

Just Another Fucking Day in Afghanistan

by J. Malcolm Garcia

I'm sitting next to this guy on a flight from Kabul to Dubai when he says he likes my pants, all the pockets.

--LL Bean brand?

--No, Columbia.

--You are?

--A journalist.

I'm on my way home from an embed with the Army's 82nd Airborne Division in Kandahar. Three months earlier, I had flown into Kabul from Dubai and my Afghan colleague, Aziz, met me at the airport. We stopped at a restaurant before Aziz would drop me off at the American military base in Bagram Village. From there I'd catch an Army transport plane to Kandahar.

In the restaurant, customers watched Aziz and I sit on a rug and order Kabuli pulao. Just a month before my arrival, leaflets distributed around the neighborhood where Aziz lived urged people to kill the Western invaders. He showed me one, a dirt-smearred piece of paper filled with words I didn't understand. Many of us would die, Aziz said, reading from it, but we would at least get some of them. Outside the open restaurant door, I watched men hose down the street to settle dust. Water splashed against a dove of peace painted across a blast wall. Aziz folded the leaflet and put it in his pocket. Everyone continued to watch us. I did not feel threatened so much as I felt their resentment as if I was not allowing them even this small amount of time alone from the presence of foreigners. We waited a long while to be served.

On our way to Bagram, Aziz told me he had canceled the engagement of his oldest daughter to a young man who planned to move to Holland where his father owned a jewelry store. She agreed to leave but Aziz told her it was not her decision to make; he would not tolerate one of his children resettling in a non-Islamic country. He

had arranged the marriage and he would end it and find her another husband, and I realized that Aziz, like the men in the restaurant, saw the West as a threat, too, an intrusive entity that would take his daughter and turn her into someone else, someone in violation of his beliefs, and at a certain level I and others like me made tangible that something, made us the faces of the threat by virtue of who we were. I liked Aziz and trusted him to arrange interviews and provide translations, and I believed he liked me, but this was not about how we felt toward each other. This went deeper, beyond our working relationship and beyond my understanding. I knew he would not want me harmed but I also accepted that we were not friends.

When I arrived in Kandahar that evening, public relations officer Corporal Keith Klue met me at the tarmac. I was his charge. In the coming days, I learned that no matter how I greeted him, Good morning, or, How're you doing, no matter the day or the time, he'd always respond, It's just another fucking day in Afghanistan. The other thing I picked up on was that Klue and all the other soldiers I met said fuck about every other word until its constant use achieved a kind of absurd, repetitious, syncopated beat that soon became part of my vocabulary, too.

A cop from Florida, Klue believed in the war, was very gung-ho. He had drunk the Kool-Aid and spoke in the cliched syntax of a bumper sticker. His favorite expression: power comes through a gun. That's what made America the biggest kid on the block in Afghanistan. He joined the Army reserves out of old-fashioned values. Honor and service. He believed in the U.S. and what it stood for. There's a fear factor, he admitted, when he went out on an operation because he never knew what would happen. So far nothing had. From Klue's perspective, that sucked. Like blue balls. All hyped up and nothing happens. What good was he if he wasn't killing the enemy? He explained, The Army had intel but nothing's perfect. The fucking hajis keep getting away. Every time he was deployed, as he got closer to the start of an operation, he felt less and less for his wife and family and more for his fellow soldiers, all of them bound together by their desire to use their weapons and kill the enemy.

--And what were you doing in Kandahar? the guy beside me on the plane admiring the number of pockets in my pants asks.

--Writing about American soldiers.

--Ah, yes, American soldiers.

He's Afghan, the man tells me. He was born in Kabul but moved to the States as a kid. Lives on Long Island, married to a woman from Uzbekistan. Both of them speak about nine languages. They have two children. Everything was fine until the 2007 recession hit and he was forced to shut down the convenience store he operated. A short time later, he signed with the U.S. Army as a translator and now earns about two hundred thousand dollars a year. Gets three weeks off every six months and returns to Long Island to see his wife and children. Now he's leaving Afghanistan after another six-month stint.

--Where will you stay in Dubai? he asks

--Majestic Hotel.

He suggests I try another hotel where Russian women will sit on your lap in the bar until you arrange something more intimate. Book a room first. It's cheaper than asking for a room without a reservation.

He considers me for a moment and then asks if I used protective military gear.

--No, I tell him.

