation before, thinking the same thing in too many different places, "Is this where we get kidnapped? Or will he take off with the money?" It's happened before—not the kidnapping thing, obviously, but the taking-off thing. I remind you of the adventure Azim and I went on in Dhaka a few years back where we ended up with a rickshaw and no rickshaw-walla...Anyway this young lad does return with the one-litre bottle shoved down the front of his trousers. Not exactly inconspicuous. How did he walk back and ensure the bottle didn't slip through to the ground? The guy then has to make a big palaver to get the bloody thing out of his pants and into Omar's hands! All the while I'm looking

out the car window thinking what a lovely sitting target we make.

Transaction done, booze acquired and we're off again at breakneck speed back to the guest house. While Oliver goes in to put cameras away, I walk with Omar around the corner to the local version of a 7/11. It's right on Wazir Akbar Khan—the main drag, traffic is zooming past, guards are everywhere, only a very few people are walking and we have a normal shopping experience—well normal enough for here. I'm still looking around, watching what I can, trying to be observant without being observed. I wonder how the spies do it. In spy movies, the main good guy always has an amazing sixth sense. His training has made him into something with computer sensor abilities. He can see a small shadow and know it's a gun and act accordingly. I try to do that too. But to me a shadow is just a shadow…so, a choice to make: be scared of all of them or none of them. I choose none of them and start to force myself to relax about where I am and how exposed I am.

We get a bottle of pickles, Iranian style, and some cakes and some cookies and some juice and something else weird looking. Shopping here is fabulous. There is so much stuff available it's strange to think of how many Afghans will die this coming winter from starvation. The foods are all from the Middle East, so you get really nice juices and jams of fruits we can't even afford to buy back home. They have four types of cherry juice, guava and mango too for the same price as orange, and other fruits I've never seen before. I've become quite partial to fresh pomegranate juice and vodka…and the Afghan bread with chillies…and the sheesha and the chunky black goodness…yeah, I could live here for a bit, easily. We spent 400 Afg, about US $7, and get two full bags of munchies and head back to the guest house to get ready for dinner.

We meet Farhad for lunch. Omar's wedding is this coming weekend and so Farhad, his friend, is going to take us around for two days and be our guide/interpreter, allowing Omar to do his wedding prep duties. He and Omar met a few years ago. Both of them went to Pakistan to learn English and then came back to Kabul to be English teachers. Farhad works for a cell phone company now selling services to large corporations but also associations and organizations like the UN and ministries like the Department of Defence. He's very well dressed, suave and emollient. I'm sure he's a bloody brilliant salesperson. We end up having a chat on the street in front of the kebab house, just like back home. I look down the road both ways. We're on a small side street—parked cars along both sides, kids playing, workers moving stuff and unloading. A couple of guys are talking to an old man smoking a sheesha in front of a shoe store. The temperature is cool, not cold per se but not warm. Kebab restaurants abound and the smell on the street is a combination of meat and flowers and the ever-present dust. It feels normal, safe, yet surreal.

We leave Farhad to go back to work and head over to Freak Street to buy some outfits for Omar's wedding. There are three neat streets in Kabul: Freak, Chicken and Flower. There don't seem to be chickens or freaks for sale on the first two, but Flower Street is the place to go for flowers. Omar's asked us both if we'd dress in traditional outfits and we're both more than happy to. I've got several pairs of kurtas at home and they're super comfortable. A kurta is long pajama pants with a huge waist that you cinch with a long string. The fabric bunches and makes many gathers and pleats



around the waist and down to the knees, hiding any hint of body shape till the pants taper to the ankles. Over top of this comes a dress shirt, with cuffs and collar, so long it hangs to almost your knees, tunic like.

As usual, I'm difficult. I want one made in Afghanistan, not one made across the border in Pakistan like so much here. They offer us a selection and we both choose with the help of Omar, the storekeeper and the other hangers-on. Oliver's is much nicer in both design and fabric. Both are light brown and tan but Oliver's has brocade trimming and the fabric looks stronger. Mine is plain and simple and lighter in weight but mine is made in Afghanistan so that's the one I'll take. It feels weird to be walking down a street, going from shop to shop, wondering who is watching, are we safe, who are these salespeople. It's a constant back-of-the-head thing—you're always wondering and worried. I'm watching out not only for myself but also for Oliver. I'm trying to ensure no one is following or those that have clocked us with the tall blond lad are still sitting in their roadside stalls and not reaching for their cell phones the second we walk past. The endless vigilance is tiring.

