

Prologue

It's after lunch by the time the white four-ton truck of the United Nations rolls into town. The letters "UN" are painted loudly in blue on the side and front. It's a comforting sight. Maybe we will be able to get back to Kabul before the snows close the mountain passes.

The driver pulls up to my buddy and me. The dust settles. It's Osman. And he's clearly unhappy. I'm not sure if he's been on private business or what, but I get the impression he's been sent to pick us up against his will. We're unable to communicate. He speaks no English, and we don't speak enough Dari. There's no interpreter to help us clear the air.

I can feel the tension, but I'm not sure of its source. I know it will make for an uncomfortable ride. Two days or more. I could be wrong, but it feels like the trust between us is breaking down.

There's no time to worry about it. It's already late and we're a long way from our destination. We can't be on the road at night. Far too dangerous.

We grab our packs and hop up into the cab of the truck, next to Osman. My buddy gets in first and sits in the middle. I follow and take my place by the door. Life in wartime is a lottery of simple decisions about who sits where.

I don't know exactly where we are, or the route we'll be taking. We have no paper maps and of course Google maps are a thing of the future. We just have to trust Osman.

As we drive out of town, I can't help thinking how different I feel now, compared to the beginning of our road trip just a week ago. I have lost my innocence and sense of wonder. I've seen so much blood, and felt a degree of fear and helplessness that I have never felt before.

I am anxious to get home. At the back of mind, I am a little concerned for my safety, thinking how Mum would take any bad news. Or whether anyone would ever even know if something happened to us out here, in the violent heart of central Asia. At the front of my mind, I'm feeling more pressure to get back to work in London on time, and to simply reassure my wife and family that I'm still alive. Add to all that this new unexplained tension with Osman.

Despite all these unspoken anxieties, there is a tremendous sense of relief that we've finally begun the journey home. I push the dark thoughts away, and concentrate on the scenery.

The snow-capped mountains of the Hindu Kush lie on the horizon. In front of us, and all around us is a giant dusty plain.

This part of Afghanistan looks like the Star Wars desert planet, Tatooine—at least at this season of the year. I have traveled a fair deal in Europe, Africa and India, but this looks and feels thoroughly alien to everything I have ever experienced. You can see fields and meadows that might bloom green after the spring floods. But now, on the eve of winter, green is just a memory. Everything is dusty, dry, brown or khaki. The homes, made from adobe are the same. Their flat roofs and small windows evoke images from childhood Bible stories, or of Tusken raiders. There are few people to be seen. Not much life at all, besides the occasional herd of goats. The only signs of modernity are long, flat concrete bridges over empty river beds. It's other-worldly. It's captivating.

The rebel checkpoints come and go. If the armed men wave us down, we slow to a crawl, and lean out of the window, shouting "*Moolee-mata-heed! Moolee-mata-heed!*"—"United Nations! United Nations!" in Dari. Usually it works, but sometimes we have to show our papers. We are traveling alone, not in a convoy, so we seem to be getting flagged down more often than not. I'm

grateful that we're in a UN truck, with *bona fide* papers. I can't imagine how we'd get through without them.

For our driver, Osman, the checkpoints are clearly getting tiresome. He starts to tsk and mutter at the delays.

Up ahead we see a kid.

A goat herder.

My guess is he's 13 or 14. His clothes are a little ragged. His sandaled feet are caked white with dust. His unkempt mop of black hair is also speckled with dust. He has life and death in his hands, in the form of an ancient looking AK-47.

He is flagging us down, but he seems to be alone. There is no roadblock; his goats are off to the side of the road. Osman tsks. My buddy urges him to slow down. But Osman has had enough of delays. I get the sense he thinks this is one "checkpoint" we can afford to ignore. He curses and pushes down on the accelerator. I gasp.

As we fly by, I can see the kid pulling the weapon up to his shoulder.

He opens fire.

Excerpt from *Bumbling Through the Hindu Kush: A Memoir of Fear and Kindness in Afghanistan* by Chris Woolf

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