Food for Work

Saturday, September 27, 1971

Baqi clears his throat. These are uncertain times for Farah's director of provincial development. For years he's done next to nothing. But then he had next to nothing for a budget. Change comes hard, and that's what we represent. He clears his throat again before introducing our team to the governor, just back from Kabul. The governor speaks better English than Baqi or anybody else we've met in the province. And certainly nobody dresses like him—pressed gray suit, dress shirt, jeweled, broad-band ring on index finger, no tie, no belt, no socks, leather sandals. It tells you he wasn't born to money. Not urban money, anyway. Big fish in a small pond, he is not used to foreigners. But having been briefed by the minister without portfolio, he wants to help. The stakes are high, for the rains have failed, and when the water table falls below collection points, irrigation ditches go dry. Rather than dig deeper, the farmers are saying it's God's will.

Well, not everyone has been so accepting; violence is on the upswing. Afghan against Afghan in most cases, but five Westerners have been murdered this year. Lest blame shift toward

the government, the minister together with the UN Development Program announced “Food for Work.” The US and other donors will supply wheat, a staple (along with mutton and rice) of the local diet. Underemployed farmers will work for it, so as not to become dependent on the dole. Given corruption and other inefficiencies, the payout would never reach the intended recipients without foreigners at the end of the pipeline. Those foreigners need no special expertise. They only have to be, and behave like, disinterested outsiders. Just the job for the Peace Corps.

I tell the governor about the projects we’ve surveyed. Our team consists of one German and three American volunteers plus three Afghan engineers. A week into it, we’re ready to go “live.” Begin immediately, he says. He’ll sign the paperwork later. The people can’t wait.

A school well and the municipal *karez* head the list, *karezzes* being underground irrigation canals common to this part of Afghanistan. We’ll round up the workers, let them choose their foremen. That should require about half our team. Baqi can take them in his pickup.

A politician more than an administrator, the governor assures us he’ll be there for the opening ceremonies.

I note we couldn’t have done it without Baqi.

Flattery makes him stand taller. His hair’s been brushed.

Excellent, the governor says. By then we've reverted to Pashto. The people are hungry, he adds. How much are we paying them?

Baqi and our team have been going back and forth on this. If you pay too much, he cautioned, nobody will work on anything else. He turns to Al, who faces straight ahead, placid and silent. Al is Peace Corps staff, here only to observe. It’s on me to speak. Based on advanced age (twenty-seven) and time in country (one year), I’ve been designated team leader.

UNDP recommended one seer, I report. Seven kilos. That’s for a day’s work.

Ooh. The governor chews that over. In Shebergan they pay two and a half kilos, he says. Shebergan lies a day's drive to the north. The going rate in Farah is half a seer.

People are hungry, I remind him. One seer, the math is easy.

He thinks about that. Okay, he concedes. One seer. Can we do it?

Assuming the wheat arrives, I say. Other assumptions are best left unsaid. A concept is one thing, a shovel another. End of the day, it comes down to people.

On its way, he confirms. Nimruz has wheat but no program like ours. Can we start one there?

That's for the minister to say.

The governor there—it's just south of us—is this one's friend. He stopped to see him on the way here. Apparently our governor promised we'd go to that province next. And, oh—he smiles a sharp smile and clasps his hands together—he's heard we're interested in Gulistan and Purchaman, up in the highlands of eastern Farah.

I was going to mention that. The team discussed it, and not for the first time, at breakfast. I say we could go as early as today.

He nods, saying check with him if we want to go farther than Gulistan.

Shouldn't we? I ask. Purchaman lies beyond Gulistan.

Wait until you've seen Gulistan. That might be enough. He laughs from deep in his throat. Don't promise more than you can deliver, he warns with no sense of irony. And don't let the khans trick you into doing things just for themselves.

He ought to know, he admits. He's a khan himself. A feudal lord. But from the eastern part of the country.

One more thing, he adds. Never drive after dark.

Bandits?

From Iran, he elaborates in English. Not Farah. Farah people no thief. Trick, yes. Thief, no.

Farah is one of four provinces in the initial phase. The Peace Corps is providing twelve volunteers in all, the Germans two, and the ministry of provincial development thirty "engineers," most of them recent high school graduates. We foreigners trained for ten days, emphasis on math, surveying, teambuilding, and cultural/political sensitivities. Emergency response, lives in the balance—we were stoked, our Afghan counterparts not so much. They showed little interest in going out (or back) to the sticks. For two months only, they were assured; home for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. New hires, they're at the bottom of the pecking order. Even in their youth they have the cynical air of those accustomed to broken promises.

Nobody we knew had ever been to Farah. A two-day drive from Kabul, it was a blank space on the map between Kandahar and Herat. Afghan staff vaguely recalled two volunteers in the provincial capital several years earlier. Communist demonstrators drove them out. The same thing happened more recently to a representative of the World Food Programme. Kabulese who knew Farah at all called it the Red Province. The Peace Corps never went back. The minister gave us a pep talk. Farah should rejoin the fold.

Baqi stays in town with the other half of the team while two Afghan engineers, fellow volunteer Charlie, and I, along with a functionary from the development office, pile into Al's Travelall van, Al at the wheel. He drove up from Kandahar because this is a pilot project with high-level interest. His chatty side comes out when we're by ourselves, when he holds forth on topics that can range, as they do today, from Persian poetry to Mullah Nasruddin, subject of

many an Afghan folktale. A mullah is the Islamic equivalent of a village priest. In some tales Nasruddin is a fool. In others he's clever. Afghans like it both ways. What strikes me as a contradiction seems as normal as night and day to them. And to Al, for that matter. His banter makes the long, rough ride bearable for our engineers.

The development functionary watches closely as those two revel in the give and take. He didn't know foreigners could be so much fun. We didn't recognize him at first. He's a quiet, dusty guy Baqi failed to introduce at the office. We should have insisted. Named Amin, he probably does all the work.

