

This Is Afghanistan

by J. Malcolm Garcia

My colleague, Zabiullah Fazly, picks me up at Kabul International Airport and drives me to the Park Palace, a guest house, near downtown. Stuck in traffic, I adjust the calendar on my watch to accommodate the nine-and-a-half-hour time difference between my Chicago home and here: August 28, 2015. Smoke from kabob grills cloud the sidewalk and young people group together to take selfies as elderly man trudge past them hauling carts of wood. It's hard to believe the country has been at war for decades. I have worked as a reporter in Afghanistan since 2001. On this trip, an editor with *Latterly Magazine* has asked me to write about the rise in violence that has resulted in at least 5,000 civilian casualties. The government, riven by corruption and political rivalries, appears unable to confront it.

I first hired Zabiullah as my translator in 2010. He has a lean face and dark, black hair. He talks in a low voice and likes to wear jeans and polo shirts, and he carries two cell phones he uses to text constantly. He fills each moment of his day with activity, aware his life could be cut short in an instant. At thirty-three, Zabiullah has lived two years longer than his father, who died in 1995, killed by a stray bullet during Afghanistan's civil war. Zabiullah himself almost died from shrapnel that pierced his neck.

When we first started working together, Zabiullah and I drove through Kabul without concern but after I completed a reporting assignment in 2014, the situation changed dramatically. NATO decided to drawdown most of its forces and the Taliban began taking control of wide swaths of the country. Since then, militants have been inflicting severe casualties on Afghan forces, more evidence of the country's struggle to blunt a resilient insurgency despite nearly twenty years of U.S. military engagement. As a consequence, thousands of Afghans have sought sanctuary in Europe. About the same time, Zabiullah started receiving threatening phone calls.

--Why do you work with foreigners? the callers wanted to know. Join the jihad.

Zabiullah asked them if the jihad would pay as well as a foreigner. You will die for your smart mouth, the callers said. Zabiullah hung up. He told his wife, Sweetra, that should anyone ask where she works, she should tell them she was a nurse or a teacher. The truth, that she translated documents for western officials in the Ministry of Interior, would only create problems. A woman assisting westerners. No. Tell them you do women's work.

After I check into my room, Zabiullah and I eat lunch at a nearby kabob stall. A young woman crosses in front of us in flesh-colored pants that at first glance give the impression she has nothing on.

--What the hell! Zabiullah shouts.

The woman looks at us. She wears lipstick and makeup. She smiles and continues walking.

--Amazing, Zabiullah says. Is this how they dress in the United States?

When the Soviet Union controlled Afghanistan in the 1980s, Zabiullah tells me, women wore miniskirts and loose blouses that exposed their breasts when they leaned forward. He recalls fairs with stalls and clowns and singers and women with their children, everyone wearing Western clothes, especially blue jeans. When he was in the fourth grade, he attended a community center for boys and girls. The gray slab of a building had been built by the Soviets and despite its dour design it bustled with activities. Soviet-trained teachers taught painting and music and coached sports. In those days, Zabiullah didn't see anyone carrying a gun. Even the police didn't have guns. Their uniform alone had value.

An intangible something started to dissolve in Afghanistan after the Soviets left. One day there were Russian uniforms, the next day civil war, and the day after that the black turbans of the Taliban. Then American bombs rocked Kabul. Zabiullah's family put blankets in front of their windows to protect the glass from flying debris. Barbers opened their shops and men lined up to have their beards shaved to celebrate the defeat of the Taliban. Boys collected bullet casings littering the ground and people cheered in the streets.

Zabiullah never suspected that the U.S. would leave Afghanistan. Now, he thinks he should have known but at the time he had seen so much war that he wanted to be happy for a moment and not think of the future. When he considers the decades of fighting, Zabiullah concludes that Afghanistan was better off under the Taliban than at any other time. It had security. No freedom but it was safe. You could leave your car without locking it and no one would dare touch it because they knew they'd be punished.

Zabiullah thought the U.S. would leave something behind when it began removing troops. Russia left good roads. Zabiullah still uses a drinking glass made by a Russian shopkeeper. The Taliban left moral discipline. What has America left? The roads are shit now. There is no security. People don't have work.

--Do you know what today's date is? he asks me.

--No.

--The eleventh. September 11th.

--I've got jet lag.