Oliver is proving to be quite the hit in the stores and elsewhere. His hair is like a beacon and I wonder not for the first or last time if we really shouldn't have made him dye it in Dushanbe. The store clerks are all very eager to help Oliver. The two suits together cost about US$40 and, well, you take a look at the picture of Oliver, he looks like some Italian noble businessman out of a Marco Polo film! Totally a Venetian salesperson having come to Kabul to trade…

From here we're off to meet Fawad, a Pakistani national who is running a small

travel agency here in Kabul. We're buying our tickets from Kabul to Baku, one of the few direct flights out of Kabul. Of course there is the prerequisite cuppa sweet tea. Fawad is brilliant, like so many of the people I've met out here. He's well mannered and so soft spoken you're forced to listen attentively. We sit in the lobby of his travel agency and talk for a bit as the tickets are being prepared.

He's from the Swat Valley, a region in Pakistan that was, until VERY recently, independent; it has a special relationship with Pakistan. Over the few meetings we have with him he describes it and it sounds like paradise. Swat is at the top of Pakistan where it meets up with India and Afghanistan. The region is mountainous but Swat is rife with rivers and valleys whose beauty will make you stop for a moment and just stare at the pictures—stunning. Since I sipped tea with Fawad the Swat Valley has been in the news far too much. The place has been taken over by the Taliban and the Pakistani army has carpet-bombed the place over and over and over. It's just a bloody nightmare over there.

Fawad's family seems be have been rather well connected—he tells stories of playing with the royal family's children when he was young. Swat had a king and princes and still does even though they are now officially part of Pakistan. Fawad tells us that he was once kidnapped and held for ransom for days in Swat and so now he always carries guns when he drives back home. As he was driving home one evening, a car pulled up behind the one he and a friend were in and he immediately knew: trouble. The car chased them, a second showed up and one pulled ahead of them, trapping them in between. The cars, just like in the movies, swerved sideways and forced them to pull over. I'd tell you more of his tale but he's writing it down and bits of it can be found online. The place he's from has been taken over by those looking for a place to hide from the world and so he says he'd rather be here. Imagine wanting to work in Kabul because it's safer than the place you're from!

Ahmed and Farad come by in the evening and grab us for Omar's wedding. Oliver and I are both dressed in the traditional clothes we bought and I think we look rather smashing. There is a picture of me somewhere at the end of this evening. My beard is full on and full of white; the Afghan cap is jauntily off to one side and I'm wrapped in a warm wool blanket…I





don't think it looks like me at all but it certainly looks Afghan.

The wedding hall is on the outskirts of town. There are lots of them. Large halls, decorated and ready for weddings. This one is covered in neon lights. It's nuts, it's like the lights of Blackpool on acid—so bright the night sky around it is lit up. We arrive at the entrance and Farhad escorts us to a table past a whole bunch of guests. There must be 400 men and boys on this side. Because of course there's a dividing wall that stretches the full length of the room, right down the centre: a six-foot-high, two-feet-per-panel, fold-out, pink divider. Women and girls on one side, men and boys on the other. The band is on a raised platform and I think they can see over the wall but apparently that's okay as they're the band. Some families, we're told, have started having co-ed weddings. Indeed, the one in the other hall on the other side of the parking lot is mixed. You get the impression that those holding co-ed weddings are considered a bit off... weird people. Sure they're the weird ones!

The young men here are all wearing jeans with tons of doodads on them and T-shirts. I saw this a great deal in Korea and then China and now here. Trousers and jeans with extra straps, buckles, zips, etc., all really doing nothing purposeful, just decorative. Sometimes it's cool and sometimes it just looks daft. Two of the guys are in hoodies which I didn't expect. A bit too American Gangsta culture the hoodie, no? Oh wait, I thought it was a young guy in a hoodie but the guy's my age…holy crap, I'm a middle aged man! Okay, two things. Someone go tell him that he looks daft in his hoodie and doodaded jeans and—oh, crap, I too have hoodies and doodaded jeans in my

wardrobe. Oh dear. Someone tell me when the hell did I too get old? Better yet, DON'T!

So like I was saying, most of the guys my age are all in suits—and they're all shiny. Shiny suits, shiny shirts, shiny ties…oy! And the older guys, well they're dressed like Oliver and me. Are they happy about the fact we're dressed like this, or offended by us? Dunno.