He shakes his head, says he wears a Kevlar vest when he's on the Army base near Pul-e-Charkhi, not far from Kabul, where young Afghan men train to be soldiers. American soldiers and their Afghan translators get very nervous when the trainees load their weapons. Snipers peer down ready to take out anyone who has a sudden urge for jihad. When he leaves the base, the translator never tells the trainees where he's going.

My handler, Klue, was also surprised I didn't carry a weapon. Can't as a journalist, I explained. Not part of my job description. Fuck that, he told me. One morning, he and I hooked up with an LT in charge of a medical mission. His instructions to his squad were brief: They were to escort the medics to some village he couldn't pronounce. Stay fifty meters apart so the fucking enemy can't take out a bunch of us at once; in case of an ambush, lay down repressive fire and start a fucking flanking maneuver; if we hit a fucking mine, an armored security vehicle would push the damaged vehicle the fuck out. If they experienced fucking sniper fire and they didn't know where it came from, they were to get out of the goddamn line of fire without

lighting up the fucking countryside; and finally, if there was fucking enemy contact in the village, the medics would be removed first and then the rest of them would pull the fuck out.

--Return fire and aim fucking well, the LT added before he walked off to consult with his CO. We shot the shit and waited.

--Hurry up and wait. The Army way.

--Where's the fucking caterer? Klue asked.

--I don't know, a private said. I told them I wanted a fucking king-size bed, not a queen. And an Asian chick, not some round-eyed bitch.

--I just want to go to a fucking Outback and get me a raw, raw steak and those mashed potatoes with skin, another private said.

--I just want to kill, another private said.

--I want a fucking ice-cold Slurpee from 7-Eleven, Klue said.

--You figure there's a fucking method to this madness?

--I don't think there fucking is one.

--Hide and go fucking seek?

--Yep.

An hour later, the LT reappeared. Move out, he said. We piled into Humvees and put on goggles to protect our eyes from dust storms. The flat barrenness of the sand-covered land pocked by thorny scrub consumed time and dimension and I had no idea how long we'd been driving before I saw the mud huts of the unpronounceable village and panicked women covering their faces and fleeing our arrival, and barefoot children chasing after them. Sullen men waited as the LT approached and he explained through an interpreter the purpose of our visit. The mens' expressions did not change. They offered green tea the medics declined but the men insisted on giving it to them and a boy brought a tray with glass cups and tea and a thermos of hot water and a sugar bowl. The medics thanked them and ignored the boy as he poured the tea and the villagers watched the medics unfold a long, collapsible table and then they formed a line, the expression on the faces unchanged, and they accepted what help the medics offered, eye drops, Band-Aids and tablets of Advil mostly, without hope of anything more.

American soldiers no older than twenty-five took up positions, their weapons pointed at the line of men waiting to be seen and they assumed the hard pose of what they thought men ready to kill would look like until the line dwindled to the last patient and the medics packed up while the male villagers stood staring at us, and their wives, mothers and daughters peered through windows and doors.

--Ya think any of these guys are fucking bad guys?

--Farmer by day, Taliban at night, dude.

--That means I can fucking kill them?

Laughter.

--I had trouble getting the fuck up this morning.

--I fucking worked out.

--I just didn't want to get the fuck up.

--How late were you playing fucking cards?

--Not that fucking late.

--Where the fuck're we going next?

--Other side of the fucking wadi.

--To do fucking what?

--Find fucking bad guys.

--There's no fucking end. We could spend another fucking month down here, easy, and not find anybody.

--They won't be bad when we find them. Everyone's a fucking farmer when we find them. They don't know fucking nothing. Then you look under a fucking wood pile and find fucking weapons.

--I thought this was just a fucking medical mission.

--Fucking other duties as assigned, man.

A thirty-year-old private, Michael Quinones, told me he'd be glad to return to base without incident. Boring was good. Quinones had a wife and two young children. He knew some of the guys wanted shit to go down. They weren't into this hearts-and-minds-medical mission bullshit but he wasn't in any hurry to get fucking shot. Go into villages, looking for ammo, open doors, hope nobody's fucking armed. That fucking shit wore him down. He wasn't sure what he was doing in Afghanistan. Weren't we

supposed to be catching Osama bin Laden? he said. Whatever. Quinones would do what he was fucking ordered.

The next morning at 0700, Klue and I sat beside Specialist Scott Eberlein in a Chinook bound for Helmand Province to flush out Taliban fighters.

--All that sound, Klue shouted at me above the noise of Chinook's rotating blades, tells the Taliban we're coming to fucking kill them!

