A MONTH AND A HALF IN A WAR ZONE MAY NOT BE YOUR IDEA OF FUN. BUT IT'S NOT ALL SECURITY SEARCHES AND SUICIDE BOMBERS

№60

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING?

SIX WEEKS IN KABUL

Well, now you're here, you think, as the plane touches down at Kabul International Airport, in the heart of Afghanistan, a country that—at least according to the magazine articles, television pundits, and news exposes—is the most dangerous war zone around.

BY **JOSH TOLENTINO**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MICHAEL EDWARDS**

AT LEAST IT BEATS FINDING A JOB, something you'd have to start doing were you not tagging along with your father as he shipped off to his new post, heading up the Afghanistan branch of a U.S.-based foundation. The last time you tagged along with him—to San Francisco—you spent your time in a haze of freelance, from-home writing, a period you'd later call "the three-year weekend."

Admittedly, spending three months in a war zone to prolong that period of career limbo seems like an extreme measure in retrospect. The impression that this was a good idea fades slightly with each frisking, each luggage scan, and each sighting of a white man in bulky clothing, sporting the telltale, close-cropped hairstyle of a "foreign security professional."

What were you thinking?

You notice large, billboard-sized posters of Ahmed Shah Massoud decorating the sides of many buildings, complete with encouraging quotes and slogans, written in Dari (the local variant of Persian) underneath. You remember Massoud's reputation as a leader who helped end the Soviet occupation, later helping the US-led coalition topple the Taliban government. Assassinated in 2002, he was posthumously nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

SPENDING THREE MONTHS IN A WAR ZONE TO PROLONG THAT PERIOD OF CAREER LIMBO SEEMS LIKE AN EXTREME MEASURE, IN RETROSPECT.

Posters of Afghanistan's current President, Hamid Karzai, are smaller and less common.

You wouldn't dare say it to any local's face, but you've always found the tendency of certain countries to erect massive posters of their leaders and/or national heroes to be "charming" in an ironic manner, a fashion choice for dictatorships and less-than-stable political climates, at least according to your arrogant reasoning. When the dust settles following the next election, would a different benevolent-looking man be emblazoned on the wall of Kabul International?

Entering the chauffeured SUV—crewed by a driver trained in the art of getaway maneuvering—you see small notices taped to each seat and the dashboard. "Never wait for a pickup outside a compound. Stay indoors until contacted by the driver." Included are cellphone numbers and radio call signs for the Security Chief, dispatcher, and medevac unit. You list the numbers down in your phone, then realize that you don't have the phone numbers of your own doctors and hospitals back home. Travel to new places, war zones in particular, can make the difference between a lazy man and a diligent man, it seems.

The drive takes you through the posh Wazir Akbar Khan neighborhood and into the similarly posh Hajji Yaquob Square, upper-class areas filled with warlords' former palaces, the city's few shopping malls, and numerous national embassies and consulates.

A sign outside a police outpost proclaims it to be part of Central Kabul's infamous "Ring of Steel" checkpoint system. You then remember an item from the previous week's news: A fierce, day-long gunfight between Taliban fighters and soldiers in the Afghan and US military, taking place just outside the US embassy and well within the Ring of Steel.

Your home for the next three months is a compound reminiscent of the houses one might find in a Manila subdivision, its walls' height augmented by tall fences and opaque green tarps. From the outside, it looks like a small, camouflaged driving range. The gate integrates with a concrete guard hut, staffed night and day by two men and equipped with security cameras, intercoms, and a space heater for dealing with the bitter Afghan winter.

Dropping off the luggage, you set out again, to resupply at the local grocery. You take the car, though the store itself is less than ten minutes away by foot. The store, part of the "Finest" chain ("Perfect" grocery is several blocks away), caters to expatriates and wealthier locals. You look over the selection, mainly consisting of goods from India and Pakistan, mixed in with overflow merchandise from places like Ukraine and Russia. Familiar brands are still present, though, including—to your surprise—a large number of cans of Century Tuna.

