THE CHILDREN OF GHAZNI

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The road to Kandahar from Kabul has such and evil reputation it was hard to get anyone at the Mustafa Hotel to talk about it. The received wisdom was that you had to go with your own private army or not go at all. Most Westerners instead chose the absurdly long route through Pakistan, which meant flying to Islamabad on a U.N. plane, flying south to Quetta, and then tunneling back into Afghanistan at a place called Spin Boldak. A multinational detour, complete with high bribes and visa hassles, just to avoid the Kabul to Kandahar shakes. But if you didn't have the money or the time to do the Pakistani route, driving started to look like a real option.

The word was that the road was full of bandits, part of an ever-worsening security situation following the end of the war. Of course, ordinary Afghans trying to visit relatives in another province can't take the U.N. flights, so they take their chances. It's a trip that takes about two days if nothing goes wrong. Coming from Kabul, most travelers stay the night in a town called Ghazni, about 150 kilometers from the capital, then get up before dawn and drive the rest of the way to Kandahar, another 400 kilometers. The road, a southwestern arc that crosses Wardak, Ghazni, Zabul, and Kandahar provinces, also crosses cultures and tribes. People in each province wear signature clothing, turbans and caps of certain colors, and speak slight variations of Pashto. Moving south, turbans take the place of pakuls, the woolen hats worn by the mujahedin, and the cloth of choice gets darker. Kandaharis wear black turbans. We decided to leave Kabul on Friday, Jan. 25, after we

learned that the blind lion at the Kabul Zoo had died.

Kabul had become dry and sleepy. Kofi Annan's visit snarled traffic for a whole day. At one point the big news was that a British Gurkha regiment had arrived to join the peacekeeping force. In the Mustafa Hotel, one TV crew was so hard up for a story they interviewed the owner, a new low. Kandahar was promising, and Aman Khan, my translator, said he could get us there if that was what I really wanted. But our driver, Abdullah, did not want to go to Kandahar. Abdullah was from Jalalabad in Nangarhar province, and it was too far for him, too distant from his own people. Asking him to drive all the way across the country was like asking him to become an astronaut or a Russian test pilot. I wheedled, bullied, then begged him to pull his minivan together so we could go. He ultimately gave in, but still didn't want to do it. We packed on Saturday night, and prepared to leave at 7 the next morning for Ghazni.

A few days before, in the bird market, I'd found two canaries for the room in the Mustafa. They lived in a Chinese wire cage and fought all the time. Walikh, a kid who was always hanging around our floor, kept stopping by with presents for them. Boiled egg, bits of bread. The bird market gangsters had kept them outside in the cold,and the gray canary was weak, but Walikh brought him back with all the attention. We took them down to the car on Sunday morning with everything else.

It was bright and cold as we drove out to the gates of the city, which were two shipping containers standing on end. We cleared the checkpoint after an argument with the militia. On our way out of town, listening to the Persian singer Nagma on the tape deck, we drove through the destroyed suburbs, a monument to the unrestrained bloodletting of 1993 in which 10,000 civilians were killed as Gulbuddin Hikmetyar attacked the Rabbani government. Only a year later, Hikmetyar and Rashid Dostum, the Uzbek warlord from

Mazar-e-Sharif, fought for control of Kabul, destroying even larger sections of the city. We drove through miles of ruins. Since then, Dostum, a man known for his brutality and shifting allegiances, has become deputy defense minister in the Karzai government, leaving many people with a sense of foreboding for the Afghan government. At Sur Pol we crossed the Kabul River, a bright silver band. Pointing to the hills and ridges, Aman said, “Do you see those mountains? They are not rock, they are made of dust.”

There were deep washes and gullies that marked the boundaries of a much larger river, but the water had retreated underground. The drought-ridden land looked like it had been scoured of anything green, and I wondered how the citizens of the villages hung on, living so far up in the mountains without water or fuel. Fifty kilometers outside Kabul the paved road ended and the van bounced along in the ruts, Abdullah swerving to stay out of the path of trucks. The canaries fluttered and chirped in the back seat.

For security, we had brought a Chinese automatic from Nangarhar province. We wrapped it in three plastic bags and hid it under the jack and a few greasy tools. The gun was strictly a last-chance deal, and we never referred to it by name, always saying, “Is that thing loaded?” or “Do you have that thing?” The gun lived under the front seat and we tried not to think bad thoughts. The way to Ghazni was peaceful, the villages relaxed and we were there by 12:30, feeling good.

Ghazni is one part ancient city and one part truck stop. On my map, Ghazni had a “Historical Scientific Center, Walled Picturesque City” annotation, next to a small star. The city contains the artifacts of three civilizations: Buddhist, Medieval Muslim. Near the road, there was a brisk car repair business where mechanics in oily shalwars swapped out axles that had been destroyed by the rutted highway, and any other car part that needed fixing. Welders worked from generator power. Convoys of trucks pulled in and stayed the

night, leaving their engines running. We checked into the trucker hotel, the Spinzar.

