

JORDAN HAYES

The Colonel's Bicycle

A chocolate brown horse with wide eyes and nostrils fluttered its tail in flaccid resistance as a child beat its brains in with a hammer. Next door, a man quarreled over the price of shoes. Behind him, the first M-ATV in our convoy barreled over a pothole deeper than most men's knees at 40 miles an hour. Dust blew over the man, filled the shop where he was haggling, covered every shoe in the store. It blew onto the child, into his hair, his clothes and his dead horse. It stuck to the hammer.

We followed the road around a bend onto what we called *Sunset Boulevard*. To our right, as we lumbered by, was a steep hillside peppered with mud huts that shone the color of sangria when the setting sunlight made its way through the dust, exhaust, salt, shit, and gunpowder in the air. I wrapped a balaclava around my face. I tried stuffing it in my mouth. I tried holding it over my nose. Everything tasted dirty. Ahead of us, in the distance, was a hill called *500 Families*. It was a tightly settled village on the slope of a mountain, one of the many that surround Kabul. It was a squatter town, packed full of refugees from Helmand and Kandahar. *500 Families* was a fertile recruiting town for the Taliban, home to disgruntled people prone to fighting, especially the children. They were also prone to painting their huts bright colors like pink, green, orange, and white. From *Sunset Boulevard*, it looked like San Francisco.

An M-ATV is an MRAP made for Afghanistan. Made by Oshkosh. Just like OshKosh B'gosh. As in overalls. It's a toy. We could talk to each other over the radio. I would relay suspicious things I could see from my position in the turret to the nine other Airmen on my team. New pavement, men with cell phones, broken-down cars, piles of trash. Because we could talk to each other, we would also joke. We would joke because Spider-3 was driving too slowly. We would joke because an IED was going to take my head off. It was going to fly across the road, and land somewhere funny. It was going to land among the construction workers who were building a warehouse we passed. When finished, that warehouse was going to be the largest building in Afghanistan. It was the centerpiece of the Afghan base where we worked. We slowed down as we approached the main gate. Weaving through concrete barriers, I turned my turret around and scouted behind us. I saw trucks with murals painted on the sides and tassels hanging from the mirrors. The murals were scenes of Arcadian green pastures, blue ponds, and homes with Doric columns. I saw children kicking soccer balls into the windows of empty businesses. A man rode his bicycle along the road with a hundred red, black, and green balloons tied to his seat. When we got through the gate, we parked in a gravel lot.

The three trucks in our convoy parked next to 30 identical sand-colored Ford pickup trucks with ANA spray painted on the side. Afghan National Army. Our Oshkosh trucks stood head and shoulders above an F-150. When we dismounted, we shed headsets, body armor, magazines, multi-tools, flashlights, glow sticks, zip-ties, zip-tie handcuffs, bullets, bandanas and helmets at the trucks and locked them. We kept our weapons. Across the gravel parking lot was a low-lying two-story building. It was the American advisors' building, where we worked. It had a four-foot brick wall around three sides, for protection, and there were steps up to a tall, unadorned steel door. Near the front door were meticulously kept flower beds and along the wall were trees and rose bushes. The bushes' branches were tied together in some places with IV tubes, crimping them into different shapes. Shapes like *Hope, Grief, Want, Flattery, Fear, Regret, and Dancing*.

Afghans call Thursday *gol shambay* or "flower day." At least, our Afghans did. This was because Thursdays were half-days and historically the least active days for the ANA. Thursdays were only meant for drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. It was the day that the soldiers relaxed, the officers closed their doors, and no serious work was accomplished. Unless, of course, you were a gardener.

I was a second lieutenant, the lowest ranking American on our training team. We were embedded on this Afghan base. It was my job to mentor and advise the Afghan Education and Training Officer for Logistics. His name was Colonel

Shirazod. He was a commando who had fought the *mujabedeens* in the eighties. He was a full colonel. At least, he wore a colonel's uniform. He had been promoted to colonel under the Russians. He became a farmer under the Taliban, and when he was reinstated under the new regime, he was placed in a major's position. This technically made him a major; however, he would not wear a major's uniform even if it was against regulation. If his wife found out that he had been demoted, even administratively, she would *kill him*.