The curious stares you garner as you walk to the car, trailed by several young men carrying plastic bags stuffed with groceries, reminds you of one other security tip: Kidnapping is becoming a more common facet of Afghanistan's crime landscape. Though the Taliban itself is too political to engage in petty ransom demands, the son and wife of a wealthy-looking "Chinese businessman" might fetch a high price.

The next evening, your father declares that dinner will be had outside, at Le Bistro, a French restaurant and popular expat haunt.

It isn't to be. Five minutes into the ten-minute ride, a voice crackles over the radio. It is "Alpha Base," the dispatch coordinator for the office. The voice orders all cars to pull over and await further instructions. A commotion has erupted just a couple of kilometers from where you were about to go. Cause is unknown.

Minutes later, you receive a text from the Afghanistan NGO Safety Office (ANSO) an outfit devoted to safeguarding local aid organizations. A suicide bomber has blown himself up. Dinner is cancelled. The victim was Burhanuddin Rabbani, an opposition party leader and one of the most powerful figures in Afghan politics.

What were you thinking?

Two days later, you visit the office for the first time. Your computer has been acting up, unable to connect to the office network and running out of bandwidth at the most inopportune times. You're left alone with Malik and Jehangir, the office techies.

As Malik tinkers with your laptop, you make small talk. The weather is cool and dry, compared with Manila's heat and humidity. Afghanistan is a very beautiful country, but you're sad that you haven't been able to play tourist too much. The bombing was terrible, and Rabbani will be missed.

Then Malik asks the question you expected, but hoped you wouldn't have to answer.

What brings you here?

You didn't have anything better to do.

Hah! You wouldn't dare say that, so you fall back on your second justification for coming to Kabul, the option you never really took seriously, but did entertain as a vague, out-there notion.

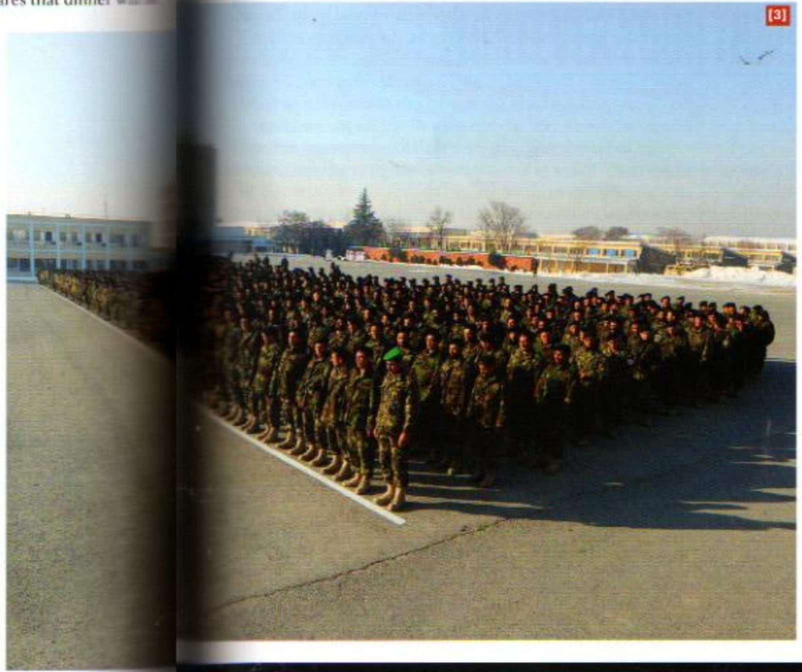
Though you were really just tagging along, you aren't just tagging along. As an American citizen in the world's premier war zone, there's good money to be made. Surely the American embassy would be happy to take you in and pay you enough money to retire early, all for a few months under siege.

Easy-peasy! As a lifelong nerd, a normal person's cabin fever is your everyday. It's pretty much all you do. So long as you have a decent internet connection, you'd be fine.

Hell, as a video game journalist, you'd be making even more money on the side. You even brought your PlayStation, your laptop, and a ready supply of software to last you a full tour of duty. You even sent in a few cursory applications, though the State Department wasn't really in the market for "electronic entertainment specialists."