It takes both spares to get us the seventy clicks to the paved highway between Herat and Kandahar. Ghulam, the older and more serious of the engineers, and Amin pitch in on the tire changing, as do Charlie and I, though clearly Al has done this many times on his own. The younger engineer, Mahdud, squats in the shade of the Travelall, cracking jokes that elicit strained smiles from Al and Ghulam.

Fingers crossed, we cruise the 125 kilometers down the paved road to Delaram, where we refresh ourselves at a teahouse while a repair shop patches the tires. It gives us a chance to ogle two tourist girls off a bus making a rest stop at the teahouse next to ours.

WTs, the Peace Corps calls them. World travelers. That's a pejorative, and we've been told to keep our distance. They eye us back in a way that implies they're open to alternatives. I tease Charlie about it, and Mahdud joins in. Charlie—gangly, trusting, a year out of college, and new to Afghanistan—practically blushes. His curly blond locks, sideburns down to the jaw, probably caught their attention. Like me and like no one else in Farah, he wears glasses. They aren't Peace Corps issue; there's a flare to them, a gold-like plate on the earpieces that flashes in the sun. And he's tall, you can tell even when he's sitting. Al's tall, too, but he's broad at the beam and

naturally tonsured. A man who dangles prayer beads over the table isn't going to attract just anybody. He doesn't say a word. He doesn't have to. We all know that talking to them would burst the bubble. Peace Corps volunteers—PCVs, we call ourselves—don't have much standing among WTs. We're straight. That's *their* pejorative.

Hips sway and jewelry jangles as the WTs sashay onto the bus. Every male in a hundred yards, and I see no other females, is taking it in. Two Jesus lookalikes get on behind. They must have been over by the shops. Hashish, laissez-faire, low cost of living, and an exotic locale have marked Afghanistan for the hippie trail. Fifty dollars will buy a bus ticket from London to Kabul. Another twenty-five will get you to Kathmandu, the ultimate in peace, love, and harmony. This is not one of those buses, however. The other passengers are Afghan. Finally I spot a few local women, their faces pressed to the back window. No bathroom break for them. Leaving a cloud of exhaust in its wake, the bus pulls onto the road for Kandahar.

Our tires are still getting patched, so we have a second round of lukewarm Fantas. A Coca-Cola bottling plant opened, to great excitement, in Kabul this summer. Tea is cheaper and a time-honored tradition, but those who can afford it spring for brand-name effervescence, a connection to the world outside.

Al can't be much older than me though he looks it, not only because of his bald spot and middle-aged spread. He gives the impression he understands how he—and we—fit into the scheme of things. He spoke Hungarian at home as a kid, majored in German, and taught English for three years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Mazar-i-Sharif. He then went as staff to Libya, where he learned Arabic and was the last of the Peace Corps to leave when Qadhafi came to power. After that, back to Afghanistan.

He admits he should be checking on the other volunteers he's responsible for, but it's not every day he goes on an expedition like this. His other volunteers are teaching school or have been at their jobs for more than a year. He claims they're better off without him. More independent.

This trip gives him an opportunity to talk to Afghans outside their shops and offices. He drops puns in Pashto as well as Dari, the country's other main language, and even our counterparts defer to him on etymology. Now, while we retrieve our tires, they want to talk about WTs. Because travelers tend to linger in Kabul, Mahdud's home town, he's looking for pickup lines. He says, with a laugh to show he's joking, he'll start by saying I love you.

Better to say you're rich, I advise.

No, Charlie says, tell them you have a farm.

Really? Mahdud asks.

Say you grow your own.

Mahdud strokes his longish hair while he ponders that. Endowed with the air of a favorite son, he's not poor. Recently shined shoes and a sheepskin jacket bought with money his father gave him as a going-away present confirm it. Both also confirm he is not rich. Rich men, or their sons, don't come to a place like this on a job like this. I wouldn't call him middle-class, either, with all that implies. I'd say he's a young man who would like to be, once he discovers how, on the make.

Delaram is in Nimruz province, but a road out the back leads to eastern Farah. We get off the pavement there, hoping the tires hold up. Proceeding cautiously, it takes us three hours to cover the sixty kilometers—nearly all of them uphill—to Gulistan. The uneven terrain hints of

some prehistoric, or prospective, upheaval, and the scattered plants that texture it emit the dull sheen of pressed flowers, the ground so hard-baked and untrodden it keeps the dust down. The lowlands were sandier, shiftier, better adjusted.

A trickle, the first surface water we've seen in the province, flows in a streambed the road follows for the final leg of our journey. There's enough water in that stretch to nurture livelier flora and even a few houses. A girl trit-trots out from one with a jug on her shoulders. Seeing us, she slows down to watch. She remains in that position, diminishing into the horizon. Grows her own, Mahdud quips.

The highlands have crept up on us. They're more rounded, less jagged, than the ridges near Farah town. A hint of green illuminated by the late afternoon sun mixes with gray on the upper slopes. More houses, and then Gulistan town appears. Hills rise behind its one street, pinching the view. There's a teahouse and a few shops, most of them closed.

The acting district chief steps into the street. Unlike the other men in sight, he wears Western slacks and the sport coat expected of government officials. He's young, not much older than Al. He'd been watching a shop that sells cigarettes, candles, salt, soap, and sundries, doing it for his brother who went home—he gestures toward the other end of town—for dinner. Anyway, he knew we were coming and invites us into the district reception hall. He leaves the shop untended, confident that no one he knows—and we're the only strangers—would take advantage.