I passed the door guard, Aziz, on my way in to the advisors' building, where Colonel Shirazod's office also was. Aziz slouched under the weight of his AK-47. He wore tattered woodland camouflage and a faded blue beret. He had a gray beard and deep wrinkles like the folds of a gown. When I passed Aziz I nodded to him, and he nodded in return. The rest of the team and I went into our office which was a long room with many broad desks, like a classroom for secretaries. I grabbed a pre-packaged blueberry muffin from our supply cabinet and put the coffee on. We had more than 50 pounds of coffee that we had convoyed in, courtesy of my mother and all her friends. And all their friends. Being the lowest ranking, I was also the coffee boy. I didn't mind. I skipped the Folgers' pile and pulled coffee from the Dunkin' pile. The good stuff. I filled a thermos labeled "Air Force Retired" and went to find Mahmoud, my interpreter.

Mahmoud was tall with curly black hair like a pop star. For that reason, the marines in Helmand had nicknamed him Julio Iglesias. Mahmoud was proud of that nickname, without really knowing why. He had stitched it into the back of his jean jacket. He stitched it in English and Dari, his native tongue, so that everyone could read it. Mahmoud taught me Dari every Thursday. We would sit on the wall around our building and go over flash cards. He taught me to read and pronounce Arabic letters. I wrote like a child- large, clearly distinguishable letters, no calligraphy. Mahmoud could write calligraphy. Mahmoud could dance the *Charleston*. He always smiled.

"Good morning, Jordan."

"Good morning, Mahmoud."

"Today we will study?"

"Sure," I said, "Later. Is Colonel Shirazod here?"

"Yes, he asked if you brought him medicine," he said.

"I sure did," I said, "one pack of mentor-approved headache pills."

There was no carpet inside the advisors' building. No tile either, but the concrete floor shined. White painted plaster arches trimmed the ceiling. The walls were a faint peach color. There were posters on the walls with pictures of Afghan soldiers

holding M-14s, RPGs, or AK-47s and had slogans in Dari written on them like “Jihad is on the side of the ANA” and “Glory to God and the government.” One poster was a soldier on a mountainside throwing a grenade with the slogan “Do not smoke indoors.”

We walked up the stairs and down a hallway that was empty but for a fire extinguisher box and that was empty too. There was a glass door at the end of the hall that led to a balcony. On either side was a door. On the door to the right hung a paper sign with the words “Education and Training” enclosed in a thick black dashed border. At the bottom it read, “Colonel Mohamed Shirazod <Chakaree>.” It was Scotch taped to the wall. At the end of one of the pieces of tape was the plastic green tab that starts a new roll.

Mahmoud and I went into the office, passing a woman asleep at her desk wearing combat boots and a burqa. She was a soldier, but she sold her uniform at the bazaar because she didn’t think it was pretty. Inside was an old man in woodland camouflage with dyed black hair, a dyed black hair comb moustache, and bright red felt pads on his lapels. This was Colonel Shirazod. He was watering his plants with his back to us. He had several plants around the office and they grew very well. There were ivies of all sorts: some with long, flowing stems, others with short, dense bursts of leaves, and still others with broad leaves that looked as though they had been dipped in merlot. I took off my M-4 and placed it between the couch and the far wall, as I was accustomed to doing. There was a coffee table in the room with an ashtray on it. Colonel Shirazod brought nuts and raisins in a dish and placed them on the coffee table. He took some candy from his pocket and added that to the dish. I lit a cigarette, sat down on the couch with Mahmoud and said, “Happy *gol shambay* Colonel.”

“*Salaam*, Lieutenant Jordan. *Walaikum Salaam*. *Fameelat chetor ast? Khoob asti? Jour asti? Tamom khoob ast?*”

“He says, ‘Hello, Jordan! How is your family,’ and also some other things like ‘how are you?’” Mahmoud translated. The three of us had worked together for three months, and knew each other so well that I understood most of what Colonel Shirazod said without Mahmoud translating. He also understood most of my English, though he had no formal training.

“My family is good, sir.” I said. “*Koobis*.”

“*Khoob ast*.” He said.

“*Khoob ast*.” I said.

“How is your girlfriend?” He asked through Mahmoud.

“She’s good too, man,” I said as I passed him a cigarette. They were Gauloises Blondes. Five bucks a carton.

“How’s *your* girlfriend?” I asked.

He laughed and pointed a finger to the woman in the next room.

