

LITTLE SOMAN'S LITTLE WAR

And other portraits by an American Journalist in Afghanistan

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Author's note: The United States war in Afghanistan is the forgotten war. Private military companies and U.S. troops in Afghanistan are today committing egregious atrocities, and the war is mostly off the American media. When it does appear in the U.S. it is the same old U.S. Pentagon information warfare appearing in, for example, the Atlantic Monthly—whose advertisers include Lockheed Martin and Northrup Grumman but whose narratives are consumed like candy by Americans hunger to believe any lie that makes them feel O.K. about what they know in their hearts to be murder. The United States today is committing genocide by using Uranium weaponry and other lethal new “toys” in Afghanistan. After commenting on some nationalistic (America) propaganda produced by some editorializing citizen who has eaten the propaganda I (and others) were accused of “standing around in the thinkers pose like that group on the television commercial that is discussing the Heimlich maneuver while someone is choking.” This is American fascism of the Save Darfur variety. I take deep exception to the accusation that I am doing nothing. My story below offers a testimonial to my concern. It was originally published by Kyoto Journal in Japan; not one American outlet picked it up.

keith harmon snow, December 6, 2007

Dead army tanks are everywhere here. One supposes they are dead. There are dead tanks in villages, sunk in streams, crossing fields, sleeping on hills, burrowing into the wind-swept land like crabs at the beach. In some towns the chunky steel tracks of tanks lie across roads as speed bumps. The dead tanks are like beacons of hopelessness, monuments to the failure of international peace and cooperation.

The tanks astonish me, and one almost kills me. On our trek through the mountains Froozan stops the car for me to photograph a dead tank. I bolt out the door and run over the grass up to the green knoll where the tank sits like a sleeping dinosaur. Froozan and Shehkib run after me, screaming and waving their arms. “These mountains are full of landmines,” they tell me. “You cannot walk twenty feet from any road without there are landmines that will kill you.”

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“Afghanistan is nothing but mountains.” This comes from the man sitting next to me on the plane from Delhi. He is the perfect portrait of Islamic terrorism painted by the United States. Long white beard, turban, robe and spectacles, and we study each other. “*As-salamu Alaykum*,” I say. He is surprised. “*Wa-alaykum as-salamu*,” he nods. The plane descends into Kabul, and fear rises in my belly as we approach the war. The man closes his eyes and prays as the plane touches tarmac. At customs the man passes through the V.I.P. line, passport in one hand, Koran in the other. He looks back at me and then he disappears.

There are two guys hovering outside customs like tired mechanics at a garage with no business. They extort \$20 from me for the short ride to town. Their old Renault sedan is banged up. It has some bullet holes, and no windshield. They drive me to the Spinzar Hotel, interrogating me, promising to show me around for \$100 a day. The dust of people and traffic covers the sunset sky like a red, gritty fog. I sit low and silent in the back seat.

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Day one I sit all morning in the dining room on top of the Spinzar. Looking out at Kabul through the big windows, I wonder how I will do the human rights work I have come to do. I am afraid to leave the hotel, terrified of people who will hate me because I am an American, and terrified of the Americans. I am independent. I don't support the occupation, and I am here to document atrocities, by all sides, and that leaves me vulnerable, an easy target. I am told, day two, that U.S. troops will shoot me if I photograph them.

I hover around the hotel looking stupid and scared. Orzala, the desk manager, rings up his cousin, Azar, to be my fixer. A “fixer” translates and negotiates and makes things happen, or not happen. Azar will come later. Finally I move outside, exploring the street and the vendors with old books spread out on the sidewalk. As dark approaches a man stops to practice English with me, and he takes me to his family's restaurant for tea.

Noorullah is a nurse. “Five years ago there was a lot of shooting in Kabul,” he says, “now there is peace.” He describes a scourge of traffic accidents, bullet wounds, stab wounds and unexploded ordinance. “Here in Kabul there was a lot of mines and shooting,” he says, “and children don't know mines when they find them.”

Noorullah's laugh is a sad, hollow laugh that echoes his disappearing hope. He earns \$125 a month from an Italian NGO that supports his hospital, but government workers get forty bucks a month. “A lot of people are hungry,” Noorullah gestures at the masses shuffling by outside. “So many people are hungry. We are hungry also. Making money is very difficult.”