--No one in Afghanistan remembers, either. It no longer matters. Nothing here does.

After lunch, we stop by the barbershop of Uresh Jawid, a mutual friend. Magazine photos of posturing young men with stern looks and dark hair pompadoured in the latest fashions —quiff, ducktail, mohawk—fill the walls. Uresh does not resemble any of these models. His mop of unruly hair hangs over his forehead uncombed. A patchy beard leapfrogs down both sides of his face, meeting at his chin in a scraggly goatee.

I've known Uresh since 2003. He was twelve then and polished shoes outside my hotel. His pants and sandals were stained and torn but the shirts, somehow, were always immaculate and I nicknamed him, Mr. Gigolo. He hung out with three other boys his age. I gave Uresh and his friends candy. One morning, Uresh said he'd had nothing to eat and candy would only upset his stomach. I took him and his friends to lunch. Every day after that we all ate lunch together. Then I enrolled them in school. Each

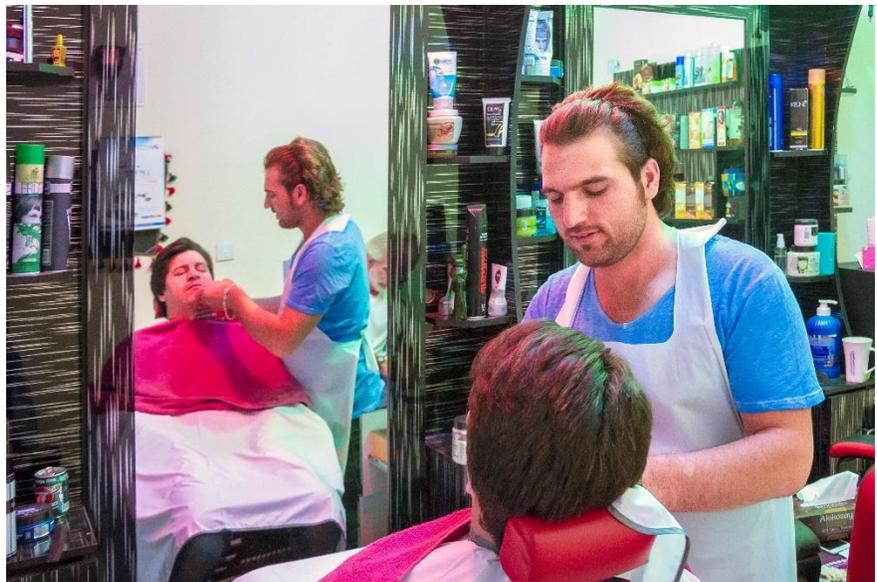
evening, I reviewed their lessons in the dingy back room of a pharmacy owned by the brother of my translator at the time.

Now, at twenty-five, a worn smile creases Uresh's face, the smile of a young man proud of his achievements but tired from his own hard-won accomplishments and the hopelessness of his country. When he takes a bus home, he asks himself, Will someone shoot me, stab me, blow me up? Will I die? People guess his age to be much older than twenty-five. I'm not even thirty, he tells them but they don't believe him. His mother tells him each wrinkle in his face shows a year of his life.

--If that is true, he responds, then I must be ninety.

He reaches for a can of Red Bull, downs it in several gulps, tosses it in the trash and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He held any number of jobs in mobile phone companies, restaurants, tea and jewelry shops before he became a barber. Then his family moved to Parwan Province outside of Kabul where there was no work. He wondered, What should I do? and decided to return to the city where he apprenticed for a friend of the family, a barber. He slept in the barber's shop beneath a table after the shop closed. He named the cockroaches that scuttled by his face. He spent all of his

days and nights there. He watched YouTube videos to learn about modern haircuts the barber refused to teach him because he was a conservative man and disapproved of western fashion. He provided Uresh with a small allowance with which he bought food for his family.



Uresh Jawid

--That was my life. Now I'm twenty-five and I have this shop. but I don't define my life by what I have. I'm not happy.

He looks at me for a long moment before he asks if he can trim my beard.

--You look like the Taliban, he scolds.

He gestures toward a chair. I sit down and he wraps a white cloth around my neck and drapes a black sheet over my chest. Taking an electric razor, he adjusts the blade before he lifts my chin. I close my eyes and listen to the hum of the razor and Uresh.