“Sleep,” he said in English. Then, “Mustafa!” Col Shirazod shouted.

Mustafa was Col Shirazod’s only sergeant. He was an E-8 and had ascended very quickly though the enlisted ranks. He was yet to be twenty. Being the lowest ranking, he was also the *chai* boy. He didn’t mind. The colonel gave him orders to bring in tea. Mustafa had already prepared, as was his routine, by heating the water in a mop bucket with a copper heating coil that he plugged into the wall and submerged into the bucket. He took some hot water into a tarnished brass kettle, and threw a handful of green sticks, leaves, twigs, nettles, shell, and dirt that they enigmatically called *chai*. Mustafa poured hot *chai* into a dirty glass, transferred it into another glass, and so on until he had swished water in all the glasses, cleaning them. He poured the leftover *chai* onto the floor in the corner of the room, cleaning that too. I was staring out the window, watching an officer chase gardeners. His name was Lieutenant Colonel Gol.

“Colonel Flower busy,” I said.

Colonel Shirazod roared with laughter.

“Colonel Flower yah beesy!” He said and then, through Mahmoud, “Colonel Flower is only busy on Flower Day. Lieutenant Colonel Gol. He is the only officer with no job. He monitors the gardeners out of boredom.”

This he knew I knew and he was happy to retell as he dipped his cigarette butt into his tea and blew through the open end for increased smoothness.

“Lieutenant Colonel Gol wasn’t always the Flower Commander,” he said through Mahmoud. “Once, he was a very powerful supply officer. But that was because his brother, a full colonel, was well connected in the government. His brother had a bicycle. It was red with white walled tires. It had a little bell on it. He cleaned it every day with paper towels that he got from American supply depots. He oiled the chains, checked the air in the tires, touched up the paint, re-upholstered the seat, checked the brakes, the shocks, the gears. He would never let his children ride his bicycle. He would only let mechanics do the work when he could not do it himself, and even then it was jealously so. Colonel Gol was proud of his bicycle. He was a stupid man... a coward. The colonel rode his bicycle to work.

“He had been in the army with me when the Russians took over and we fought the *mujahedeen*. We were commandos together. Commandos are the bravest of all Afghan fighters. After the Russian War, when the Taliban came in to control the

chaos, we hid from them by pretending to go along with it. We grew beards. We buried our uniforms and our pictures. If the old *mujahedeen* knew we had fought with the Russian mentors, they would have killed us. Many years we hid from the Taliban, farming fields, feeding our families and only singing under our breath when we felt bold and bullet-proof. As he grew older, however, Colonel Gol was very afraid to die. So, he did not ride the ANA bus.”

Colonel Shirazod pronounced ANA “UNA.” Mahmoud corrected him.

“He rode his bicycle to work,” he continued. “He was convinced that one day the Taliban would blow up the bus, because they know we work with the American mentors, and he would be a damned fool to ride it. Last year, there was a Taliban attack on an ANA bus, just as he predicted.

“It was a Thursday, *golshambay*, and historically the least active day for the Taliban. No soldier expected an attack that day. The bus driver wasn’t even worried. It was a sunny day and the bus driver was whistling to himself from the minute he awoke. He drove his bus around tight turns with finesse and gusto. He pulled his bus over at a stop near *500 Families*, and a group of soldiers got on. Behind them, a boy broke away from a soccer game, chasing after a loose ball. Colonel Gol was passing by and stopped to pick up the ball and then held it, arms outstretched. The boy ran up, out of breath, reached into his jacket stuffed with plastic explosives and nails, and blew himself to pieces like a porcelain doll so that his clothes were tattered and singed and crumpled around his little bloody chunks of ankles in cleats, which was all that was left of him. Except clean-up crews did find his head the next day. Usually, the bombers don’t kill anyone but themselves, but that day Colonel Gol and his red bicycle were found mangled together under the seat of a bench, as if placed there. None of the soldiers on the bus were hurt.”

Colonel Shirazod laughed heartily and drank off his *chai*. Then he rose, took the kettle, and poured the leftovers into his flower pots.

“And now, Lieutenant Colonel Gol is in charge of the gardeners!” He snorted.