The masses outside are like ghosts moving through the night. Their clothing, money and prospects are few. On the shelves of Noorullah's shop I count eighty-one twelve-ounce cans and five plastic two-liter bottles of Coca-Cola. There is little else. The walls and floors are thick with Afghan carpets and dusty mirrors. We eat rice and bread and mutton grilled on a stick. Everywhere I go we eat fresh-baked Afghan bread, steamed rice, grilled mutton on a stick, or off it.

Noorullah walks me back through the night to the Spinzar. He invites me to find him at the hospital, and then he moves into the dark street, his head bowed, like someone who fears being seen but who is too proud to skulk like a thief.

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My fixer, Azar, is eighteen. He is a big bony boy, big hands, big smile. His clothes are greasy and torn and he always wears the same clothes. In mutilated English he blurts out that he expects to be paid *FEFF-TEE DOE-LARRSE FUR EVVER-REE DAY-EESE*. It is the first thing he says. He is humble, and also angry, and I tell him we will see how good he is, and he's no good at fixing, and after a day of sightseeing I tell him twenty bucks, and he is happy until I tell him I won't use him again. Anger washes over his face like a cloud passing over the sun.

Azar comes back the next day and takes me to taste the poverty of his family. He has six brothers and two sisters and "home" is like a crowded stable. No one has work. They are too hospitable and they look at me like I am their answer to something. I tell Azar, "O.K., you will be my back-up fixer in Kabul." Working together frustrates both of us, but I feel good giving Azar \$20 for a day with me, and he feels good taking it, but he is always angry after.

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The Spinzar Hotel is an ambivalent sarcophagus. Mornings begin with breakfast in the sunshine of the dining room on top. The gaudy architecture, the spiral staircases, the faded 1960's posters from Afghan tourism advertising smiling British blondes skiing, the long hallways with missing light-bulbs and moldy carpets, the cold, barren rooms—it is as heavy and unappealing as an old bearskin coat and it both suffocates and comforts me. The other hotel guests all appear to be permanent.

The waiter makes me walk over to his table and ask for something, and while standing there he interrogates me out of apathy while staring out the window. Each day's questions become more private, but he never comes to my table. The apathetic waiter sat at his table and smoked, across the big dining room, nostalgic for the days when banquets filled the hall with guests and food and laughter. Some days he only stares at me. The heavy décor is matched by the heaviness of life on the streets, and you feel it from the dining room.

Kabul in March is a dirty, cold, windy city. By then the snow has melted away from the valley but the mountains remain white and frozen. Dirt covers everything, whipped up by old Kazakh and Uzbek trucks that groan and bump over the pot-holed roads and slop through the mud of the morning thaw, and by convoys of Hummers with big guns sticking out of them and U.S. soldiers tucked inside, frightened. The speeding convoys run people down on the streets. There is a thick, cold tension on the street—the week after I left, Kabul exploded in riots and suicide bombings after the latest hit-and-run by U.S. forces.

From the top of the Spinzar I watch the masses of people moving along the canal, the dust rising and blowing them sideways, the people boarding the old, heavy silver-and-blue buses like cattle boarding a train, and the buses roaring off in clouds of dust. Walking the streets of Kabul, the people and dust are as thick as a cattle drive. Like the waiter who didn't want to move from his chair, there is a momentum of decay and hopelessness, as if everything you do will be meaningless, but you must do it, and that is how I felt everywhere in Kabul.

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Azar takes me to a refugee “camp” on the outskirts of the city. The refugees came home from Iran and Pakistan after years of suffering. “The women beg in the streets,” says Jafaar, the community delegate. We are touring shattered buildings that are “home” to 300 families. “There are no jobs for men or for widows. During the winter many children died. Colds. Coughs. Diarrhea. Fevers. There are no doctors helping us. There are two water pumps but these are far from the buildings.”

The gutted, crumbling “buildings” are exoskeletons of former apartment houses and they are seething with suffering. You can see this in the eyes of the old woman cooking gruel in a greasy pot, her only pot, and her only gruel. You can see it in the toothless smile of the government soldier who searches people as they enter the refugee “camp,” his partner smoking a cigarette, finger on trigger. You see it in little Soman, who is hysterical to see you, because she lives with the terror of being a six year-old girl in a war zone, and she cannot help but choke with excitement, which escapes like a squeal out of her mouth and startles even her, making her eyes dart to the adults in fear and her lips seal shut like a clam. Hope and fear bubble behind Soman’s darting eyes.