After he completed his apprenticeship, he and another student started their own hair style business. Four years later, they sold the shop and Uresh opened this one after a customer offered him the space. He has been here a year and earns from ten dollars to one hundred dollars a day. His mother gets angry with him for not wearing a salwar kameez to work. He tells her he can't. He must look modern for his customers.

His father, he thinks, would be proud of him. He had been a lieutenant in the mujahadeen and died in the civil wars of the 1990s. Men who served under him are now commanders in the Afghan National Army and in Uresh's opinion have grabbed everything of value for themselves. They drive armored cars, live in gated communities. They are happy. They can leave Afghanistan when they want. None of them came to Uresh's house when his father died. None of them offered to help his family. It was left to him to take on the responsibilities of his father.

He shuts off the razor. Looking in the mirror, I see that my once bushy beard has been cut close to the skin. Uresh smiles his weary smile.

--Close your eyes, he tells me.

He flicks a brush over my face, removing stray hair. He wants to live outside of Afghanistan in a country where he'll feel safe, some place he could call a new homeland. He remains in Kabul, however, because of his mother. If she let him go, he would leave this minute. But he can't leave without her permission. He has tried to persuade her to find him a wife outside of Afghanistan. He would marry that girl and become a citizen of her country. Sweden, Germany, somewhere. He would live there legally and send for his mother. But she refuses and he can't go because she depends on him. If he knew someone to look after her, he would take a bus and go to Iran as others have done and from there travel to Turkey and then Europe. Risky, yes, but it would be a chance at a better life. However, Uresh's mother wants him to stay and meet

a good Afghan girl. He has not told her he has a girlfriend. If he did, she would want them to get married. Then they'd have children and it would be that much harder for him to escape to Europe.

--You can get up now, Uresh tells me.

I offer to pay but he refuses. Instead, he hugs me and tells me how good it is to see me. I'm happy to see him, too, flattered by his attention but depressed by his sense of hopelessness. My feelings are like an intense, magnified experience of teaching—running into a student I'd mentored at one time, who is doing well, but whose future somehow falls short of what I might have hoped. What difference can any of us make especially when you walk away?

Hours later, after he closes for the night, Uresh catches a bus home. It carries him past the home of Mohammad Qasim Karbalaye, a mender of broken bones. When he was a young man, Mohammad worked as a laborer. Short but powerful, he could do in one hour what it took other men a week to complete. He had never thought of helping people with physical ailments until he assisted a wrestler from Uzbekistan with a dislocated shoulder. He punched it back in place and the Uzbek told him he should go into business and doctor others as he had him. Mohammad opened a shop and the Uzbek would sit with him and people assumed that like the Uzbek he, too, was a wrestler, and they started calling him the Wrestler. Other than his wife and son, Mohammad does not know any other living person who knows his true name. He has been doing this kind of work for almost fifty years and has been called the Wrestler for so long he sometimes doesn't answer his wife when she calls him Mohammad.

On this evening, a woman walks in carrying a boy just twenty days old. His right elbow juts out at an odd angle. Mohammad rubs the arm with car grease. He tells the mother to leave the grease on the child's arm for three days to lubricate the joint. Then come back, he says, and he'll fix it.

The woman departs and an elderly man leaning on a cane enters. A thick bandage swaddles his left hand. Mohammad examines it.

--Leave the bandage on for another week, he says.

The man leaves, his cane making small dents in the dirt floor. Outside, moonlight sweeps the street with a white, shivering glow and Mohammad sips tea and stares through the light at nothing. He has seen with his own eyes how much worse Afghanistan has become. Day by day nothing goes right. In Jalalabad, the wife of a man with five daughters gave birth to a son. The man fired his gun into the air with happiness. A Taliban commander said, Why are you shooting your gun? My wife finally had a son, the man explained. The commander took the two-day-old baby and crushed his head with the butt of his Kalashnikov. Then he shot the father. The father's cousin told Mohammad about this when he came in to see him for back pain. Some people didn't believe him but Mohammad did. He knows these things happen. He doesn't need evidence. Living in Afghanistan is evidence enough. After September 11th, everything was fine and then it wasn't. Nothing is sustainable. That is why everyone skips the country. He thinks of leaving, too, but how can he? Where will he go? Who will pay his expenses? He worries about these things. He'll go if someone pays his way.