You volley the ball back to Malik. Do incidents like last night's bombing happen often? "Almost every week," he replies.

[1]



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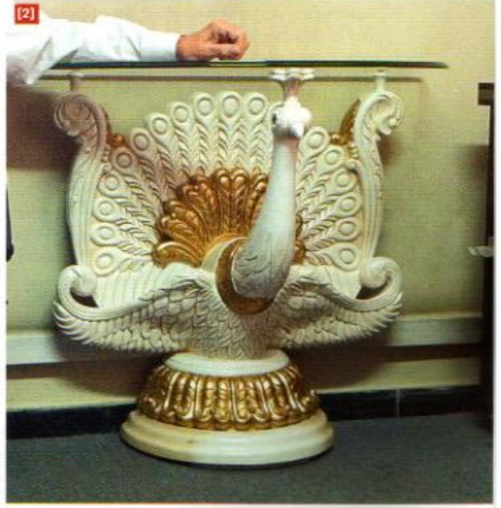

[2]

Clockwise from top
[1] Pictured: sand. Not pictured: excitement.
[2] One of the controversial $500 side tables.
[3] A massive dance number just waiting to happen.

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DESPITE THE VIOLENCE, THE LOCKDOWNS, AND THE UNCERTAINTY, REFUSING TO SUPPORT THE GROWING FILIPINO DIASPORA IS, TO THEM, AKIN TO ABANDONMENT.

"But this is Afghanistan. We get used to it."

You find that cavalier attitude a little difficult to accept, but it is, in fact, quite possible to "get used" to that sort of situation. Afghanistan has existed in a state of violent flux for much of the last three decades. If any people can "get used" to this state of affairs, it would be the Afghan people.

You tour the office. You meet Security Chief Gurung, a former Nepalese Gurkha soldier, Haqbeen, a former mujahedeen fighter, and Sadat, a former member of the Taliban, now a governance expert. Fatimah, a government liaison and one of the office's few female employees, diplomatically mentions these "challenging times" and the setbacks brought on by yesterday's assassination.

These times, and you're here just to hang out.

Your father arranges a party for some local Filipinos, mostly working with the UN, the US Embassy, or other aid organizations. Except it isn't a "party" per se, but a "Discussion Seminar on Work-Life Balance." Such names are necessary to skirt the many lockdown rules that dog Kabul's expats. Parties may be verboten, but this one is for work.

Some of the guests grouse about the government's ongoing policy of refusing Afghan visas to prospective OFWs. Despite the violence, the lockdowns, and the uncertainty, opportunities are there to be exploited, and refusing to support the growing Filipino diaspora is, to them, akin to abandonment.

You laugh, internally. Your distant second priority for coming is many people's first and foremost priority.

Another party features, for the first time, the sight of a child—as Kareem, a local official, brings his eighteen-month-old daughter to dinner. The other expats are delighted to "finally see a small human being," reveling in the dose of normality afforded by the little guest. You're told that both you and your mother's presence are credited as part of that phenomenon. Kabul's foreigners are invariably there to work, for themselves or for Afghanistan's future, or for their government's interests.

You and your mom, you're there to hang out, like a lot of normal people in normal countries are. Your presence is appreciated for its own sake.

Perhaps tagging along wasn't so bad after all.

Later in the week, you visit Kareem's house for dinner. The traditional Afghan living room is large, with a wide floor and no furniture to speak of. Carpets cover the floor, with cushions and thicker rugs bunched up close to the walls for guests to sit on. Food is laid out over a mat in the center of the floor. Dinner includes pilau (broth-cooked basmati rice over lamb and topped by sliced carrots and raisins), roasted vegetables—zucchini, peppers and spiced cauliflower are favored over the more water-hungry leaves—and fried chicken, in case Afghan food wasn't to your liking. Eating is done bare-handed, using slices of naan bread to move the food and sop up sauce and oil.