I rose, thanked Colonel Shirazod, and promised to come see him later. When I stood, I patted myself down and dust flew from my clothes into the morning sunlight that filtered through his office window. Outside, a forklift drove in circles, carrying empty pallets. I grabbed my M-4 from behind the couch, and slung it over my shoulder, checking the safety as I did. I put out my cigarette in Colonel Shirazod’s ashtray, and took a few raisins. They were pale raisins, dried in the shade instead of in the sun. Almost forgetting, I handed him a Ziploc bag with multivitamins.

“For your headaches,” I said.

Mahmoud translated.

Outside, Aziz was sitting in his chair, asleep. A few ANA soldiers were walking back from their dining hall with bread tucked under their arms and apples in their pockets. They waved to us as Mahmoud and I stood by the front door, smoking. They shouted something to Mahmoud. He laughed. They were holding up their pants. Mahmoud and I hoisted ourselves up and sat on the perimeter wall. I took a stack of three-by-five note cards wrapped in a rubber band out of the chest pocket of my desert uniform.

"Een chee ast?" he said, holding up a card with Arabic letters. His cigarette dangled between his ring and pinky fingers.

"*Een chee ast?*" I said. "What is this?"

"Very good," he said and held up another. "*Ketob.*"

"*Ketob,*" I said. "Book."

"*Brietman,*" he said.

"*Brietman,*" I said. "Soldier, also, Lieutenant."

"*Urdu.*"

"*Urdu.*" I said. "Army."

"*Man shamora doost doram.*"

"*Man shamora doost doram,*" I said. "I love you."

"*Jordan bagel ast,*" he said.

"Screw you, dude," I said and laughed.

There was an old man tending to bushes nearby. He wore a thin corduroy jacket with a matted felt collar. He stood bent over like he was shoveling snow and he was sweating. He had IV tubes sticking out of the pocket of his ANA-issued camouflage trousers. The needles were still attached. From either side of a bush the old man took a handful of branches, bent them to the middle and tied them with an IV tube so that they met. He stood back, wiped his brow, and looked at the bush. He might have called it *Applause*. The old man noticed us practicing, and stopped to watch. I showed him a flashcard.

"Look," I said, holding a card out to him. "See? I'm learning Dari. Mahmoud is my teacher. Mahmoud *malem-e man ast.*"

The old man looked at the card, and then looked at me quizzically. Mahmoud didn't translate. I looked at Mahmoud quizzically.

"He doesn't read," Mahmoud said. "He doesn't read, so he's a gardener."

We heard shouting and the old man scurried back to work. It was Lieutenant Colonel Gol. He shouted at the old man, gave direction. The old man was still slouched, so that he looked inattentive, but he nodded in understanding. When

the colonel was through, he walked proudly to where Mahmoud and I were sitting on the wall.

“Hey, Colonel Flower!” I said.

“*Salaam-a-laikum, Dagar-man Gol,*” said Mahmoud, covering my tracks.

“How are you, sir?” I asked.

“Very well!” He said through Mahmoud. “We will have very good plants this year. We will also have grapes. The Commander was gracious enough to buy seedlings. We will be the only base in the ANA with a grape crop. Eventually we will have more fruit trees and vegetables. Someday, we will be the only self-sustaining Afghan base. You know, when I was a supply officer, I was going to be promoted to major for designing the base warehouse. When it’s finished, it will be the largest building in Afghanistan. Perhaps they will make me a full colonel when the grape crop is harvested. They may yet.”

“Very good,” I said. “*Koobis.*”

“*Khoob ast,*” he corrected me.

“*Khoob ast,*” I said.

The colonel returned to his work, issuing orders to his gardeners and ensuring they were all kept busy. Ensuring good order and discipline. He weeded his gardens every day with tools that he got from American supply depots. He tilled the earth, repotted plants, trimmed trees, crimped bushes into shapes like Love, picked fruit fresh from the vine or the branch, pushed seeds into the soil with his forefinger, watered roses from his cupped hands. He would only let his gardeners do the work when he could not do it himself, and even then it was jealously so. Colonel Gol was proud of his gardens. I watched him hustle as Mahmoud held up another card.

“*Atfal,*” he said.

“*Atfal,*” I said. “Children.”

JORDAN HAYES is a veteran of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, having served in Afghanistan as an embedded advisor to the Afghan National Army. He currently resides in Charleston, South Carolina with his wife, Whitney. His work has previously appeared in *The Columbia Review*.