

Torpikai and the Teddy Bear



It was the summer of 1968 and we were Peace Corps volunteers in Kabul, Afghanistan. Like many years before and after, we're sure, there was then a gaggle of children selling socks outside the Peace Corps office in Kabul. I think we called the socks "Socks, Mister? socks" because, no matter how many times we PCVs would decline the invitation to buy, the kids would always run up to us as we approached or came out of the Peace Corps office door shouting "Socks, Mister?"

There were several young children selling Socks, Mister? socks, all pretty scruffy and most, if not all, cute, charming, and endearing – as well as persevering. One of these aspiring entrepreneurs was a little girl named Torpikai. She was probably around six or seven years old, maybe even a bit younger. And, she was a very cute, very endearing, and very personable little girl, with a sweet, vivacious smile and a positive personality. Of all the kids, Torpikai was our favorite.

One day we came to the Peace Corps office and, as usual, were surrounded by the Socks, Mister? kids. But, Torpikai was missing. We asked where she was and one of the kids told us that she had been hit by a car and was injured. We couldn't determine how badly Torpikai was hurt but this was obviously very bad news. A day or a few days later we found

out that Torpikai had not been too badly injured and that she was recovering in her family's home.

We realized that we had to do something for Torpikai to show that we cared about her and missed her. After a bit of thought, we decide that we would try to find a teddy bear and take it to her. Our memory tells us that we had no idea whether there was such a thing in Kabul as a teddy bear, where one would find one if there were, or even whether an Afghan kid would even know what a teddy bear was. But, we looked around town and found a shop that sold some very sweet teddy bears.

After buying one of the teddy bears that was almost as cute as Torpikai, we realized that we didn't know where her family's home was. Memory tells us that we asked one of the other Socks, Mister? little girls to take us to Torpikai's home – which she did. Torpikai's family lived up on one of those Kabul hills covered, at least then, with pretty meager houses and other ramshackle buildings. With our guide, we climbed the hill on a path that weaved among the houses until we reached Torpikai's home. We met Torpikai's parents and, in our less-than-highly-developed Dari, we explained that we were Peace Corps volunteers, that we knew Torpikai from her socks selling, and that we had a present for Torpikai. They were welcoming and showed us into their house.

We found Torpikai resting in her bed. She was surprised to see us but she had her usual radiant grin that lit up the room. One of us took the teddy bear out of its bag and handed it to Torpikai. We need not have wondered whether Afghan kids know what terry bears are all about. Torpikai immediately hugged the teddy bear to her and the smile on her sweet little face grew even more radiant. The teddy bear was a great hit! – it did its cheer-up work as well as ever could be hoped.

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