Kareem is the CEO of Afghanistan's Export Agency. His position marks a significant achievement, seeing as he is part of a double minority in Afghanistan. He is both a Hazara (a Mongolian-descended ethnic group), and an Ismaili (an offshoot branch of Shia Islam). He holds a place on Afghanistan's Ismaili Council helping make decisions for roughly a tenth of the Afghan population.

And yet, he says he would rather his wife and daughter emigrate to Canada, perhaps with himself to follow after them. His daughter be "free to be anyone she wants to be," a condition that for many Afghan women isn't much more than a dream. The country is still too lawless, too backwards, too violent, too unstable for women to advance in.

You recall the commissary women's table, the headscarves, the indelible image of a woman dressed in a burka, and can't help but agree. The fact that the foundation's female staff number a mere thirty out of more than three hundred only reinforces the sense of obstruction.

"But," Kareem adds, "this is Afghanistan. This is our home. We will return, and it will be better."

The next day, you attend a "tea party" at the apartment of Fareed, another staff member. The host seems eager to impress, as a minor scandal has broken out in the office. Someone has been feeding the rumor mill, with whisperings that Daoud, who is married, has been hooking up with Lemma, a female coworker.

Not even war zones are exempt from office politicking.

Fareed speaks excitedly about his wedding, playing videos taken of the event. Many Kabul weddings are held in "Wedding Palaces," mall-sized buildings lit up like Christmas trees at night. Daoud chatters on about the value of the gifts, the dancing—held in separate men's and women's sections—and the guests, which numbered close to a thousand. Where a normal American or Filipino's first brush with debt is in the buying of a house, a car, or higher education, the average Afghan goes all-out for the wedding.

Later in the evening, you meet with more expats, some of whom are in Kabul to investigate the office's other scandal, one of considerably more consequence.

Somehow the foundation was finagled into furnishing the office of Hamid Karzai for nearly a million dollars, the end product being a pile of furniture barely worth burning, much less keeping.

Most iconic of the fiasco is a set of sixty garish dove-sculpture side tables, imported from Brazil at five hundred dollars each. The incident, which your father is quick to point out happened before he took the post, speaks of negligence at best, and corruption at worst.

The laughs and sighs betray a slight tinge of exasperation, the sort that you hear coming from generals interviewed on 60 Minutes and confronted about the state of the war, the sort you notice when you speak to Filipino OFWs about politics back home.

Not one to add to the commotion, you opt to stay at home over the next few days, leaving the house just to get a new pair of "Decent"-brand sandals for use indoors. Looking out the window, you notice that most of your trips around Kabul have occurred in the shadow of what looks like an old hilltop fortress. Wikipedia tells you that the place is Bala Hissar, a fortification dating back to the fifth century, once boasting castles and the infamous "Black Pit" dungeons, now host to an Afghan CONTINUED ON PAGE [illegible]

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What Were You Thinking? Six Weeks In Kabul

army outpost and tons of cold war wreck age.

You feel the first true frustration of the trip. Bala Hissar is right there, but you can't go. It wouldn't be safe. This is Afghanistan.

You dine with one Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, former chancellor of Kabul University and at one point the fourth most likely figure to become President of Afghanistan.

Ghani himself acknowledges your presence this time, citing you and your mother as evidence of the growing confidence in Afghanistan's security. That your father would be so bold as to bring his family here surely means the country is on the right track. Afghanistan is no longer solely the province of foreign soldiers, embedded journalists, and nervous aid workers. Tourists, children, and wives are now welcome, and safe.

You're struck by how happy everyone seems just to see you, as if you and your mother are validations of their ongoing faith in their country. You feel important and wanted, a sentiment that is a far cry from the media's narrative of Afghanistan as a nation hostile to all foreigners. If the country was as the pundits and news reports put it, you'd never have made it past the airport.

The Afghans themselves are eager to change that perception. One program of your father's piques your interest. Run by Sadat and Aziz, the foundation flies groups of Afghan Mullahs—Islamic religious leaders—to countries like Indonesia, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, places with more moderate views on Islamic law, more progressive attitudes towards women, and other policies that could steer Afghanistan away from the extremism that characterized the brutality of the Taliban regime. For many Mullahs, the program is their first opportunity to travel by air, or even leave the country.