Soman is excited because I have come to the building where *she* lives, the “home” where she has risen in the morning to find her playmate, Farida, dead, after she plunged three floors and landed face first on cement. They show me the puddle of blood, frozen. There are no bathrooms and no banisters on the stairs and no lights, and three children have fallen in the past month. That is why Soman is hysterical: someone cares enough to witness, to ask questions about people’s lives, to listen to their stories. Across the hall on the third floor, where Soman lives, I peer into an empty room, because they did not want me to go there, and the floor is dotted with piles of shit, like neatly spaced cookies on a huge cookie sheet, half-filled, because it is not safe to move through the building or go outside, where the outhouses are, in the cold, dark night of Kabul.

Covering walls and floors is plastic sheeting branded UNHCR and I ask when UNHCR brought these. They didn’t: they buy the sheeting in the market. There is a blast-hole where the cold wind of Kabul blows over little Soman, huddled up with her mama and her papa and her two sisters and brother, in one bed, shivering, and the images of Soman shivering and Soman squealing with joy and Soman splitting her skull open in the middle of night, haunt me every day I am in Afghanistan, and after.

“The United Nations—UNCHR—this is just a name but they are not caring about us,” said a woman’s rights advocate. “The U.N. says they are helping these refugees but they are not doing anything. If you ask the refugees they will say: ‘We do not know those people. Who are they? They do not come here. No one comes here.’ ”

I asked. It was true. At the offices of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees—whose brand logo is “UNHCR”—the official spokesman was contemptuous and disinterested. “Those people are not refugees. They come to Kabul for a hand out but we are not in the business of hand-outs to people who do not need them.”

No, but photographers and journalists take pictures of the plastic sheeting branded UNHCR—free advertising to win donations from Americans and Europeans back home.

“I told you the UNHCR and UNICEF they are all coming here and making pictures and films and some calendars,” Froozan told me, twice. “They are taking these pictures and publishing these pictures but they do not help the Afghan refugees. They are just selling these pictures or using them to make money for themselves.” I worked for UNICEF in Ethiopia in 2005. I didn’t want to admit it, but Froozan was right.

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I was opening the door to my room at the Spinzar when someone shouted, “Where are you from?” I looked up to see a big Afghan man coming down the hall. “I’m from America.” He was walking fast, his robe in the wind behind him, and his voice thundered through the hall. “I HATE AMERICANS.” He was on me now like a raging bull and I turned and looked him straight in the eye. “All Americans or only the terrorist Americans?” The big man stopped. He was surprised. A smile came over his face, and then he laughed. I didn’t.

Mohammed Miraki was born in Afghanistan in 1983. His family fled the Russian invasion of 1982, arriving in the U.S. in 1984. “There are people starving on the streets,” Mohammed tells me straight off. A social scientist with a PhD, Mohammed is gentle and soft-spoken. He is also appropriately outraged by the ongoing international war crimes against his people.

“The Americans have condemned the Afghan people for ever,” Mohammed says. I can feel his heartbreak. “The use of the weapons of mass destruction destroyed every avenue of hope and prosperity for the Afghan people. The U.S. dropped unexploded cluster bomblets. They were yellow and almost identical to the ready-to-eat meals parachuted from the air to “save” hungry Afghans. Meanwhile, the ten million mines from the Soviets’ invasion in the 1980’s terrify and kill Afghans on daily basis. The U.S. used the Afghan people to defeat the former Soviet Union and then abandoned them to die and maim. The legacy of death and destruction from the past and the present haunts Afghans as they try to survive their daily misery.”

Mohammed has turned away from the U.S. “liberation” job schemes and high salaries of the non-government “humanitarian” sector in Afghanistan. He leaves Afghanistan soon after I do, and he uses his own money to produce a photo book—[Afghanistan After Democracy](http://www.afghanistanafterdemocracy.com) (www.afghanistanafterdemocracy.com). He hopes to raise awareness and funds to build a small hospital and a uranium research facility to help his people.

“There’s uranium from American weapons all over the country, causing birth defects and other casualties. This is not reported by the Western media.” Mohammed pulls out photos collected by the maternity staff at a hospital in Kabul. They are photos of deformed babies. I am unable to eat my breakfast and I want to run away from the table, and from Mohammed, and from Afghanistan.

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I am sitting on a rooftop on a steep hillside in Kabul negotiating with Froozan and Shehkib to travel to the north. Froozan is twenty-one and cousin Shehkib is twenty-three. Yes, he has a good car. Yes, he knows all the military commanders and he can get us interviews. Yes, he can take me to the poppy farmers. No, nothing less than \$95 a day, I pay gas and food. No, I don’t have to pay for repairs if the car breaks down. We negotiate the price. We will leave for Mazar-i-Sharif in two days.