Homayoun, the hotel manager, brought firewood for the stove and sleeping mats, while Abdullah took the opportunity to get stoned out of his mind. Homayoun had a light beard, blue eyes, and a very kind demeanor, like the one good kid in school. We sat on the floor with him and drank green tea with sugar as the room warmed up. He wanted to know if we wanted to drive around Ghazni with him as our guide, and we said sure.

In the car, he told Abdullah to drive up toward the walled city, and as we worked our way up the hills, the towers of Mahmoud Ghaznavi came into view, graceful 1,200-year-old brick structures named after a powerful 10th century ruler. They were set a considerable distance apart, possibly the better part of a kilometer, and Homayoun told Abdullah to pull the van close to one of the towers so we could get out and have a look around. In a shallow ravine behind us we saw the remains of a Taliban tank. It looked like they had hidden it there to escape the American bombing raids. A short distance down the hill was a military storage site where more tanks and heavy artillery were kept, but these belonged to the new government and still worked.

On the way up in the van, I asked Homayoun what was going on in Ghazni these days, what the big news was. “Nothing,” he said. “Ghazni is completely at peace.” Homayoun did not mention that less than two weeks before, Around Jan. 17, two brothers were murdered by bandits at the gas pump for small change. Homayoun heard the shots, because the pumps are right out in front of the hotel. He also forgot to mention that everyone in town knew who did it.

We walked around the tower. Its foundation was exposed, and it seemed like there should have been an entrance, but we couldn’t find one. I was still

looking when a very old man in a white turban came up from the fields to say hello. His teeth were stained from putting powdered Afghan tobacco in his mouth. The old man explained that the towers marked the boundaries of the precious- stone bazaar, and that they were joined by an underground tunnel. “But the government won’t allow people to take the stones,” the man said. I thought he meant that people weren’t allowed to take bricks from the structures to use for their own houses. As we were talking, a group of child soldiers came up the hill toward us with their Kalashnikovs on their backs. The kids’ clothes were dirty and none of them were wearing a pakul: They mostly wore white turbans, like the old man. A commander came up the hill with them. Everyone was relaxed, just having a visit. The commander introduced himself as Qasim, and said that he had worked as chief of police during the Najibullah government, and then he asked if I had seen the Buddhas on the opposite hill. I hadn’t. Qasim then volunteered an interesting piece of information.

“The Taliban stole antiquities and brought them to Pakistan where they were sold. They stole everything, the historical things of Mahmoud Ghaznavi. Scientists from Pakistan came to examine the artifacts, then they were packed up and taken out of the country.” If it was true, Pakistan was complicit in looting the history of Afghanistan. At Bamiyan, the Taliban destroyed 1,500-year-old standing Buddhas with explosives, but I hadn’t heard of Afghan artifacts being sold or transferred to museums in Pakistan. I asked Qasim how he knew the artifacts were sold, and the question made him angry.

“We live here. We know what happened to those things.” I wanted to go see the place where the artifacts were looted. Qasim said it would be OK, and offered two of his child soldiers as a security detail. We asked Qasim to come with us, but he wasn’t interested.

The two fighters piled into the van, one in the front passenger seat, the other next to Aman, and they told Abdullah how to get to the monuments. We rolled slowly down the hill into a dry riverbed, past a cluster of abandoned buildings.

There was a sharp crack that I thought was a blown tire. Aman looked at me and said, “They are shooting at us.” It was impossible to see who they were or where the shots were coming from. Abdullah hit the brakes, and one of Qasim’s fighters opened the door and waved. The shooter came running toward us and climbed into the van with his gun, sharing the front seat with a Qasim fighter. Abdullah said, “We will all be killed.” I told him, through Aman, to calm down and drive, and he did. We kept going down the riverbed toward the hills where the Buddhas were supposed to be.

A few minutes later, we came to a second set of houses set against the hills. It was not a checkpoint. There was no road. There was nothing to guard, no military equipment. These buildings were out in the middle of nowhere. When the fighters who lived there saw us coming, they ran out in force with their weapons raised. They were acting very strangely, like they were on the front end of a bad amphetamine binge. More child fighters came toward the van; there were 12 or 15 of them now. One kid had a machine gun mounted on a tripod that he tried to straighten out as he ran, his turban completely covering his face. Abdullah took one look at the scene and hit the brakes. Two of them reached us at about the same time, while the rest hung back covering the car with their Kalashnikovs. They were wild children, breathing hard after running down the hill.