Oliver has his camera and starts taking pics. He shoots the old men at their table and we together suss out who's in Omar's family and ensure we get pics of them as we're giving him a web site and wedding photos as a gift. The place is filling up but nothing's happening. Kids are running all over as they do in any country except Singapore and there are even some little girls running around too. Apparently it's okay for them to be on this side of the divide while they are pre pubescent, and Omar's male family members can go on the other side, but that's it.



The band is playing and it's loud. Too loud for me as it's all screechy and sounds to my ear like Bollywood music gone horribly wrong. But the atmosphere is a good one and people are very happy and celebrating—sober! There are many people who want to come and say hello to us; we're at one of the front tables and



conspicuous. In twos and threes they come, for an audience with the Blond One. They vie to sit next to him and then are too shy to talk. They nudge each other and smile at Oliver, batting eyelids. He's oblivious. It's hysterical. Some of them don't speak any English at all, they just want to come and sit near him. I wonder, as with our poor friend Larissa in Korea, if anyone's going to pluck out a blond hair for a souvenir. Oliver is very popular. I'm a touch jealous.

Omar arrives with his father and uncle and they make the rounds, shaking hands, being congratulated. Omar's super-pleased to see us and asks us how we are and if we need anything and if we're well taken care of. It's his wedding day, but that Afghan hospitality is front and centre and it's sweet. We wish him and his new bride well and Oliver takes some pics of him and his dad.

Then the dancing starts, on the carpet in front of the band. By the wall separating the genders the men gather in a circle. About twenty of them, Omar's friends and family.





Most guys stay in their chairs by their tables, but for the ones who are dancing this is the shit. They clap and sway and move in a circle and one by one they enter the middle and dance their own style, their own moves, and all in celebration of Omar and his wedding and then dance back into the circle.

It seems the more you cavort and contort, the more honour you are doing Omar. So they dance, the young lads, suggestively, seductively, sexily, by themselves in a circle of other guys. Hips grinding and bodies slithering … combine this with what we call the Indian bhungra Light Bulb Dance—you know, where you move your hands like you're screwing in a light bulb, one hand above your head and one by your side. Sexy? HELL yeah—but all the girls are on the other side of that pink wall. I've heard 70 percent of Afghan men are bi; I look at the uberly suggestive dancing and won-





der who's being turned on by whom. Shake my head, have a sip of water and let the mind be boggled. Weird world.

At one point the kids are all mucking around and Oliver decides it would be good to take some pics of the kids together. So he tries wrangling them into a circle so he can shoot but no, the kids just want to crowd around him and make faces into the camera. Oliver gets up onto a chair so he can get a good angle on the kids. I'm watching him and the kids from our table, sort of as I talk with others and suddenly Farhad flips. I see what's going on—Oliver's head is now above the pink dividing wall. I rush over but he's clued in too and gets down off the chair…phew. The look on Farhad's face gave me a solid fright. I hope none of the guests are offended.

We recover and Oliver, true to his indomitable spirit, does a dance for Omar's honour and happiness. This is good as I'm far too shy and Oliver's a good dancer, he used to pole dance at a gay bar in Seoul but that too is another story. Omar is on a chair, we're all in a circle around him and it feels very much like an Indian wedding except there all the girls would be dancing the way the boys dance here, while the Indian guys would be drinking Johnny Walker Black and Perrier!

Omar leaves the hall with his dad to go eat in a separate room with his new wife and her immediate family. We never do get to see the wife or any of the female members of the family. Guess this is the way it's done here. But as soon as Omar's gone, the food arrives and it's plentiful, varied and good—roast chicken, kebabs, naan bread, rice with mutton, three vegetable curries, plain rice, salad and a few other dishes that were succulent and rich and but I've got no idea if they were

even meat or veg. Oh and the chilies— fresh, crisp, with a zing and a bite. There are so many plates of food that they are now stacked up on top of one another. Ahmed is having a great time going from dancing to eating and back. The mood is brilliant.

We finish up and head out about 10 p.m. because we want to get home before it's too late, it's a security thing. Out into the main road we stop and pull over so Oliver can take a shot of the wedding hall. It's very late, very dark, and we're on a weird road with cars flying past. Ahmed is not so into stopping here like this as he's worried about our security and is making decisions on his own because Omar is not with us. Oliver's out with the tripod fast so Ahmed kind of has to go along with us. The shot takes some time as Oliver's doing something with apertures and light capture and such—he's trying to shoot a building at night that's covered in neon. We wait. Ahmed tenses visibly. He's worrying me now. Usually he's super cool. This road reminds me a bit of Highway 7, not far from where I grew up in the north part of Toronto: a highway that's now built up on both sides with strip malls and gas stations and anonymous low-rise buildings. Like North York, like Toronto, I think to myself…yeah, just like Toronto, only AFTER the Americans forcibly come for and get our water!