Eberlein's face notably paled at Klue's warrior pose. He told me he had been an actor and had bit parts in the television shows "X-Files," "Nash Bridges" and "Martial Law." He joined the Army the day after 9/11. His acting friends thought he was fucking crazy.

He was scared, he admitted, but when the Chinook landed, he'd focus on his memories of the Twin Towers falling. He then shook my hand and wished us both luck and then he said goodbye in case he didn't make it. For the first time, I thought I might die, too. I didn't feel fear so much as loneliness surrounded by young men with guns, strangers, without my family or anyone I knew. I couldn't fathom getting shot, however, it didn't feel real although of course I knew it could happen. My inability to comprehend getting shot or blown up or whatever else might kill me eased my fear but the loneliness lingered.

The Chinook landed and we all ran down a ramp and dove on the ground. Nothing happened. We had no contact with the enemy. Not a shot fired. Helmand was a bust.

--They climb mountains like fucking goats and we can't fucking catch them, Klue bitched. Fucking Chinooks, they heard us a mile away.

That night back in Kandahar, Eberlein talked about X-Files. He played a hit man who kidnapped a psychic. The psychic led him to an alien and the alien threw him against a wall and killed him. All of the guys thought it was pretty cool he'd been on TV although they'd rather have talked about all the bad guys they'd shot to hell in Helmand but that didn't happen, and they were still all hyped up. Just hours earlier they thought they'd take enemy fire, they thought they might die in the vague sort of way that something like that can be imagined but vivid enough that their hearts raced and the palms of their hands got clammy but still death, the permanent darkness of endless

sleep, was impossible to comprehend. Restless, they made their way to “the wack room,” a latrine stuffed with Playboy magazines, and jerked off. After they took care of business, the soldiers came back and asked Eberlein what it was like to be on Nash Bridges.

I glance out the plane window at the mountains spread out below us and imagine trying to find anyone in the nooks and crannies of those bare peaks. Small square patches of land mark where farmers till soil in narrow valleys at the base of the mountains. The translator looks out the window, too.

--Did you meet Afghan soldiers? he asks me.

--No.

--They don't like discipline. They don't remember what they've been taught and quit at a moment's notice. The Army will spend a year and a half training one guy and then he goes home for a month and by the time he returns to base he has forgotten everything.

He blames this on their lack of education.

--Most Afghans can't read or write their own language. They are only doing it for the money.

--Unlike you.

The translator smiles.

--You are very clever.

The plane carries us over a military base in the foothills of some of the mountains. The translator points at a group of square brown buildings.

--There, that's where I was, he says.

He hiked around the mountains for five hours just the day before. Afterward, he caught a ride into Kabul and stayed at the Inter-Continental Hotel. Great barbecue. He recommends I try it the next time I come out.

--You'll think you're back home.

--I doubt that, I say.

--Will you be back?

--I don't know.

--It's not close to being over, you know. The Taliban have belief. You can't beat belief.

--I didn't see any Taliban.

--You don't see belief, my friend, the translator said.

My days in Kandahar revealed nothing but flat deserts and poor families eking a subsistence living off the parched land. They seemed oblivious of the war, oblivious of what we considered to be their impoverished state as they had lived simply like this for generations, undisturbed it seemed despite the Soviet invasion, the civil war that followed the Russian retreat, the rise of the Taliban, 9/11 and the American-led invasion, but Klue would have none of it. He shook a finger in my face and warned me of the deceitful nature of Afghans. We could be here ten fucking years and never find all the fucking weapon caches. He didn't know what he'd fucking say back home if someone asked, What was it like? He hadn't used his weapon, just handed out food and medicine to the enemy, that's what it was like. That would always be between them, what he hadn't done and what they'd assumed he'd done. He wished he could tell them something profound. What was it like? He'd repeat the question and then answer, Just another day in Afghanistan.

The translator and I don't speak again for the rest of the hour-and-a half flight. When we land at Dubai, I get out of my seat and step back in the aisle to give him room to stand. He hefts a large backpack out of the luggage hold above our heads. We shake hands and I follow him off the plane and search for a place to buy coffee. I have a twelve-hour wait before my flight to D.C. At home, I assume that with jet lag I won't sleep. I'll lie awake and think of an empty, morose expanse, its weighty silence and unsettling monotony. I'll wonder if Aziz found another husband for his daughter. Fucking Afghanistan, I hear Klue curse.

After a few days, I'll be OK.



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