Mohammad sits back and rubs his face. Another patient arrives. This time, a young woman and her husband. The woman lifts her swollen right foot. Mohammad examines it with the tips of his fingers. He advises her to put grease on it for three days. Her ankle had become solid, he explains. Grease will loosen it.



He watches the couple walk out. If he had money, obviously he would leave Afghanistan, why not? If his patients had money, they would see a doctor and not him. For some people, there are no alternatives.

*

Mohammad Qasim Karbalaye, The Wrestler

Mohammad's shop recedes in the distance as the bus carrying Uresh continues its journey, the passengers thinning with each stop until Uresh gets off and only a few remain, among them Abdul Malik Bakhytar. He lives in Logar Province a good two-hour drive outside of Kabul. When the bus stops near his house well past the hour for dinner, he gets out and pauses, listening for gunshots and the screams that often follow. On this night, hearing nothing, he hurries home passing through the shadows cast by white, stucco houses and diminished trees. During the day, he fulfills his duties as the director of publications for the Ministry of Women's Affairs. He recognizes the irony of his position. The newsletters of the Ministry of Women's Affairs administered by a man. Men hold all the key positions in the ministry and the Taliban target them for supporting women's rights. That is Afghanistan. In the end, what does it matter? Men and women are leaving the country and would still be leaving even if a woman ran the ministry. Why would any woman or man stay? Abdul is grateful just to have an income.

In Logar, a province with a strong Taliban influence, Abdul doesn't dare say where he works. Life here is fine except at night, when the province belongs to the Taliban. Abdul often wakes up in the middle of the night and hears shouting and fighting and terrified voices begging for mercy. Leave me alone, don't kill me! He stays in his bed, does not move. No one comes to the rescue. Everyone stays inside, prepared to defend themselves. His neighbors all have guns. No one relies on NATO or the government. At night, each family lives in fear. At night, each family is on its own.

Two weeks ago, Abdul saw a policeman return home from work. Eight o'clock at night, not that dark. The policeman lived on a street close to a stream. He used the water to grow a beautiful garden, dark green with bright flowers. Some men approached him, shot him in the head and ransacked the garden. Abdul saw the whole thing from his living room window. He doesn't know how he feels about it. Numb. Not surprised. Grateful it wasn't him. Guilty for these thoughts. He's thought about it a lot.

In Abdul's neighborhood, everyone is related, but outside of it he knows no one and talks to no one. On his days off, Thursdays and Fridays, he stays home. He attended a wedding the other day but he didn't participate in the reception. He does not wear Western suits but dresses traditionally in a salwar kameez. He changes into a suit at work.

A driver takes his two daughters and two sons to school. He calls home four or five times a day to check in with his wife. If he had the money, he'd fly his family out of the country. Many others in the government have sent their wives and children abroad. His friends and in-laws tell him his daughters should not attend school. If they get raped or killed, it will bring shame on all of us, they warn him. People will wonder what they did to deserve their fate. It is my right to educate my daughters, he retorts emphatically.

When he reads stories about boys and girls drowning on their way to Europe from Turkey, he sees the faces of his children and gets emotional. One newspaper photo showed a dead boy on a beach. He resembled his youngest son. Abdul felt ill. He quit reading and shut off the light and tried to sleep, hoping a scream in the night would not awaken him.

The next morning, Uresh catches a bus back into Kabul and calls Zabiullah. A friend telephoned Uresh last night to say he was leaving Kabul for Germany with his pregnant wife in a few days. Uresh thought I'd want to speak to him. He gives us his name, Shekib Younissi, and cell number. Zabiullah calls him and Shekib invites us to his home. We follow Shekib's directions to a narrow alley near the Park Palace. The alley takes us to a road of stone and rubble. We follow uphill and soon have an expansive view of Kabul, and the bare, brown mountains in the distance, and the grainy haze hovering above everything. The road turns and we dip downhill and stop outside a two-story white house on a dead-end street.

Twenty-six-year-old Shekib meets us at the door. He wears a bright blue silk shirt I associate with the disco era, and his skintight jeans show creases where he, or more likely, his wife ironed them. We follow him inside to a room where his wife, mother, and father sit on the floor. The sun shines through a window illuminating the bare walls. I sit down and Shekib's father offers me a plate of nuts and raisins.