Oliver gets the picture and we're back in the taxi. Pretty soon we hit a road check and men with guns want to know who's in the back. Okay, Oliver and I are in the back but we're dressed as locals and we're wrapped in wool blankets because it's bloody cold. Flashlights and guns in the face and he tells us to open our blankets—slowly. We do. The guard decides we're cool (mostly I think due to the blond hair as Oliver's hat has come off) and we go. Home. To the nice hard bed that has no guns pointed at it.

Today is the photo shoot with Hewadwal and Oliver. We show up mid morning, and Omar is with us, even though it's the day after he got married. We rib him about not seeing to his new wife and already buggering off with his friends. He asserts that we are still his guests, it is his pleasure and honour to show us around and his wife will understand.

We leave Ahmed at the construction company and climb into their very large black SUVs. There are two SUVs, a smaller car and a truck in our convoy. Everyone seems to have a gun except Oliver, Omar, me and Waheed, the engineer. I'm pretty sure even the driver is packing. We head out to an apartment building complex that Hewadwal is building. There are four phases and the first completed apartments are already occupied. They're a neat company; they've gone out of their way to ensure community space, clean water recycling and such. Waheed seems fascinated by the concept of rooftop gardens, a particular like of mine. We talk as Oliver takes pictures of guards and buildings. We drive around the whole building site, making sure we have photos from each phase. We pull over when Oliver asks us to—it's his "eye" directing us today, and out of the flatbed truck





jump three guys. They're assigned to protect Oliver and me but I encourage them to take point over Oliver. They move around him in a triangle, each one scanning 180 degrees in an arc that ensures he's always covered. He moves, they move…surreal.

Hewadwal build roads too and works in other provinces also. We talk of their projects, marketing, communications, Requests for Proposals and Requests for Quotes and such as Oliver takes pics. One of the last sites we visit is the fuel storage depot near the airport. HUGE above-ground tanks, several stories high, rust red. They're just going up on the side of a mountain. I wonder what's on the other side? Fuel tanks are a major target but I'm assured it's okay, the Department of Defence is on the others side. That's good, right? From the mountain you can see down into the valley and, so the theory goes, anyone coming at you aiming to blow up the tanks. Good theory. Glad I'm not there to see it tested because the road up here is lined with chemical and other hazardous-type companies. Seems to me you blow up the first one good and proper, and the resulting chain reaction takes out the mountain side. Hmmm…does anyone else out here think these thoughts?

The sun's beginning to go down and we head back into town. Hewadwal wants us to put together a proposal to visit all twenty of their sites and properly photograph each one. Sounds good to us.



Next time Oliver is here he really should play soccer. He's a goalie and out here there are soccer players everywhere. There's no grass or greenery, just goal posts hammered into dusty mud. But there are players nonetheless. One large "field" we pass has at least four, maybe six, games going on it. I'm sure we could have pulled over and gotten someone to let Oliver sub for a few. Next time.

We had another "Now what?" moment with Omar earlier in the week while getting a Bluetooth dongle for my computer downtown from an Afghan service provider. We're in the offices, waiting while Omar explains what we need. He disappears with the clerk (another friend) for a bit and we're left there, waiting again—and wondering. Omar's believes that if we go to places foreign people don't normally go, we should be just fine. He also asserts that since we only recently got here, no one knows us yet or what we're about so we're not likely to be targets. Relax. Well, Johannes, our UN friend, told us of two French volunteers who got kidnapped right from the airport—someone knew they were coming! Omar also thinks that only important or rich people get kidnapped, but the UN types tell us stories of people being kidnapped for as little as $1,500 US ransom. So now the kidnappers are using foreigners as an income source and not necessarily for political pressure. The Indians tell me it's okay for me to travel to the North but Omar's mum is too scared to let him go. And Johannes drives down from Dushanbe to



Kabul in a UN convoy yet some people tell me if we tried it we'd be a target with the Blond Hair Lad with us. I mean, who do you believe? What do you believe?

The guys drop me at Fawad's office; Fawad's the travel agent, but he's also a major ISP hardware provider out here and I want to talk to him about some infrastructure bidding I'd like to do as part of a communications plan. We need to go to his other office for that information, so we walk out the door, down the street, cross the road to his other place. Sounds normal. Well, it is and it isn't. It's Kabul. There are people milling about in robes and kurtas, no lights, dark shadows, car horns, yelling—and it's fine. The whole trip turns out to be fine; nothing happens to us, but listening to everyone and their stories you can really work yourself up into a frenzy.