We enter a room the size of the governor's office but without the furniture. We take turns going to a stone outhouse in the back and then sloshing our hands in a rivulet down from the street. The water is clearer and cooler but not necessarily cleaner than that which we drew from our well in Farah town. In a redundant but appreciated courtesy, a servant brings an ewer, basin,

fresh bar of soap, and hand towel into the room. He pours; we wash. Like us, he leaves his shoes at the door. He returns with bread direct from the oven and then goes for the rest of the meal, which he sets on a plastic mat in front of cushions that line the walls. We sit cross-legged, Afghan style. The stew is made from fat-tailed mutton like that which we had every day in the lowlands, though this version contains more onion and less potato than we're used to. Between mouthfuls we describe the program to our host, who's already eaten and so takes only tea. The district chief went to see the governor, he says. He doesn't know how we missed him.

He bids us goodnight, and we sleep where we ate. I keep my legs warm under my sleeping bag while I write in the journal our country director asked me to keep for "lessons learned." Knowing there'll be no time for that, I do it for myself, for the discipline. Not until I flick off the flashlight do I realize the lantern that the servant brought after dinner has gone out. Although the district office has a generator and a lightbulb hangs from the ceiling, they're conserving fuel in case the governor visits. He came once, his inaugural tour.

The entire crew is asleep. It can't be that late but I'm not sure. I left my watch and other nonessential gear in Kabul. I needed it last year when I taught English in a village outside of Jalalabad. The school had no electricity, so we synchronized with Kabul Radio. In Farah farmers go by the sun, moon, and stars. That works because it rarely clouds over. Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin wear watches, as do Al and Baqi. But when will Charlie and I get another chance to live without a timepiece? There's no escaping it: the counterculture extends even to us straights, even to Gulistan.

Used to be, American kids followed in their parents' footsteps. Only headstrong or desperate youths set off in the opposite direction. Nowadays it's the majority. Last winter my

father wrote to see if I was interested in taking over the coal, feed, and lumber yard that had been in the family since the Civil War. My grandfather was getting old, and they had an offer for the land.

I knew that'd be coming, eventually. I just didn't expect it so soon, and from so far away. They worked five days a week, half day on Saturday. Because Grandpa couldn't run things by himself anymore, my father hadn't taken a vacation in eight years. The day my draft notice arrived he told me I was making more than he ever did. I was a junior accountant, one week out of college, and he hoped I'd do the smart thing, the safe thing, with the Reserves or the Guard.

Sell, I wrote back.

He'd seen the signs. He just wanted to make sure.

This summer the new owners tore everything down. They're replacing it with a self-service gas station. My grandfather retired to his rose garden, and my father found work at an insurance company. Neither has much regard for the Peace Corps because they associate it with Kennedy. They have the same problem with Vietnam. They're old-fashioned conservatives who oppose all foreign entanglements.

I go for a good-night pee behind the outhouse. It *is* early, I can tell, because lanterns and candles flicker in the street. The elevation gain has brought us a half mile closer to the stars. It makes them appear sharper, their twinkle crisper. A subtle but pervasive glow emanates from the ground itself. No need for flashlights. Like the ridgeline above, they narrow the vision. The farther I get from town, the clearer I think I think. It was the same in Vietnam. As an auditor there, I checked on others. *Advised* them, really. This beats that. We're the instigators here.

Sunday

We divide into two groups so we can cover more ground. Charlie, Mahdud, Amin, and a

few elders go down the valley. Ghulam, Al, the acting district chief, hangers-on, and I head upstream to survey potential projects. The main type we can support is re-covering creek-bed karezzes the locals call *chalks*.

We will try to give the same amount of work and of course pay the same rate to each village. They want it done with mortar and cement. No can do, we tell them. Transport is expensive, and cement is one and done. Local materials would be all theirs, and they could replicate the process.

Each of our two groups finds itself at a meal prepared by a separate village. In one sense our hosts can't afford it. In another they can't afford not to try and build a bond. We're creatures of our cultures, and theirs requires them to welcome strangers.

Midafternoon our two groups run into each other in the street. Charlie, with support from Amin and Mahdud, has kept on message. He may seem callow but he's solid, seemingly impervious to pressure. Mahdud does better when his colleagues from Kabul aren't around to impress. I suspect Amin helps with that. Amin may be a nebbish—he sure looks the part—but he knows a lot, and he doesn't seem to be gaming us the way his boss Baqi usually is.

We go over our assessments with the acting district chief. We like that he doesn't try to push us into pet projects or big ones beyond our competence. He lets us use the district phone to call the governor. The governor wants to talk with him first. *Bali bali*, the acting district chief keeps saying. Yes, yes. Maybe he can't speak freely because we're standing right next to him. Or maybe that's what you say to the governor no matter what you're going to do, or not do.

I get on the line to describe the projects. In the morning we'll look at a few more. The governor says he told the chief to go ahead with anything that meets our approval. He's champing at the bit. This is prelim, I explain. Baqi needs to sign off.

Baqi works for *me*! the Governor practically shouts. I put a few inches between the phone and my ear. What he doesn't say is Baqi also reports to the minister in Kabul. And what's his name—the governor pauses—works for Baqi.

Amin, I say.

Is he giving you problems?

No, no. But the farmers have to choose their foreman. The foreman has to agree to the specs. The chief will follow up.

The governor snorts.

He's been great, I attest. In the meantime we'll return to Farah town, double-check the math, complete the forms, set priorities, coordinate the teams, arrange for wheat deliveries, and then send a couple of guys here to get the earth moving. Might take a few days.

The governor tells me to head back after tomorrow's lunch. See him that evening.

I remind him we haven't gone to Purchaman.

There's a pause.

Governor?

It's on the other side of the mountain! he exclaims, his voice made both rougher and smoother by the connection. How would you get the wheat there?

Isn't there a road?

Not much of one, he says.

We got this far.

It's your decision.

Aren't they hungry, too?

They don't use karezzes, he says.

Chalks, I guess.

Another snort.

