

## LETTER WRITTEN TO MY FATHER MAY 8, 1978 FROM TEHRAN, IRAN

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Dear Daddy,

The trip to Afghanistan was marvelous, despite its extraordinary ending. I went with a group of military and embassy people; there were 41 of us. My roommate was Beverly Norris, the wife of one of the retired US Navy captains who are consultants to the Royal Iranian Navy here in my office, and there was another Stanwick couple along. It was pleasant, I thought, to go with friends—not knowing how very close the 41 of us would feel to each other when it was all over!

Our trip took us by plane from Tehran to Kabul, where we spent the first night. The Kabul hotel where we were to have stayed was under renovation and the Homyun, where we were put up, was of a rather low caliber indeed—which led some of our group to complain bitterly and the travel agency to finally offer us a last night at the Intercontinental, at some loss to themselves. Through the years Ed and I have stayed at some interesting hostelries indeed, and the semi-fleabag did not put me off that much. I was more amused than appalled—a minority of one.

The next morning we left Kabul very early, passing through spectacular countryside all the way to Jalalabad—lovely lush valleys surrounded by harsh mountains. Afghanistan is an agrarian society with a feudal system which has survived until now, and the fields we passed were dotted with low walled mud houses wherein live the farmers who receive 5% of the crops or the profits thereof for their labors. The landlord's homes were readily identifiable; they were also one-story mud dwellings, but larger and built like small fortresses. (Perhaps they feel some threat from the people they exploit.) The farm women were dressed very colorfully, and as far as one could see there were the bent backs of ladies clad in reds and pinks; they were either seeding, weeding, or harvesting—while their men folk were usually squatting beside the road gossiping and watching the passing parade.

We arrived at Jalalabad around noon, and after lunch we drove to what had been advertised to us as the “Khyber Pass”, but which in reality was 34 kilometers this side. We parked the bus and walked across “no man's land” to Pakistan and back again. I was truly disappointed, having looked forward to seeing that historical spot. I suppose the tourist company wished to avoid the hassle of getting 41 passports processed, since the pass is well into Pakistan.

Early the next morning we left for the town of Puhli-Kumri, in northern Afghanistan. The drive was spectacular, as before, with lovely green fields and sheer mountain cliffs. I never tired of drinking in the beauty of the countryside. We got into Puhli-Kumri late in the evening, and at that point there was some dissension in the ranks when it was discovered that we were to get up early the next morning and start riding again without visiting the nearby archeological dig which was, apparently, the reason for our being

there. A compromise was reached, and those of us who were willing to arise at 4:00 am to drive to the dig were allowed to do so.

I shall never forget the sight of that lovely mountain in the early morning. It was not high, but what a spectacular view when one reached the gentle summit—spread out below were villages that were just beginning to awaken. The morning mist was rising, and one could hear the distant animal sounds and murmur of voices. The excavation was interesting, and dates back to one of the ancient rulers of the Kushan era. Our guide—who as a young archeologist had assisted the French group who had done the excavation some dozen years ago—pointed out nearby low mountains and explained that they hid an ancient city, which cannot be excavated in the foreseeable future because of a lack of funds. He estimated that the excavation would take at least fifty years.

While we were standing in small groups on the mountain contemplating the view there came the sound of music across the valley, and I looked up and saw a small shepherd boy standing not far away, holding his crook and playing what we later identified as a small homemade clay flute. Soon, from several directions there came other shepherd boys, all of them carrying their flutes, and we realized that the serpent had long since penetrated this particular Garden of Eden when they offered them to us in exchange for chewing gum, candy or (in the case of the more sophisticated) hard cash. I bought one, of course, but thought while doing so of the impact the 50 cents in cash, earned perhaps once a week by that small boy, must have on a family who had seen until recently little more cash than that in the course of a month. What a strange sense of values the appearance of the tourists imposes on a culture where a man might work days for that much money—and his son earns it in moments from creatures from another world. I would like to think that my bit of money helped that family, but I fear that instead we were the “spoilers, as Americans so often are.

The next morning we prepared to drive to Bamyan, and for the difficult journey our party was transferred from the large bus to two minibuses. My roommate Beverly, who had been extremely uptight about the hairpin turns and mountain vistas of the day before (she says she is an ocean person, not a mountain person) made the decision to return alone to Kabul on the big bus instead of going with us; she also wanted to do some serious carpet shopping. Later, when things got exciting, it was to cause us a good deal of worry until we finally found her again.

