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## A Promise to Keep

Dedicated to Olga Contreras

**I**n March 2004, as a reporter for Knight Ridder newspapers, I returned to Afghanistan for the fourth time to cover the war. My Afghan colleague, translator Khalid Saraway, picked me up at Kabul International Airport.

A boy stood outside my hotel, the Mustafa, when Khalid and I pulled up. I recognized him instantly. Jawad. His white shirt and pants were blotched with dark, wet stains. He rung out a mop. He looked at me and cocked his head to one side as I stepped out of the car. Slowly, a look crossed his face.

“You’re late,” he said after a long pause. He smiled but I heard no humor in his voice.

Four other boys joined him. They were as subdued as Jawad. We shook hands stiffly.

“I’d hoped to come back sooner,” I said.

An onslaught of beggars interrupted the awkwardness of the moment by offering—demanding—to carry my duffel bag into the hotel. Khalid shooed them away and we went inside. Jawad and the other boys did not follow us.

I registered at the front desk, dropped my duffel in my room and returned to the lobby. I joined Khalid in the hotel restaurant. He ordered us tea.

“The boys have changed,” he said.

“I see.”

“They have all dropped out of school.”

In 2003, Khalid and I took on Jawad and the other boys, all of them war orphans, as our personal project. It was my idea. We fed them, made sure they had a daily change of clothes and enrolled them in school. The boys, I told Khalid, fell under the category of “other duties as assigned.” They didn’t know their birthdays. I guessed them all to be about thirteen.

Each evening, Khalid and I reviewed their homework in the back room of a pharmacy owned by his brother and near the Mustafa. We also taught them English. When I left Kabul five months later, I promised, based on what my editor had told me, to return in two weeks. Khalid assured me he would go over their homework in my absence, and the boys vowed not to skip school.

We all believed the commitments we had made to one another but we had not anticipated how the demands on our lives would influence and in the end shatter those commitments. I suspect I was the first to break my promise. I did not return in two weeks. A year would pass before my editor offered me another assignment in Kabul.

“It was very hard to keep helping them,” Khalid said of the boys. “You did not come back. I had to find work. There are no jobs in Afghanistan. No future. I needed to work if not with you then someone else.”

“What are they doing now? The boys? If they’re not in school.”

“Jawad and Jamshid, work here at the Mustafa cleaning and running errands,” Khalid said. “The other three work for shop owners. They make about seventy U.S. a month.”

I nodded. Seventy bucks a month. Good money in a country where the average monthly income was fifty bucks. How could school compete with success like that? When I left, I knew Khalid wouldn’t have the money to feed and clothe the boys and keep them in school. Who would? Me. But I returned twelve months later than I promised. What had I expected Khalid to do in the meantime? I was in no position to scold.

“I found a job with the United Nations,” Khalid said. “I was a data entry supervisor for a voter registration drive. I didn’t have time to come by the pharmacy and meet with the boys.”

“That’s OK. No need to explain.”

I looked out a window at the street. I saw two of the boys, Sohail and Noor. Sohail was sweeping the floor of a photo copy shop; Noor was hawking magazines. I watched them work. I had been selfish. I had not considered the obligation I’d taken on by helping them. What I did for them, I did for my benefit, not theirs.

My days in Kabul had been filled with despair. Daily, I heard the desperate pleas of war widows and amputees and the angry shouts of Afghan soldiers and police. I saw

shop owners whip beggars with metal cables to clear them from sidewalks. I watched freaked-out Westerners flee from hungry children shouting, "One dollar, mister!" I saw legless men in doorways pleading for money. For the sake of my sanity, I needed more going on inside my head than the stories I was writing and the lingering cries and the screams of people being beaten. I can feed, clothe and help educate the five homeless boys I see every day polishing shoes outside my hotel, I thought. I can do that much.

At night, as I tried to sleep, the shrieks of "Money Mister!" grew louder in my head. The snarling images of people fighting for food tossed at them from U.N. trucks filled my room, hovered over my bed with suffocating intensity. Thoughts of the boys reciting their lessons just hours before, however, eased my mind.

"I am thinking of going to Iraq," Khalid said. "The U.N. said it needs staff there. It will be good money, I think. What do you think?"

"I think you're silly," I said using one of his favorite English words. He smiled. He remembered as I did the time when he told an Afghan bureaucrat who was putting us through needless hoops of red tape that he was a "silly man." I wanted to talk about that day, the moments that made us laugh. Instead, I grappled with my conscience.

"I have to support my family," Khalid said. "There's no future here."