Asked what they do use, he says there's a schoolhouse in need of repair, a new roof or something, and they'll probably show us wells they haven't maintained. The parliamentary representative from the area—the *Wakil*—keeps asking for roads. And guess who owns the only private vehicle in the district? The governor chuckles. That's our little secret.

Monday

After finishing on-site inspections and devising an overall plan for Gulistan valley, we load the van, follow the road past where we hiked the day before, and take a fork that leads north up the ridge to Purchaman. Gulistan the town and then the valley recede from view. We keep climbing. Far above, from what appears to be the crest, a solitary figure stands in our path, legs spread, arms folded, watching us. Wrapped in a cape blacker than anything we've seen in this province, the man looms like a prophet here to urge our repentance. A white turban adds to the effect. He's huge, with a salt-and-pepper beard the size and shape of a wreath. The glimmer in his eyes brightens, as though reflecting the sun on his face, with our approach. He doesn't need to squint because he's looking down at us coming up. Finally, as we rise to his level, he shades his eyes with his hand. Behind him a second man is bent under the hood of a Russian jeep. They're not on the ridgetop, as I thought from lower down. Higher crests have come into view. The man in black flaps his hand for us to stop, as if we could pass this spectacle by.

And so we meet the Wakil. He was traveling to Gulistan when his jeep failed. On the *downhill* side. That makes him laugh. He swats at the dust on his cape, the little there is of it. The road here is green with grass and gray with rock. This is not the Farah of the lowlands, where no one would consider such a get-up. Good God, the cape is *wool*. Unfastened, like something Dracula or a bullfighter might affect, it accentuates girth and gesture. Under it he wears *salwar kameez*, the combo long-sleeve tunic and baggy trousers common to the area, his a silky white that matches the turban on top.

Saying he has responsibilities as a host—no American has ever come this way before—the Wakil insists on accompanying us. His rollicking voice picks up the merriment in his face, the crinkling around his eyes. Although the acting district chief told us the phone to Purchaman was

out, and we've seen no transmission line, the Wakil acts as if he'd been waiting for us.

You can't be surprised, Al notes, if you have no expectations. For a man like the Wakil, something always comes along. He ensconces himself on the middle bench, forcing the rest of us to squeeze together. With that cape and what's under it, he takes the place of two. He breathes heavily and is already telling Al which way to go. For all his joviality we foreigners have taken an instant dislike to the man. Speaking only when spoken to, Al rubs the back of his neck with one hand while keeping the other on the wheel. Charlie—half smile, eyes cocked—goes silent. The word *wakil* can mean lawyer, and the man is so much better off than the people we've been sent to help.

We're not the only ones to get our noses out of joint. His oblivious, imperious manner has Mahdud and Ghulam muttering to each other. Only Amin seems unperturbed, but then he has no one to confide in, and he's not one to show his hand. It's the Wakil, not Amin, who mentions they've met—last year in the Governor's office.

He leaves his driver with the busted jeep. No wonder it broke down. Switchbacks are for sissies: this road heads straight up. It is barely differentiated from the mountain. With the new rider's extra weight, our Travelall suffers vapor lock many times over. On several occasions we have to get out and walk.

Roads help everybody, the Wakil declares as he strains to keep up. Truckers. Taxi drivers. Us. Look at yourselves, he says between huffs and puffs, his hands propped on his knees. Don't be tired. Russians.

Russians?

He smiles, lifting his eyebrows. The exercise has turned his complexion ruddy. Farmers, he adds. Traders. Police. With a real road maybe even the governor might visit! That gets him

laughing.

You and he friends? I ask as we wait for Al to bring up the Travelall.

That keeps the Wakil laughing.

Covering all bases, he quizzes Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin about Food for Work and how they got into it. Meanwhile Charlie has been asking our counterparts about rural engineering. They teach, he learns, and it gets Ghulam and Mahdud out of their funk. We go for hours without sign of people, houses, or vehicles. The sun to our rear balances the cool, almost subalpine, air. Each high point we approach leads to speculation that Purchaman lurks just over the ridge. That too makes the Wakil laugh. He knows the barren saddles that lie between.

At last Purchaman reveals itself, low and with barely enough cohesion to qualify as a town. Row upon row of slate-colored mountains rise behind it to the east. They get higher as they get farther. Is that snow? I ask. It could be haze. Or clouds.

Yes, Mahdud affirms. Bamiyan mountains have snow all year.

Appropriate to the conversation, he's donned his new jacket. *Posteen* is the word for it; in Kabul tourist shops sell them. He tugs the fleece-trimmed collar tight around his neck. In Bamiyan men may actually wear posteens without preening.

Uruzgan, Ghulam counters. No snow.

Mahdud says he's been to Bamiyan. He should know.

Amin mentions a mountain in Farah has snow. He saw it on the drive here. Had he known of our interest, he would have pointed it out. We were busy with the carburetor then.

Mahdud asks if I know the Dari word for snow.

I say the Pashto.

Dari, he insists.

Every volunteer knows it: *barf*, which is also the brand name for the country's detergent. We have a box at the house.

He says it. He laughs and then translates the English into Dari for the Afghans. Their smiles suggest they're embarrassed for him.

We spend the night in the district capital, again all in one room as arranged by the Wakil, who sleeps elsewhere. The District Chief checks in before dinner. Not so dapper as his counterpart in Gulistan, he wears the same dun-colored salwar kameez as nearly everyone else. On him they could pass for pajamas. He has no projects in mind; he recommends asking the villagers. I don't think he takes us seriously. He speaks in Dari, which Mahdud and Ghulam prefer. Al says it's closer to the modern Farsi spoken in Iran than to the Dari you hear in Kabul. He translates for Charlie and me.

We dip bread into sautéed vegetables—eggplant and squash—unavailable in the lowlands. Ghulam nods a grudging approval. He, Amin, and Mahdud are anxious to return. They don't want to get between the Wakil and the governor.