Monday's drive was over nine hours long. The roads were often only mud tracks, and at one point one of our buses became bogged down in a wadi and all the men got out and pushed. The trail we followed was once a caravan trail, followed by Genghis Khan over two thousand years ago when he went to Bamyan, sacked the city and killed the inhabitants. One wonders at the persistence of anyone in those primitive times who would have kept going on a hazardous path that was flanked on one side by a mountain river and on the other by sheer cliffs—but once one is on the trail there is nowhere to go but on.

Bamyan was as lovely as we had been led to believe—a valley completely surrounded by mountains, the Kohi-baba on one side and the Hindu Kush on the other. Our hotel was composed of a group of “yurts”—replicas of nomad huts which are round and constructed of hides stretched over wooden poles.

We had a whole day in which to visit Bamyan and environs. The village is adjacent to high red cliffs in which images of the Buddha were carved in alcoves in ancient times. The images—two of them remain, with their faces obliterated by the Mongols—are huge, and one could climb up torturous stairways carved inside the cliffs to come out upon their summit, even sitting upon the head as our guide did (which I found offensive, having lived in Buddhist countries where it would be a great sacrilege). After the Buddhas we had lunch in a field (cold bread, cold “lambburgers”, cold baked potatoes, apples and oranges—delicious, believe it or not!)

We next climbed by a winding, torturous path to an ancient Islamic fortress built upon a cliff. Most of our group stopped at the first stage of the fortress, about a third of the way to the summit, but some of the younger members of our number went on to the top. Being unfortunately unable to resist a challenge, I started up after them—in slick soled, too-large shoes I had inherited from Mrs. Mobley and a grey pleated skirt—dressed, as I told them when I finally got to the top, for a PTA meeting instead of mountain-climbing! For much of the way I had to go laboriously step-by-step, holding on to the edge of the cliff, because my shoes kept slipping on loose pebbles and I was in danger of sliding backwards. But what a sight met my eyes when I finally reached the top! The view of the surrounding countryside was magnificent, and one could only wonder how Genghis Khan and his men made it in numbers large enough to wipe out the defenders of the fortress. (The Mongols destroyed Buddhists and Muslims alike in Bamyan, and a few Hindus, too.)

That afternoon we also visited the nearby limestone city also destroyed by G. Khan. He was a busy man, and since he departed all those years ago Bamyan has been a backwater, visited only by tourists like us.

We started out early the next morning in our two minibuses for Kabul, rather sad that most of our adventures (or so we thought) were behind us. We stopped for a late lunch at a scenic spot called Istalif on the outskirts of Kabul, and stopped also in the nearby village to shop for “Khyber” rifles (made yesterday in somebody’s back room and sold to the unwary as antiques), carpets, and a wealth of handicrafts.

We rolled into Kabul in the middle of the afternoon, and as we reached the outskirts of the city we noticed several Russian-made tanks along the way. We thought they must be having maneuvers (we had passed a convoy of army trucks on the road earlier) and paid little attention to them except that several people reached over to take photographs out of the bus windows—a capital offense two days later! Most of our number wanted to get to the shopping area as quickly as possible, since we were leaving early the next morning for Tehran and opportunities for shopping had been slim; we therefore headed for the center of town. To our astonishment, every time we attempted to turn into the shopping

area, we found our way blocked by tanks and we were waved away by soldiers. We finally turned around to head for the Intercontinental Hotel, for by then it was clear that something seriously out of the ordinary was going on. When we reached the road leading up to the promontory crowned by the Intercon we were waved away by yet another tank crew. At this point an overwrought embassy wife in the back seat of our bus screamed out the window for the soldiers to “go to hell” and it seemed the better part of valor to get away from there. (The same woman kept yelling to the driver, as we proceeded down the street, to get us all to the American Embassy. Touching what faith embassy people have in their embassies, wherever they may be. In Kabul our embassy was located very near the president’s palace, which was thought by the rest of us to be not a good place to be in at the present time.)

Our guide made the decision to drive to the home of the man who was the head of Afghan Travel, one Dr. Rasoul. That gentleman came running out into the street when his gate bell was rung and told us that the situation was very serious as there was a coup d’etat in progress, and that he must get us to shelter immediately. He hurried down the street, and almost at that moment the MIG’s appeared, shells began falling around us, and there was the sound of the tanks at the end of the street firing at one another. Rasoul appeared again and yelled for us to hurry and get out of the buses. It seemed to take forever for the jump seats to be folded and everybody to get out, since we were stuffed in like sausages. A nearby gate stood open, and our group ran through a courtyard and crowded into a tiny room already occupied by six or seven terrified people. The planes were diving and swooping overhead and the tanks were still firing and my main reaction was one of incredulity because it had all happened so fast.