An hour with Froozan teaches me more than two days with Azar. “The U.S. wants to maintain a presence in Afghanistan,” Froozan says. “The majority of Afghan people believe that this is, first, to get investments, to make money, and second, to use Afghanistan to control Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Pakistan and Iran. If the U.S. keeps the war going it has a reason to stay. If the fighting stops, the Afghan people will say: “Why is the United States military still here?”

I grew a beard for Afghanistan. I also wore traditional clothes, with Froozan and Shehkib’s instruction. Wherever we go the men ask, privately, curiously, from where in Afghanistan is *that one* from? I speak a few key phrases in Dari, greet with *As-salamu alaykum*, and I am treated kindly and warmly.

Froozan and Shehkib everywhere prowl after girls. I learn about gender dynamics by watching them. They also probed me about Western women. “I have been with prostitutes,” Froozan boasted. “But I cannot let my father know this. I have been to brothels in China too. There’s a lot of prostitution in Afghanistan.” Froozan described the Chinese bars where Americans go for sex, and how prostitution is officially forbidden and secretly encouraged. He told me how Afghan girls on their wedding night have to prove that they are virgins. Froozan will expect this of his bride; it is his heritage, his entitlement. “Blood is collected on a handkerchief, but if she is not a virgin a girl will be forbidden to marry unless with a widower.”

In two weeks with Shehkib and Froozan we have fun together, and they challenge me, and I challenge them. In the end, Shehkib and Froozan are humbled mildly by life’s surprises. They promised a lot, but they couldn’t produce, and they wouldn’t admit it. Flying across the plains of Sheberghan the windshield exploded and the shattered glass poured onto us like hail. I agree to pay for the new windshield, since we can’t work the dusty roads without it. When the brakes fail on the car, I pay.

And then I get sick, and it is no fun. Froozan and Shehkib can’t understand how I could be so sick and still want to keep working, so they decide I am not sick at all. But I am sick for a week, hardly get out of bed, and my fixers play—hot baths at the bathhouses, cruising the town in the car, extra time at the mosque—and still they hold me to the agreed daily rate. Soldiers take us prisoner in Kunduz, and I have to fix it.

My fixers knew some things, and what they didn’t know they made up for with the boldness and arrogance of youth and good looks. They are handsome, and they have trained in martial arts, and they are strong but overconfident. Their whole lives are before them, and they want their piece of the pie, and they will work for anyone to get it. Froozan worked as a fixer for Dyncorp, he says, until another fixer was beheaded “for betraying Afghanistan and working for terrorists.” Froozan’s father forced him to quit. They didn’t care why I was there, as long as they got paid.

But they fawn and lurk—and slow the car—when they see a woman’s ankles showing under her gown, and a woman in blue jeans—unlikely outside Kabul—stirs their testosterone and heats their Dari conversations. They don’t speak to the women, ever. They get excited about women, who are shrouded by *burkhas* and gowns, and I laugh out loud at this, and they are confused and embarrassed. It is profoundly ridiculous, I tell them, laughing, to leer at a *mummy*.

It is impossible for me to get close to women, to understand this side of Afghan society and culture. The walled compounds in the countryside are sealed to me, unless I am with the men of the family,

and then the women are hidden. Almost everything is forbidden. I come to see the *burkha* as both prison, and fortress, enslaving femininity, and protecting it from raw, male aggression. I am told that this perception is culturally arrogant, that the *burkha* is always worn with honor, by choice.

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Young women all over the country set themselves on fire with kerosene. Immolation is escape. Men of some families try to beat the spirit out of young women, and the trauma and social upheaval of the occupation make it worse. Women are traded here. Young women take pills, cut wrists, hang themselves—anything to escape an arranged marriage to an older man, or marriage to erase a debt.

“There is an epidemic of suicides,” a woman from RAWA tells me. RAWA is the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan. Two RAWA women had met me in the Spinzar lobby. They are young but undeterred by the taboo of meeting a Western man in public. They wear scarves but no *burkhas*. “Many women who burn themselves do not die and then they endure unspeakable misery.”

The women tell me the U.S. has brought fundamentalism to Afghanistan. I hear this over and over. We do this by supporting a government of warlords and drug-runners: President Hamid Kharzai’s brother, Wali Kharzai, is the leading agent in the opium and heroin trade. With all the negativity attributed to the Taliban, the Taliban had crushed the opium and heroine trade, and they forbade forced marriages and protected the inheritance rights of women.