Amin, a small man in his thirties, his short hair and beard already turning gray, has the look of a guy who isn't going to get anywhere in this world except through longevity. Baqi sent him to get out of going himself. I remind him he's the director's field representative. We need his buy-in. He thinks about that. It's better than a flat-out no.

Tuesday

Ghulam and Mahdud are first to rise. The blankets they slept under drape across their shoulders, and a steel-blue sleeveless sweater under Ghulam's sport coat lends color to his wardrobe. Mahdud's elbows press into his posteen for warmth while he and Ghulam rub their hands together like cowpokes around a campfire. Seeing me peek out of my sleeping bag, Mahdud booms good morning in Pashto.

The sun streams through the window, capturing cream-colored motes in its rays. I pull on a sweater that had been my father's until the moths got to it. My trousers are old dress greens, my boots government issued for the jungle but just as good in the desert. Charlie goes out in a light jacket and comes back patting his arms. His cheeks are rosy. Having sweltered on Farah's plains, he's disappointed. He thought there'd be frost.

You can see your breath, I console him. Even inside. Now we know why the Wakil wears a cape.

A servant carries in warm bread and hot tea that ease us through the chill.

The district chief slips out of his sandals and comes in. After the greetings, most of them in Dari, he asks a question I don't understand. He asks again.

Pashto! Mahmud interjects. They (Charlie and I) don't know Dari.

The chief smiles. We told him that last night. In Pashto he asks if we'll do wells. Yes, indeed. Schools? Anything to get the wheat out.

He addresses me as *Enjunyair Sayib*: Mr. Engineer. No, no, I explain. That's our counterparts. They're comfortable with the title. They earned it in school.

Ghulam describes the program more fully than we did over dinner, Mahdud commenting from time to time, and Amin fills in from his department's perspective. They do it in both Dari

and Pashto. The chief's eyes glaze over.

Enter the Wakil, cape and all. You think this place is poor, he says, having figured how to work us, you ought to see the next valley—Lerband. He'll show us.

The district chief wags his head, meaning he'll stay, thank you.

Steep and rugged, the road is too much for the van. We have to abandon it near the top of a pass. Just as well, Al remarks. We're running low on fuel.

As on yesterday's route, grass grows among the rocks. These higher elevations must get more rain, or dew. The descent is gradual, parallel to the ridgeline and with a view of Lerband all the way down. The village at the bottom strikes us as very beautiful. The Wakil's eyes beam to see us take it in. Willows and poplars line a streambed. Above it, houses separated by mulberry trees form a checkerboard. The buildings are not so bunched as in Gulistan or even Purchaman. We don't see a single shop. Our arrival draws residents into the one street, which bends and dips with the lay of the land. In order of proximity to us, boys, girls, men, and a few women stare. They've never seen the like.

Tsangaye, I say, Pashto for *how are you*?

Charlie says it, too.

Staire mashay, I persist. Don't be tired.

Boys titter to hear such an accent.

I say it again.

A man repeats it back to me like you're supposed to. He's a farmer, brown-bearded and gaunt with gaps in his teeth. Barefoot. Heck, they're all farmers or shepherds, most of them clothed in gray—a pale gray, like the rocks at our feet. The boys' outfits are darker, like wet

stone, probably because they're newer. The girls and women get red, green, and black. No washed-out colors for them.

The man and I shake hands. Everything good? How's the health? The family?

Other men step forward. We're all shaking hands. I even hear Ghulam and Mahdud talking Pashto. Like Charlie and me, they can get by if they have to. Then they burst out laughing—they've discovered the farmers' first language is Dari.

Remember the roads, the Wakil implores. He's afraid we're turning into tourists. Remember how you had to walk here.

Representative doesn't really capture his status. Educated in Herat and then Kabul, he's a khan-and-a-half. Lerband happens to be his home village, a fact he failed to mention until we set foot in it. Elders greet him, holding his hand in theirs. One drops to his knees to kiss it. He takes credit for bringing aid-givers from America and engineers from Kabul. Lord of the manor, he invites us to dinner and then goes off to alert the womenfolk.

That leaves us with the villagers. Their focus is the soil, and you might think they'd ask for more than forty meters of "chalk" to cover in a dry ravine. Then you realize our unexpected, incomprehensible visit can't overcome a lifetime of making do. Initiative, if any, must come from the Wakil.

Villages are like people. Each has its own personality. The next one over wants a karez. They saw our procession filing down the pass and sent elders to investigate. Not as close to the Wakil's heart as Lerband, they try harder.

Al expresses concern about time. He has meetings in Herat, and the Peace Corps director will want an update. Al knows we can't just eat and run. We have to look at some projects. The

Wakil understands. He arranges for horses and tells the women we'll be dining early. He says he'd go with us but doesn't want to get in our way.

The horses are blanketed but unsaddled. Thankfully, because the trail is narrow and rocky, they also happen to be docile. Although we Americans would find walking easier, it would be rude to decline the offer. Besides, when will we ever get to work on horseback again?

The villagers want to clear out a collapsed karez with dynamite, but we don't do dynamite. We remind them the more man-days they put in, the more wheat they'll earn. They don't say yes or no. They're wondering if it's negotiable.

You'd think they'd jump at the chance. Only the Wakil, resting at his homestead, carries excess poundage. Even he is far from obese. Nobody is starving that we can see. These are poor people who have cinched their waist cords a knot tighter. But when they're hungry, Al reminds us, they're more susceptible to disease. They've started to eat their seed grain as well as the sheep, their principal store of wealth. The price of mutton has fallen. The animals are leaner. There's a push to sell before they lose more weight and the price falls further. The farmers appear to lack energy, Al says, because they're conserving it, hunkering down. They have no experience with foreigners, and the little they've had with their government was not fruitful. They're wary of tricks, of Mullah Nasruddin in disguise.