Qasim’s fighters, plus the shooter, then got out of the van and talked with the new arrivals for a few minutes, then took off. One of the new arrivals, a teenage boy with a shock of thick black hair, began arguing with the other fighter about who was going to ride with us to the hills. The black-haired

fighter was moving so fast, and wanted in on the action so badly, that he aimed his Kalashnikov at the other boy and pulled back the bolt before we knew what was happening. He wanted to shoot him right there. There was something wrong with the black-haired boy. He didn't move normally. Our side door was open; Homayoun was in the back seat. We didn't make a sound. They shouted and yelled at each other. The violent one drove his colleague away from the van. This is when their commander arrived and climbed into the front seat, grinning. This one, who the other fighters obeyed, looked like Homayoun, fair-haired and blue-eyed.

Our driver was terrified and we had completely lost control. The strange boy then got into the van next to Aman with his gun. The side door stayed open. I shook hands with him in the front seat. I smiled. "I am the commander," he said. It seemed wise to be impressed. He couldn't have been older than 19. Usually, Afghan fighters become commanders after they have demonstrated responsibility and courage on the battlefield. It's part of the tribal system. When fighters work under a commander, they have a father figure responsible for their food, clothes and shelter. This kid was way too young for that job. That was a bad sign, on top of the fact that the rest of them still had their guns raised long after they knew we weren't a threat. The boy told me his name was Istmatullah, and said, "You have green eyes, you must be an American."

Aman explained that I was a journalist who wanted to see the monuments on the hill. Istmatullah loved the idea. I started to explain to Istmatullah that we had to go and he put a hand in my face to shut me up while he put a question to Aman. "Is this his bag?" Istmatullah wanted to know. Aman told him it was. "Does he have a satellite phone?" Aman said Yes, he does. "Is everything in here?" Istmatullah asked, patting the case. "Yes, everything is in there." Aman wanted him to think I was legit so he answered all his questions truthfully. While they were talking, I tapped Abdullah on the shoulder

and drew a circle in the air with a finger, to say turn the car around right now, and he nodded but we didn't move. Istmatullah caught it.

Realizing that we were about to back out of the deal, Istmatullah broke away from questioning Aman and said to me, pointing to his chest, "Dost," which means "friend." I laughed and said, "Dost" back. They had us. Istmatullah wanted us to go up to the hills because he thought that was a fantastic plan. Istmatullah thought that this was efficient because he would go up there, kill us, take the cash, computer and satellite phone and be a made man in Ghazni. This is why the boys had been fighting about who got to ride in the van.

I tried to remember the name of a warlord, the man who had just become governor of Ghazni province with the victory of the mujahedin. He was an old political figure who had fled with the collapse of the Rabbani government. I lied to Istmatullah, "Listen, the monuments are too far, and I have to be back in Ghazni to interview someone." Istmatullah wanted to know who. I said, "Qari Baba is expecting me in 15 minutes," and checked my watch. "We have an interview all set up with the governor, and he doesn't like to wait." Homayoun backed me up, saying I really had to be there or there would be a problem. He explained that we had lost track of time. Istmatullah did the math. If he killed someone who knew the governor, it could be the end of his career. We kept saying the name "Qari Baba" as a kind of lucky charm, because the sound of it made Istmatullah hesitate. It was a ridiculous lie, and it worked.

I told Abdullah to take us directly to the governor's mansion and asked Istmatullah to help us find it. The insane boy was given the responsibility of leading us to the governor's mansion in town. "Help me," I asked the child bandits, "Help me find the governor this afternoon." Most of them drifted away. The guns were gone. Istmatullah had said something to them while I was looking at Aman. "Are you coming back?" Istmatullah asked Aman. "Of

course," Aman said. "We'll have tea at your house." Istmatullah was happy and turned toward his house. Then Abdullah drove back down the riverbed to the main road. The crazy one stopped us once so he could get out and leave his weapon in the dust: He wasn't allowed to bring it in town. In the new security regime for Afghanistan, only regular army soldiers are allowed to carry weapons in cities. Once we were in town, I asked the crazy one his name, and he told me, without looking up, "Mohsin." But it seemed the human spark had gone out of him, leaving Mohsin a shell, all flattened affect and animal movements. He didn't want to be picked up in town. We drove to the governor's place, and he wasn't in. Aman told the guard the ridiculous lie. I acted surprised and put out by the inconvenience of not being allowed to meet with Qari Baba. Mohsin was standing right there and heard the whole conversation, and he looked like he'd been ripped off, he was on to us, but his moment had passed. Aman was worried that he would figure out where we were staying. Night was coming on, and Mohsin went off walking down the street without saying a word. When we got back to the room at the Spinzar, Homayoun said that the murderers of the two brothers at the gas pump had come from Istmatullah's camp, and the whole town of Ghazni lived in fear of them but there was nothing they could do. It was easy to see Mohsin as the killer. The kid with the black shock of hair. Istmatullah was the charmer, the money man, the one the others listened to. The director. After eating, we took a vote on whether we should keep going to Kandahar. It was unanimous. We turned around and headed back for Kabul the next day. ■