We head out again to the guest house to break bread with Omar and Ahmed. Ahmed has brought his sheesha with him. It's safely secured in the trunk with bungee cords, because it's a big one, like mine, standing three feet tall with all the bits and bobs attached to it. The guest house staff love it. They're running around getting us plates and chillies and tea and coals, we've got BBQ chicken and kebabs and bread and chilli sauce.

Omar's wife calls on the cell: where is he? Ahem, in a meeting with the guys…home soon, yeah, dinner sounds great. We all look at him. Ahmed starts laughing and so do Oliver and I. Lying already? He splutters and tries to deflect our comments with his own commentary on us and some of our behaviour at a bar the night before. We all end up laughing—it is a great night. Omar's only going to eat half a chicken as he has to have dinner when he gets home! Ahmed pats his tummy and says something in Dari. We laugh too. Sated and sheesha'd, the boys head out, with Ahmed promising to get Omar home fast…I bet! As they're packing up stuff to head out Ahmed lets slip that after he dropped us off from Omar's wedding, he went back and sneaked into the co-ed wedding in the other hall so he could dance with the girls. And here I thought he was gay. He's not gay, he's just randy!

Why? Why is the flight at 8 a.m? Seriously. Up early, packed and double-check all the luggage, pockets, zips, etc. Sim cards exchanged, GPS, phones; hard drives and movies copied and copies of pics. It's a frenzy of

admin in the morning but we're well organized. We're on our way to the airport and it's still dark outside.

The town is weirdly normal. Yeah, the guards are still everywhere but so are people on their way to work, opening shops, sweeping the dust from their front sidewalks, having coffee at the side of the road. We're at the airport fast, and the guys bid us a teary goodbye. It's been a zany few days and we're all going to miss each other.



Through the security check and X-ray and then another table and a full bag search, unless you pay a bribe. I have no desire to have all my stuff removed and then have to repack so I slip the guy a fiver, USD. Then the next guy wants a bribe for the pat down; and so does the guy who wants to put plastic straps on my luggage; and the guy who tells me what line to line up in as there are no signs; and the guy who puts my bags onto the weigh scale, but not the guy behind the counter! The old man waving us to passport control also has his hand out. In total I spend $25 US on bribes trying to get to the departure lounge. Oliver, who has fewer small bills on him than I, simply refuses and they give up. I tried to refuse but was hounded so I gave in. Easier. I know I know, we shouldn't pay and we're fostering the corruption, etc., but bug off, it was 6:30 in the fracking morning! I just wanted done and at our seats which, by 7 a.m. we were in.

If you've seen photographs of the American Midwest during the Depression, when that most fertile of lands became a dust bowl, blowing away farm houses and dreams, then you've seen Afghanistan. After years of drought, soil erosion has beaten away at the country's once-lush fields and gardens. Deforestation from



years of war and an ongoing lack of rainfall have left a desolate moonscape in places that once were lush and alive. With a water system that depends heavily on mountain run-off, the Afghans can only hope that each winter will bring heavy snow. Which of course kills many but ensures water the following spring.

Whenever and wherever conflicts occur, the most able are always the first to leave. If you have money you get out; if you have an education you get out; if you have a religious affiliation you declare you are a refugee and you get out. Once everyone is gone and decades have passed and skills and talents are lost to a whole generation or two, it then becomes hard to attract educated people back. New lives have been started elsewhere and the children no longer know of the homeland in any context other than old stories. Despite this, however, many Afghans have uprooted their families once again to return home and rebuild. I think it takes a certain kind of person, like the old pioneers of North America, to pick up and start again. These people are the ones running the start-up businesses responsible for doing the practical ground work of rebuilding the country.

Everything, absolutely everything—from roads to schools to parks—must be built again. It's hard to attract money for some of these projects, because something as simple and important as a road is hardly a flashy thing for governments and organizations to pour money into. Many of the roads and often buildings too sit literally half-finished, awaiting money to complete the opposite side of the street or the top of the building.

And through all this you can see that the spirit of the people endures, is not gone… it is diminished, tarnished, battered, bruised and in many cases beaten into a pulp, but it's still there. Through the drought, life goes on. Through the violence, life goes on…and the Afghans seem to just get on with it.

When you think about it, what other choice do they have?

Salman A. Nensi
Kabul, Afghanistan