At dinner the Wakil is unhappy to hear we looked at karezzes instead of roads. He knew he shouldn't have left us. We're in too much of a hurry, he counsels. Spreading ourselves too thin.

But not such a hurry that we miss a meal. This one is the best yet: pilaf with raisins and carrot slivers atop a communal mound of rice, a fist-sized hunk of mutton underneath. We dig in, as always with right hand only, and supplement it with bread and a sauce made from dried buttermilk chunks soaked in water of dubious quality. No tea is served, only water in glasses. Al

partakes. He's been partaking all along. Don't drink the water, the Peace Corps doctor stressed in training. Lay off the strawberries. Lettuce, too. I adhered to his advice in Jalalabad and still I got sick. Repeatedly. Al shrugs. Up to us, he says. Charlie and I look at each other. Until now, we relied on tea. Or you can use your iodine, Al adds.

That's in the medical kits back at our house.

The Wakil notices our hesitation. Deep well, he assures us. His, not the village's.

Charlie and I go for it.

We finish with melon sliced into cubes the color of lime sherbet and every bit as sweet.

We ride the horses to the pass as the sun sets over the ridge and a chill transforms the air. This time the Wakil goes with us, cozy in his cape. Ghulam unpacks his blanket and sweater while Charlie, Mahdud, and I put on our jackets. Both Amin and Al get by with sport coats.

We must be living right because the Travelall is where we left it, rested and of a piece. Starts right up. Al puts it in neutral whenever he can. Darkness overtakes us as we descend into Purchaman.

Two Russians in town are as surprised to see us as we are to see them. Haggard and hard, they have the spent, smudged faces of miners emerging from a shaft.

Prospecting, the Wakil informs us. Someday we'll all be rich. He laughs.

Coal? I guess.

Mercury, he thinks. Al knows the word. They have a permit from the Ministry of Mines.

They nod greetings but don't respond to English, Dari, Pashto, or smiles. Unshaven, they are as gray and dirty as the farmers. Good bet we are too. Because the religious leadersmullahs just recently permitted mirrors, the only kind in circulation are rearviews on vehicles, and

Afghan drivers adjust the angle to reflect themselves. The fascination with their own visages makes travel an even greater adventure than it already is.

It seems every adult male for miles has come to see the Americans. We brief the district chief, and then the Wakil, in a voice too low for eavesdropping, does it from his perspective. He starts chortling. His belly quivers. The chief chortles, too.

Dinner is served in the great room. I don't know how they determine who gets to eat, but it's done without argument. Those who make the cut have more gray and less white to their beards than we've seen on our interlocutors in the lowlands. Did the old guys stay home? Or do they just look younger? Or don't live as long?

Whatever, right hands make fast work of a slow-cooked meal, then our hosts rise to do the *atan*, the national dance. With their strong encouragement we foreigners join in. Everybody goes round in a rhythmic circle. Bob and weave, twist and turn, it's an Afghan hokey-pokey, hands down when in, high when out. Twirling and clapping is permitted. Go get 'em, Al! Even Charlie lets loose. You can hoot. You can holler. You can make eye contact. You can fix off in space. Just when I think it doesn't get much better than this, for Afghans as well as Americans—Russians, too—that this is the definitive Peace Corps moment, the recruiting poster we all signed up for, the Wakil loudly asks me to teach the people of Purchaman *my* country's national dance.

Ah, I confess, we don't really have one.

Ah, the men around him respond, you just don't want to teach us.

What about our Soviet friends? I parry. Maybe *they* have a national dance.

The Wakil looks one way, I another.

Sorawi! a man calls out the word for Soviet. *Sorawi*!

Our northern neighbors have slipped out.

Charlie shakes his head to say he can't help. Al watches from the back, taking mental notes. His sly smile makes me think he put the Wakil up to this.

Maybe it's a secret, someone pipes up. The superpowers don't want to share.

Okay, I announce as that notion gains currency, everybody get in line. Behind me.

I teach them the bunny hop.

Hands on hips, step to the left. Do it again. Step to the right. So nice we're gonna do it twice. Hands on hips of the man in front of you, take one hop back. Three hops forward.

Bali, bali.

In a barely lit room reeking of sweat, grease, mutton, tobacco, dust, and kerosene, these grizzled mountain men take to it with a verve I never would have imagined. On the hop hop hop the whole room quakes. It's the boys' night out. They're doing something nobody else in this country has ever done. Or even heard about. No mullahs present, and anyway Mohammed never banned the bunny hop. Ghulam, Mahdud, and Amin find themselves in the mix—it's inescapable—but, like the men of the office they are or will become, hold something back. Caught poking their heads in the door, the Russians have to join in too. Part of them revels in it, and part of them looks as if, even here, Big Brother might be watching.

Don't worry, Al says later as our team beds down in the great room; my lips are sealed.

Wednesday

The servant arrives with bread and tea. The chief follows, asking about our plans. Finally the Wakil rolls in. No tea, thanks. He's had his. With a shake of the shoulders and an exuberant sigh he carves a space for himself between Ghulam and the chief. Hop hop hop, he says with a wink. Nobody picks up on it. Instead, we cycle through the greetings. All business. He looks us

each in the eye. No roads? he asks.

I nod.

That brings a chuckle. He *knew* it. So he's been talking to the chief, who's been talking to the people, and they'd be most appreciative if we could help with karezzes. This time he'll serve as our escort. No horses this time. It'll be on foot.

The chief tags along, and as we make our way up the valley I realize I underestimated him. The farmers who approach us talk to the Wakil—he's hard to avoid—but they also seek out their district chief. I reckon they see him as more likely to follow up, and in his deference to their wishes he's a democrat by default. Maybe the Wakil is, too, by extension.

The karezzes turn out to be more ambitious than he indicated. We thought he was talking rehab. The farmers want new ones, from sources way off in the hills. We're determined to start small, especially this far from home.