It is the first program you've seen that aims to change what people mean when they say "This is Afghanistan."

A lunch is held for the whole staff. Caterers arrive to set up a circus-like tent on the lawn. Huge carpets are laid out to cover the grass, and cushions are arranged much like the living rooms you visited at Kareem and Fareed's places. Crates of fruit juice boxes arrive (Islamic law forbids the consumption of alcohol), and the smell of pilau, roasted lamb, kebabs and vegetables waft in from the driveway.

The party is lively, pervaded by an air of carefree relaxation. For once there are no furtive looks, careful checking through metal door slits, and, of course, no one's busy working for the next couple of hours. Music and karaoke are still off the table, though. Too much attention from the rest of the neighborhood is still risky, but to you this is the sort of day from which hope springs.

The magazine covers shouting about how the war can never be won, about how the Afghan people will never accept enlightened coalition aid, that the rest of the world should just cut and run, those covers are surely wrong.

Hope, however, has the nasty tendency to get dampened, and a time comes that convinces your father to give in to the uncertainty, and send you home early.

One day he comes home with the most serious expression he's had to date. You've been alone the last few days, mother having left for a conference in Italy. He orders you to keep the doors locked while he's out to work, only letting in familiar faces, and questioning any unknown guests.

Heads have rolled over the furniture issue.

Firing people in Afghanistan is difficult. The weakness of the government—and by extension the rule of law—makes any employment decision personal, and being forced out of a cushy position helping a foreign NGO can sting badly. You remember a story of one expat's attempt to dismiss his housekeeper. Relatives, friends, and even the woman's tribal elder gathered to vouch for her.

One of the men your father let go muttered threats under his breath as he left the room. The other didn't show up to work at all. Your father's boldness in bringing his loved ones to Kabul may end up backfiring. After all, kidnapping is the preferred method of pressuring foreigners in Afghanistan.

The man who didn't show up, Abdullah, has been living beyond his means, buying a brand new SUV, selling a house worth $150,000, and sending his children to the best school in Kabul. Where the money is coming from is unknown, but he was once a member of an NBI-like secret police force. A contingent of the foundation's drivers owes him their jobs. The potential for mischief—or worse—is high.

That night, Abdullah sends an email, claiming that his own son has been kidnapped, and that the kidnappers' demands include that he forfeit his extra money, and quit his job. Attached to the email is a letter of resignation.

The story doesn't add up, unless interpreted as a convenient cover-up, one that allows Abdullah to save face.

Rather than being fired, Abdullah "resigned." Rather than obtaining his money through shady means, he was forced to pay it as a "ransom." And he gets to leave the country briefly, to give his son time to recover from the trauma of the "kidnapping."

The matter is quietly dropped, and Abdullah's resignation is accepted. There would be little to gain by pursuing the truth, and the bad apple is gone in any case. The man gets away with his reputation intact, a very important consideration in Afghan society.

Unfortunately, it is still best for you to leave.

And just as you were feeling the sense of hope, that Afghanistan really wasn't as bad off as everyone else says.

Of course, your experience isn't necessarily representative of the whole. Your experience is not that of the Red Cross doctor out in the field, the soldier fighting in Helmand or Kandahar, or the citizen who lost a loved one to an American air strike. People in those situations might be considerably less welcoming of a man here to hang out, just coming off a three-year weekend.

Even in Kabul, the uncertainty and fear that the threat of mortal danger brings cause the likes of Malik to "get used" to those feelings, or Kareem to dream of Canada.

What has yet to settle in, thankfully, is the cynicism. The fatalism that seems to characterize conversations about the direction of your own country, the sighs and nods that accompany discussions of politics and the quality of your own government, the lack of faith and opportunity that fuels the diaspora and grows the remittance economy. The people you've met in your six weeks so far remain confident in their war zone, their disaster area, because This is Afghanistan. This is their home. If they leave, they will return, and it will be better.

At the end of it all, that's what you're thinking.