For two years, Shekib saved and borrowed money and eventually put aside \$4,000. An uncle in Germany who had left Afghanistan during the Taliban years helped with additional funds. However, Shekib still did not have enough money for them all to leave. After a lengthy discussion, the family decided that his father, wife and cousin would go to Iran and hire a smuggler for the long trek to Turkey and beyond into

Europe; Shekib and his mother would stay behind. They hope to leave next year if Shekib raises the money. A quiet despair fills the room, the mute sadness mixed with a stoic resolve not to show it.

Shekib first thought of leaving when his wife became pregnant. Many reasons led to this decision, the welfare of his child and the lack of security being number one. Shekib doesn't know when or where a bomb might go off, when or where a man with a gun might begin shooting.



Shekib and Yazdi Younissi

Every day Shekib meets with friends and ask, How are you? Is everyone in your family still alive? Being alive in Afghanistan is a big thing. When insurgents attach magnet bombs to cars, being alive can't be taken for granted.

Shekib's wife, Yazdi, does not want to travel without him. The day when she agreed to leave Kabul, she wept from morning to night. Shekib looked so sad as he explained that it was better for him to stay behind and pay back the loans and then start saving again so he and his mother could leave. He works for Kam Air, an airline headquartered in Kabul. He can save and reimburse people a little bit at a time. Yazdi told him, I know it will be hard but I tell myself I can do it.

--Don't cry, Shekib tells her now. Afghans are very courageous. We don't cry.

--It will be the first time I'll be apart from my family, she says. I am seven months pregnant and I will be without my husband.

Shekib's father, Shaiq Hamid, stares out a window, eyes brimming with tears. He worries and nervously runs his hands through his thinning, gray hair. He has friends stuck in Iran. They have children and children don't run as fast as adults and they may need to run from police, border guards and God knows who else. Like children, a

pregnant woman can't run fast, either. The smuggler will pay the police to look the other way but they have only so much money and there are many police. They can't pay them all.

Shekib's mother, Sham Sad, also struggles to hold back tears. She wears a black, body-length veil and only exposes her face to her family. Wiping her eyes, she stares at the floor to conceal her sorrow. She knows the trip will be long and difficult for Yazdi. That is the way for Afghan women. They must suffer. Carrying a baby and clothes and food. God will be testing her. She should buy sneakers. Better to walk in.

Sham remembers baking bread when rockets fell around their house during the civil war years. She had to run and seek shelter with her children only to return later to finish baking bread; otherwise, they'd have no food. As her grandchild grows, he or she will take care of her one day. That is what women hope for, the love of their children and their grandchildren.

--I have to get you a mobile phone to call me, Shekib tells Yazdi.

--You have to give me some of your clothes to pack.

--I'll need them here.

--No, I'll keep them so that I know one day you will come to me.

Before I return to the States, I meet Uresh one last time at the Herat Restaurant, where I used to take him for lunch every day in 2003. The Herat has changed dramatically since then. The once roughhewn interior with its concrete floor and warped wood tables has been completely remodeled. It now has white, tile floors, glossy glass tables, and bright, glaring lights. Its prices have nearly quadrupled.

--You see improvements like this and you think we're becoming a modern country, Uresh says noticing my open-mouth surprise. Then a bomb explodes. Nothing is certain in Afghanistan.

We take a table and order a plate of beef kabob and two Cokes. As we wait for the food, Uresh shows me photographs of his girlfriend on his cell phone. She has a wide, open face and a generous smile. An orange headscarf covers her hair. Uresh tells me she wants to leave Afghanistan.

--Let's go, she says, and then we'll marry in Europe, but he demurs. Her family, he believes, would kill him.

--Why? I ask.

Before he answers, Uresh takes back the phone and deletes her pictures. If he was to lose it and her family found it with her photos, they'd shoot him, he says.

--They believe she should marry within the family, Uresh says. That is the Afghan way. They don't want their daughter with a poor boy.

--That makes no sense, I tell him.

He puts the phone down, and faces me. The exasperated look on his face suggests I'm the one who doesn't make sense.

--This is Afghanistan, he says, as if that alone explains everything.

J. Malcolm Garcia is a freelance writer. His most recent book, *Riding Through Katrina With the Red Baron's Ghost* (Skyhorse), was published in August 2018.

All photographs by **Zabiullah Fazly**.