Our entourage grows with each stop, as the citizenry would rather join our traveling show than hang back with the same boring, bleating sheep and unyielding, unforgiving soil. Many of them don't even own the fields they tend. The village headman does. Or somebody in Gulistan, Delaram, Kandahar, wherever. At my insistence we press on to the village where the school has fallen into disrepair.

It needs a new roof, the Wakil states as we enter the outskirts. He's looking around for it as are we, only he's pretending he isn't. That could explain his lack of enthusiasm.

And doors, the headman takes over. Glass for the windows, he adds. The snow stays all winter.

I ask if there's a teacher.

Yes.

How many?

Two. Sometimes three.

Boys only?

Yes. Grades one to five.

I turn to the villagers. Is it a priority? I ask.

The men nod perfunctorily. They look to the Wakil, the chief, and their headman for clues while trying to make sense of our presence. They doubt this will come to anything.

How many have sons in school? I ask, daughters being out of the question.

Most raise their hands. It's tentative, though.

Are they there now? More hesitation. I call their bluff: Let's go see.

They smile at each other.

Mahdud shakes his head no.

It's a long walk, the Wakil interjects, reasserting his primacy. His face above the beard glows like Old St. Nick's, and sweat glistens on his forehead. Earlier he handed his cape to the chief, who passed it to his factotum to carry.

For a village school?

The Wakil points up the valley. The governor wanted it there.

Your friend.

The *last* governor.

The teachers went to Herat, a villager says.

Farah, the headman corrects. He means the provincial capital.

To get their salary, the chief explains.

We take a pass on the school.

What the villagers really need is wells. It's a rare family that hasn't lost at least one child to disease. One beat-down farmer lost all four of his to what sounds like dysentery. They drink from the same ditch they wash in. Comes from the hills, he says. Good water. There's a plea to his voice. He wants affirmation. I ask if he'd like a well. He shrugs. Wells are seen as a convenience, not a necessity, a help for the women more than the men. The idea would generate greater interest if we supplied drills, pumps, concrete, and dynamite in part because it makes the work easier and in part, I think, because materials provide an opportunity for pilferage. It may also be a boys-with-their-toys thing.

Wells are risky, the Wakil explains. You may or may not strike water. A new well can rob from an existing one. Without equipment to go deep, the water may or may not be clean. It may or may not last through the dry season. People won't use it if another source is closer. Irrigation benefits only the landowners. They're already rich. Like me, he adds, laughing. And you too. He slaps the headman on the shoulder. Someday you'll be as rich as me.

The headman frowns at such talk in front of the villagers. His expression, indeed, his whole bearing, recalls the farmer in *American Gothic*.

Al checks his watch. We have to be going.

No meal? the headman asks. He finds good and bad in that but mostly finds it hard to believe.

We'll be back, I promise. Speaking of hard to believe.

Despite downcast faces, slumped shoulders, limp grips, and affectless voices, everybody shakes hands and says the right things because it's what you do and you never know.

I know one thing. We're going to try.

Farmers along the path move toward us and then pause. Our determined strides make clear

we're not stopping.

The Wakil waves as he passes. *Salaam aleikum*.

Waleikum salaam, they reply. *Staire mashay*, they add if they're Pashtun.

He dabs his brow with the tail of his turban, though the pace is not so brisk he can't talk. Roads offer the surest return and the broadest benefit, he argues. Build a road and the vehicles will come. Fertilizer in, crops out. Maybe even the education department will send the salaries! That gets him laughing again.

Gravity pulls us along. He asks if I know Baqi.

Do you?

His smile says yes and maybe even favorably.

He slows down to get in step with Al. Those two have hit it off.

I should appreciate being left by myself and in front like this. I think best when walking, in silence and outdoors. But the peasants' scrutiny reminds me that for them this is no walk in the park. They're looking for relevance. On the way up Al talked me into the trickle-down approach. The most we can do is avert starvation and help improve the infrastructure. When and if that happens, social pressure will spread benefits to the poor. We cannot work directly with the peasantry. They defer to the headman, and headmen rarely let us out of their sight. *Malik* is the word even foreigners use to capture their status. Maliks are deputized villagers who, like the district chief, can be called to account.

The Wakil, in contrast, reports to no official, as near as we can tell. Sure, he knows people in high places. And his landholdings allow him to live large by local standards. As case in point, he's made the pilgrimage to Mecca, thereby earning the honorific *haji sayib*, which adds to the homage that comes from being the parliamentary representative. Obligations come with that

status, however. They seem to take up more time than money.

Never, in those few moments I've found myself alone with the sharecropping majority, have I been able to elicit any suppressed yearning for land reform. They will have to make their own revolution, for we outsiders can do nothing without the government's connivance. Europe might have been like this 800 years ago.

Mr. Light, are you sad? That's Ghulam. He and Mahdud hustle to catch up. Afghans believe solitude leads to despair.

Not anymore, I say with a smile. I start to add we're together even when we're apart and then I realize the opposite also holds true. Neither of them wants us taking on projects here in the back of beyond. Ghulam sees the need but won't stand up to Mahdud. I ask if they've taken good notes.

Everything! Ghulam exclaims. He and Mahdud show me the results. Ghulam has more writing, in a neat Dari script, while Mahdud relies more on sketches.

Very good, Mahdud says in English. Anybody can use it.

You two are the experts, I say.

They shake their heads and tell me in school they studied roads, bridges, wells, and irrigation canals but nothing about karezzes. They'd never seen one before Farah.

The Wakil is right, Ghulam adds. Purchaman needs a road.

Want to be in charge of it? I ask.

You're in charge, Ghulam snaps.

We'll talk later, in private. Some of it's me, team leader who talks too much at decision time. And some of it's the system. The one he bought into, the only one available, is riddled with workarounds.

Mahdud smiles the smile of the unbeholden.