We finished our tea and agreed to start work in the morning. Attend a press conference, find a daily news story. A full, long day. I walked to my room past the open door of another room where flies were tormenting an American—perhaps a journalist, perhaps someone with an NGO. I didn't know or care.

"You can run but you can't hide," he screamed, swatting the flies.

I closed my door and sat on my bed. I stared at the walls, the light outside turning to gray. A turmoil of dust air seeped through the cracks of my windows. A fan stood in one corner. It didn't work. Someone knocked. I opened the door. Jawad.

"What does this mean?" he said. He showed me a slip of paper, the word pizza scrawled across it. He handed me the tattered Dari-English dictionary I had given him the previous year.

"I can't find this word. A guest asked for it."

I knew pizza would not be in the dictionary, but I thumbed through it anyway, reeling off words in Dari for him to repeat in English, an exercise I used to do with him and the other boys.

"Tarafik."

"Traffic."

"Kuchi."

"Nomad."

“Sasej.”

“Sausage.”

After a few more words, Jawad stopped me. He needed to get back to work.

“What is this word?” he insisted.

I explained what a pizza was. He nodded. Then he asked me to buy him a bicycle.

“A bicycle? Where’d that come from? What’s that got to do with pizza?”

He shrugged.

“Where have you been?”

“I was in the States.”

“A long time.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll see about getting you a bike.”

He left. I presumed he would forget about the bicycle. I presumed he would wake up the next morning as I would to the demands of our jobs, our lives.

I shut the door. I listened to dogs barking and the wailing of cats, the screech of tires and the shouts of beggars until I heard nothing more leaving only my thoughts to intrude on the silent dark and the long, deep night ahead.

I remained in Afghanistan for three months. A few days before I returned to the States, I caught a bus bound for Khost, a city near the Pakistan border on Jalalabad Road, for a feature story. When the bus stopped in Gardez, about an hour outside of Khost, I was advised by local villagers to go no farther. Security along the road was very bad, they told me. Bandits and Taliban fighters hid in the mountainous and attacked passing vehicles.

One man offered me tea. Then he took me by the hand and led me to an empty lot in a wheat field not far from the bus station where he was building a house on land, I gathered by the way he gestured toward a cemetery and then back at the house, had been in his family a long time. By his gestures, I understood he had carried buckets of water to the lot so he could turn the dirt to mud and build the walls of his house. One side was almost finished, thick and drying in the sun. Shattered walls riddled with mortar holes stood not far from where we stood.

He handed me a shovel. I stood holding it, not sure what to do. In my four trips to Afghanistan, I realized, I had never given anything back to the people who had told me their stories, offered their hospitality, shared their lives and often tears. I took what they had given to me and left for the next story. I thought about that. Then I pushed the shovel into the mud.

As I worked beside him, I thought about Khalid and his father Aziz. Just twenty-four hours earlier, we’d spent the afternoon together in Aziz’s hardware store. The three of

us stood behind the front counter and drank orange Fanta, escaping the oven-heat of Kabul. Khalid should have been home celebrating his four-year wedding anniversary with his wife. But she was pregnant and grumpy and he was tired from work and avoiding her. So we drank our Fanta and took a break from the day and our lives.

Khalid's marriage had been arranged by his parents just as their marriage had been arranged by their families. Khalid ran away to Pakistan to get out of it but his father tracked him down and brought him back.

One evening I dropped by Khalid's house and saw him with his wife in their garden. They were laughing. They had two daughters. I wanted to believe Khalid had found a way to love his wife.

"The Taliban was in power when I was married so my wedding was very quiet," Khalid recalled as we stood in his father's shop slouched against the front counter. "No music. If the Taliban hears music, they will take the husband to jail for ten days. After ten days, the husband can make honeymoon."

He stopped talking, his mouth sagging into a pout like that of a child. He was thirty years old but retained the face of a boy. However, he was as stocky as a bear with hands that could swallow mine. Aziz, on the other hand, had a lean build. A well-trimmed black beard encircled his face and when he was angry his blue eyes stared down whoever had crossed him.

I looked at them both, surprised how Khalid had lapsed into the present tense. I assumed it was more difficult than I could imagine for him to believe the Taliban were gone. He had served six days in jail for trimming his beard.

"It was a very quiet time under the Taliban," Khalid said. "You forgot how to talk to people because you never went out. If the mullahs saw people on the street, they beat them for not being in the mosque."

A customer walked in, greeted the three of us and began sorting through spark plugs. After a few minutes, he left without buying anything. I watched him leave, listened to the slap of his sandals on the sidewalk, and then I heard nothing more.