In time there came a brief lull and we were able to take stock of our situation. Our ranking military member Colonel Liotta had proclaimed himself our leader and he told us to disperse ourselves in what turned out to be a modest hostelry that made the Homyun appear like the Hilton in retrospect (though not a one of us failed to be overjoyed at finding a refuge, and complaints were the last thing on anybody’s mind—then.)

First we were told to sit in the corridor against the walls, well away from windows, but as time went on, we dispersed ourselves into the several rooms, each of which contained three or four cots—wooden frames with hemp wound back and forth to create the “mattress” portion. As night came on, we lay down two to a cot while the cots lasted; some people made pallets on the floor with blankets they found. We were instructed by the colonel to remain quiet, since the main police station was just next door and it was possible it would be attacked. In addition, we did not know what the feelings were about foreigners, and Americans in particular. Some time during the early evening we heard on the radio that the government was now in the hands of the rebels. (We were fortunate in (1) having a radio and (2) having with us an Iranian woman who was married to one of the military doctors, since she could translate the Farsi radio announcements.) The radio further informed us that the uprising was over and President Daoud killed in his palace. Both statements were, as it turned out, somewhat premature, although we learned later that the president and his family were shot early the next morning.

Twice during the night the planes came over and large-scale firing broke out again—around 1:30 and near 4:00—but as dawn broke it quieted down and our two intelligence officers, who had kept watch during the night, felt it would be quiet for awhile. We took ourselves to the “kitchen” in two’s and three’s, where a small servant of the hostel was making three cups of tea at a time in a tiny teapot and a coil. We had had no food since lunch the day before (fortunately, that was a fulsome one!) and everybody shared what they had. (My breakfast consisted, for example, of one-quarter of Colonel Liotta’s cookie, five of Carol Corrado’s pistachios, and three of Tammy’s crackers!) In retrospect it seems rather funny, but at the time we felt as though we had been in the thick of battle, and we didn’t have any idea at all when we would be able to procure any food. The hostel had none at all.

After several hours it was decided that the streets were safe enough for the moment and a taxi driver was found and requested to get us, four at a time, to the Intercontinental Hotel, where it was felt we would be much safer. That is the way it happened: each small group was stopped by guards and tanks, the taxi driver explained in each case what his authority was and who we were, and in a matter of hours all of us were safely ensconced in the Intercon. Beverly and I had an emotional reunion. She explained that she had been carpet buying when the firing started, and that the owners of the shop took her along when they ran to their home nearby. They were an affluent family, very kind to her, and most knowledgeable about what was transpiring since they knew which military leaders were known communists and were likely to start a coup. (The husband also predicted there would be tanks in the streets of Tehran in a matter of months. We thought he had been deranged by what was happening in his country, but of course his prediction came true and we were all to flee Tehran before the end of the year.)

The rest of our stay was anti-climax. Sporadic firing continued in the outskirts of the city and outlying areas of the country, but bodies were picked up in Kabul and in two days people were walking around taking note of the damage. (Several of us hired a taxi and drove around to see what damage had been done: except for the immediate vicinity of the president’s palace, things looked rather normal—with the notable exception of a large number of tanks stationed at key points around the city. They were adorned with garlands of flowers and often had floral bouquets protruding from their barrels.)

The colonel gave us regular briefings about our prospects. The borders had been closed, as well as the airport, and our main concern at that point was to let our families know we were all right. Communication with Tehran was poor, and it took some time for the word to get there. (I guess that was when Ed was trying to find out something through Bill and his intelligence sources in Washington.) We just had to be patient and wait for things to normalize enough for us to leave. We got out on the morning of the 2<sup>nd</sup>, just four days after our originally scheduled departure.

When the wheels touched down here in Tehran, there was a spontaneous burst of applause from everybody on the plane—Germans, French, and Americans. It was an enormous release from tension.

In retrospect, the most vivid memories I have of Afghanistan are—aside from the frightening few hours when we were under fire—the friendliness of the people and the vivid and unspoiled beauty of the countryside. Even Kabul itself, though rather primitive by western standards, was an attractive and tidy city in most respects. Those of us who were caught there during the brief period of transition can only hope that whatever happens in future to the good people of Afghanistan will be to their eventual benefit.