“The Taliban—these are not terrorists,” Shehkib says later. “The occupation is creating the Taliban. Every time American soldiers break down a door in the middle of the night they create another family of Taliban.” The Pashtun people in the south are very conservative. It is a question of honor, says Froozan. He tells me about sexual atrocities committed by occupation forces buying children. “You *never* dishonor my family, because you dishonor me. Not in Afghanistan. I will become what you call “Taliban.” And I will kill you.”

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In Kabul there are few advertisements and outside Kabul, none. The few billboards are campaigning against opium or celebrating the martyred hero Ahmed Shah Massoud. If you have not read the history of Afghanistan written by white people you are able to learn about this man without prejudice. And while poppy cultivation is publicly admonished, farmers everywhere grow poppies, and after talking with them I support it. It is the same old story: destroy the lives and livelihoods of rural farmers, but give them no reasonable choices. But the absence of advertising is something you must see for yourself. There are only the dead tanks advertising war.

Everywhere we stop in these astonishing mountains are stones—painted red for danger—marking fields of invisible land mines. One landmine expert told me that the United Nations will take eight years to clear Afghanistan, but that his company could do it in three, and that is why they lost their contract. “Landmines are not designed to kill,” Noorullah told me, at the hospital. “They are designed to maim, making the victim a burden on the family.”

I was everywhere astonished in Afghanistan, and everywhere afraid. Across the plains, through the green hills and white mountains and black tunnel of the Salang pass, rutted with ice floes and snow banks, and out the other side, and down into the sleepy valleys, where burros grazed along milky rivers and olive trees blossomed in green fields, and shepherds ambled along behind their flocks, waiting for the explosion.

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When the brakes blow out we stop in *Pul-i Khumri* town for repairs. A man pulls up his robe and proudly displays his two prosthetic legs while a little boy begins the brake job. The boy removing the tires can't be ten years old. When he takes off the brake shoes I am, of course, astonished. There's a man watching, but the boy does the job. He's got grease on his face and seatbelts for suspenders. He is another Soman, another child in a war zone, fighting his little fight to survive, and I can't stop thinking about the mixture of sadness and confusion and joy in his eyes.

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We pick up an old man begging for a ride. He wants a drink, and we buy him a Coke, his choice, and some hot Afghan bread and mutton on a stick. His name is Zalaika and he is eighty years old and he has been walking for seven days. He talks softly, and his story stirs the hearts of Froozan and Shehkiab.

"I am beggar," he says, "living and moving here and there, and no one is caring." When Shehkiab asks about his family, he cries openly: all eight members killed by the war. He sobs quietly in the back seat. It is as if he has never been asked, as if he has been walking in the valley of the shadow of death, and needed to share his grief, and be seen for what he is—a man.

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At the top of a knoll in a place called Sherberghan the children of the village have turned their dead tank into a toy. It is their plaything, their jungle gym, and their merry-go-round. There are few other toys, but two boys on the hillside of a sacred shrine pulled pop-guns out of their pockets and killed each other, laughing and hitting and running off, and I saw one white doll, unloved, like a puppy dog in a window. But here they play with dead tanks, and deadly tanks.

Children not yet ten push on the barrel and run with it, rotating the turret and running it around and around. The barrel rises and falls across their chests or bellies or noses as the ground rises and falls beneath their feet, and when they reach a valley in the cycle they throw their bodies over the barrel and tuck their legs and together they are carried forward on the momentum of a long steel pipe cast with the intent to commit murder.

Half buried in sand, and long since cannibalized, I inspect the tanks innards through the open porthole on the turret: loose cables, shattered instruments, mangled levers, everything coated with dust. I stare at these monoliths wondering how they came to rest, who they defended, who defended them, who paid for them, who died in them, who died because of them. I wonder what it is like for children who grow up with dead tanks but no schools. Maybe the children's stories here are full of dead fathers, dead mothers, dead cousins and dead brothers, killed by these dead tanks.

Standing near the tank I feel the magnetism of it. I want to play on it too. Suddenly an old man comes along swinging a stick, hollering roughly, driving the children off, and shouting at me. Last week a boy of twelve was hurt here Shehkib translates. He got his hand stuck under the turret and like a giant slicing machine it sliced it off at the wrist. The other children just kept running the turret around and around while the boy ran screaming down the hill and the blood ran out of the stub where his hand was. The hand was ground up by the turret. The boy died. The old man finishes the story. He stares at me, trying to understand, and then he turns away. ~