Khalid began talking again about the Taliban but Aziz interrupted him. He had his own arrest story to tell. During the Taliban years, Aziz and his brother worked for a Japanese aid organization that cleared mines. One day, a member of the Taliban came by their office. He said he wanted one of the radio antennas they used on their cars. Aziz said the antennas were not his to give away. Four minutes later, he was arrested. He spent eight hours in jail. He asked what had he done. He was told nothing other than he would be killed.

The Taliban official in charge of the jail allowed him to call his employer. Aziz told his employer he had a problem. His employer spoke to the Taliban official and agreed

to give him an antenna. After he hung up the phone, the official told Aziz he had killed 100 people. You will be number 101, he said. Aziz told him he had a family to support. He worried all day that he might die until the antenna was delivered and the Taliban released him.

When his father stopped speaking, Khalid reached over and squeezed his shoulder. I did not know how to react and just stood there and looked away to give them both a moment together. Sometimes I wish I had come to Kabul when the Taliban ruled so I could put in perspective the stories I heard about the regime. I have tried and tried but I can't comprehend what it must have been like.

"It was a very bad time," Khalid said. "We were always afraid of the knock on the door."

In Gardez, the man with the house had no stories to tell. Or, I should say, he most likely did but I could not speak Dari, the language of northern Afghanistan, and he could speak only a few words of English. So, whatever he may have had on his mind went unsaid.

We worked in silence, smiling at each other from time to time, slopping mud on the wall and patting it flat with our shovels. After a while, we took off our shoes and worked barefoot. When we needed a break, we sat in the shade offered by trees near a creek and drank with our hands the water spilling over stones. We looked at each other and rolled our eyes at the heat and laughed. Then we got up and started again.

Khalid and Aziz had opposed my traveling to Khost. Khalid said because I had never lived in fear inside my own country, had not felt threatened by my own people, I did not appreciate the risk I was taking leaving the relative safety of Kabul. I had the self-confidence of my inexperience.

"Times are still bad here," he said. "You should know that. People don't like this government because they say the Americans control it. The south is very violent. The east is very violent. No one in my office wants to go there. There is no security. The women are like prisoners. They still wear the burqa. I take my two little girls to the zoo. I get them out of the house to see the city. They are not locked inside. When they are older, I will let them choose their life. I will let them choose a love marriage, not an arranged marriage."

Aziz rolled his eyes. He did not like the Taliban but he gave them credit for upholding traditions of faith and marriage and roles of men and women. He had three daughters and he allowed none of them outside without a burqa.

Khalid ignored his father.

"I want to show you something," he said to me.

He reached into his pocket for a Thurya phone. His office had ordered 6,000 Thuryas at \$2,500 apiece but they could not use them because too many U.N. personnel were afraid to work in the villages outside of Kabul. They refused to leave their offices and therefore had no need for the Thuryas.

When he finished talking, Khalid cursed and tossed his phone on the counter.

"This is very expensive," Aziz said, picking up the phone.

"I don't care," Khalid said.

Aziz frowned. He did not want Khalid to create trouble. He should be happy to have a job. He should be happy to be alive.

"At least the U.N. pays you better than I did," I said.

Khalid looked at me and then leaned back and laughed.

"That's true."

"Go to your wife," I told him.

"Yes, I should go. You know National Geographic?"

"Of course."

"I was watching it on satellite television. A man lived with a lion for 12 months. Twelve months. Imagine. By the time he left, he had tamed the lion. I used to think Afghanistan was like the lion. It would be tamed. I don't think that anymore."

Khalid stood up and we shook hands and hugged. Aziz offered me a ride to my hotel. I sat in his car and looked at the pale mountains rising above the outskirts of the city, the same mountain I'd drive through to Gardez.

I worked on the wall until late afternoon. Then I had to leave, find a place to stay overnight and return to Kabul in the morning.

I explained this even though I knew the man would not understand. However, I felt compelled to tell him anyway. I did not want to just walk away. I had enjoyed his company despite the absence of conversation.

I gave him my shovel. Then I pointed toward the city and made walking motions with my fingers to indicate I was leaving. He nodded and we smiled and shook hands. I didn't look back to see if he had resumed working.

On the bus the next morning, I thought of Khalid and Aziz and how they had withstood the Taliban, damaged in one way or another but still here, and I thought of the man and his incomplete house and the remains of blasted walls around it. The ruined homes, what remained upright but beyond repair, had survived bullets and bombs. I stared out my window and wondered how long my section of wall would last, my small mark upon the land.

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