At least Amin has been helpful, always ready to explain our program to the locals. I don't think he's worked outside of the office before. Yet he and the district chief seem to know each other. All four hands are clasped in goodbye when we get to the Travelall, and both officials are more animated than I've seen them. I ask Amin about it as we board: they were classmates at the province's only secondary school, in Farah town.

The van strains on the climb from Purchaman. No vapor lock, but Al worries we'll run out of gas. And, knock on wood, no flat tires since Delaram. We're going too slow for that. A last, wistful look at the mountains to our rear prompts me to ask Amin about Farah's own snowy mountain. It lies ahead but is obscured by clouds, the first we've seen since Kabul. They're dry clouds formed, it would seem, from dust off the flatlands that stretch deep into Iran. With no pollution or moisture to sustain them, the sun burns through. He explains the snow was in prior years. The little that fell this winter didn't last.

Volunteers aren't allowed to drive. Only staff. Al coasts all the way while his passengers drift into daydreams and naps. The Wakil's jeep and driver are no longer where he left them, but he is unconcerned and of course finds them again in Gulistan. We get there on fumes, buy what little gas they will sell us, and siphon it into the tank. There we hear the Governor has been transferred. We're also told UNDP has descended on Farah town. They want us to return today, but it's getting dark, and we remember the now-departed governor's warning about bandits. We'll leave at dawn, too early to meet the district chief. He's due back tomorrow or the day after, or he might stay to greet the new governor, the acting chief isn't sure. He knew we'd be coming—the Purchaman chief got through on the phone. Chicken tonight, the first we've had in Farah. Proof, Ghulam says, his eyes on mine, the lowlands need us more.

I waggle the leg bone I've been gnawing. Truth is, I'm loving this more than I should.

After

Charlie was eager to get out on his own, Amin was also starting to like the separation though he had no say in it, and Mahdud, after young toughs threatened him in Farah town, volunteered to go back. With help from the Wakil and the district chiefs, they completed all that we surveyed and then some, the task made easier because the villagers were grateful and isolation spared them from invidious comparisons.

UNDP brought revised forms and two beers apiece for us Western volunteers. They then left for Herat. Al followed the next day. The day after that, at our first wheat distribution, a riot erupted because some claimants had the same name, they wouldn't line up, not every claimant's coupons matched the stubs we gave the granary manager, and he couldn't read our writing in any event. Students unfurled red banners demanding work, wheat, and bread. Men carrying shovels gathered behind. They marched, they chanted, and in the midst of all that Baqi assaulted the acting governor, a weightlifter who could have squashed Baqi like a bug but who was politic enough to let me hold him back. Baqi was summoned to Kabul.

Once the new governor arrived and we revamped procedures, everybody wanted in, even after we lowered the pay rate. By then influence peddlers were promising friends, family, and men of means a position at the head of the queue. Our landlord tried to evict us. Accusations were made, pressures brought to bear, and one of our two teams was stoned when it limited the number of diggers on a ditch. Their engineer quit. Ghulam quit. I took sick. After a week the town doctors paid a visit. They said it was malaria. I said I'd been taking the prophylaxis.

Sooner or later, they said, everybody gets it. Rest. Drink plenty of fluids.

Fever overlay chills like hot fudge on a sundae, and my urine turned the color of root beer. I stayed in our house and compiled updates from the field. Reports were blurring, everything coated in dust. It was all I could do to think. Or walk. I staggered to the telephone office to call Kabul. The doctor was out of town. The director was at a meeting. I told his assistant I needed a medevac.

Are you sure?

I asked about laxatives. I hadn't had a movement in two weeks. That brought a laugh. Intestinal medicines in Afghanistan worked to the opposite effect. I didn't have the energy, the ability to put this congestion into words, to… what? *Agh*. Damn if I was going to moan. *Aghgh*. That wasn't me. It was an aircraft, the first I'd heard since Kabul. Gotta go, I said. This might be my one chance.

It was a helicopter, a resonance every Vietnam veteran receives as a harbinger, a *potential* harbinger, of change. It got louder and ear-splittingly louder until it landed so close it blew dust through the open window. I smelled the exhaust, felt the metallic heat.

I stumbled upon the minister without portfolio and his UNDP counterpart, the former overdressed and the latter underdressed. Not recognizing me at first (I had reverted to native costume), they fought the impulse to recoil as though I were a vagrant begging for wheat without work. Thin to begin with, I was down to skin and bones.

What are you *doing* here? the UNDP rep demanded. No pat on the shoulder, not even a smile.

Where's the team? the Minister asked.

Bummer these Ph.Ds weren't doctors of medicine. Get me out, I pleaded.

When you're with helicopter there's never enough time. They had to see the acting Governor, and the Governor of Herat was expecting them. He wanted a program like Farah's. So did Nimroz. Herat was next, and it had twice the population. They hadn't brought the tape measures we'd requested. Nor the maps. They promised to call for assistance. I said I already had.

Al returned the next day. He said the whites of my eyes were orange, like a pumpkin. Hepatitis, he diagnosed, and he drove me to Kabul.

As Eid al-Fitr approached, the minister recalled the teams for redeployment. The program was expanding into nine more provinces. To keep up with demand the Peace Corps brought in a new wave of volunteers who were redirected to other countries when Pakistan impounded the wheat. Another group arrived after the Paks relented. Our aid agency got involved, and Peace Corps Washington replaced the country director. Conditions got worse, far worse, before they got better. Food for Work was rebranded Operation Help, and the wheat was given gratis, no labor required. Eventually the drought ended, sort of, and after a while the program did, too.

As for me, I laid low through New Year's and then led an all-Afghan team into a province at the other end of the country. Before going I heard the rains had returned to Farah, with a vengeance. The river rose from its once-dry bed and flooded the capital. The locals blamed it on us. We had upset the natural order of things.