HEADLONG

By Susan Barrett Price

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I will meet you there. [Rumi]

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My Jim, you are 85 now and have a hard time remembering those glowing days of surrender in Central Asia. So, I have gathered my notes into chapters. On cold nights, our cabin floors warmed by the rugs that got us in so much trouble there, we'll curl up together and I'll read you our story. It happened twenty-five years ago, 1992, and we were in love.

PART 1

01::Landing

Rochester, Los Angeles, Seoul, Bangkok, and finally Karachi, Pakistan. It was August 5, 1992, at 4 a.m., in the steaming rain. We followed the crowd into the luggage terminal, where the lights suddenly went out.

I switched on the mini-flashlight that hung around my neck with the luggage keys. "We're prepared," I assured myself, as I clutched your arm.

The lights flickered back on. No sign of our bags, so we sat on a bench opposite three women draped head to toe in black, curled up against one another. I tried not to stare, but did notice their expensive shoes and the gold bangles stacked on their wrists. I wanted to decode their lives, but… where were our bags?

We had perfect bags—soft-sided, with a frame. One zip and they converted to backpacks. Another zip and our daypacks were attached. We weren't backpackers but you were always clear with me: a traveler had to be ready to carry her own bags. I acknowledged you as the Master Traveler, me as the eager Apprentice. And I scored on this logistical task: the perfect luggable luggage for five weeks of travel in unknown territory.

But we were off on the wrong foot. Six hours before, in Bangkok, we realized that the next leg of our trip—the seven hundred miles from Karachi to Rawalpindi—was scheduled for August 6, not today.

"I'm going to check things out," you said and disappeared into the crowd before I could protest.

I pulled out a flowered scarf and wrapped it around my head—my version of *hajib*, trying to be respectful of the Islamic culture we'd landed in.

I kept glancing at the women in black. Their veils gave them privacy, no worry about hair, make-up, or binding waistbands. I fell into a reverie about their exotic, protected world, but when their husbands appeared, young men in blue jeans and sports shirts, the spell was broken. The terminal was hot, I thought as I loosened my scarf. Those women in black tents must be roasting.

I followed one of them to the ladies' room. In addition to the regular facilities, there was a washing area with low faucets. I snuck peeks as the woman sat on a short stool and began to bathe. A religious ritual, no doubt, but still a mystery to me.

Back in the terminal, I watched a man fold a length of white cloth and wind it around his head into a turban—as fascinating as origami. Another ritual I wish I understood.

The voice of a muezzin summoned people for dawn prayers. The men knelt, faces to the floor, and the women disappeared behind a privacy screen. You and I bowed our heads to avoid gawking.

My brain wanted to make sense of everything, to get my new world categorized and labeled, but, after forty hours in transit, on the wrong day, with flickering lights, and no luggage, it all felt so crazy.

You finally reappeared and plopped down next to me with no news. Then you pulled a guidebook from your daypack and looked again at the list of hotels in

Rawalpindi, the list you'd been too busy to look at before we left Rochester. I had checked off the ones that looked decent but not too expensive.

"Yeah, this Flashman's looks good," you said. The book said something about *colonial charm*. "Let's go there. Look, it says there's a tourist office at the Rawalpindi airport. We can make arrangements there."

After another anxious hour, luggage was finally hauled into the arrival area. Two young men grabbed our packs and led us to the correct window to rebook our flight. You handed them a couple bucks and they wanted more, but you shooed them away. We be fine from here.

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A couple hours later we landed at Rawalpindi and the airport was a madhouse. We got pushed along with the crowd through customs and immigration and suddenly found ourselves out on the sidewalk. No sign of PTDC—the Pakistan Tourist Development Corporation. We tried to backtrack into the terminal but we were lost: all the signs were in Urdu, which uses Arabic script instead of Roman letters. You had been confident that, because Pakistan had been part of the old British Raj in India, English would be a common second language. You were wrong.

Why were we even in Rawalpindi? Because the map on the back of our Lonely Planet guide showed that the Karakoram Highway into China began there. We had no hotel because, in those days before common fax machines and universal email, we were stymied by the process. *Let's just go.* Remember when you said that on your back deck while we were flipping through travel brochures and drinking wine?

Why had we chosen the Karakoram Highway? On one level, it hardly mattered. We just wanted to travel, to get as far as your frequent flyer miles would take us, to have experiences, to feel adventurous.

At age sixty, you needed this kind of all-absorbing travel to quiet the raging inner voices of late middle-age—an academic career burdened with administrative chores, ongoing entanglements with ex-wives, an expensive passion for book and art collecting, and the need to side-hustle doing nursing home recertifications for Medicare, which made you very unpopular. For all your accomplishments, those inner voices scolded you for never quite measuring up.

My perspective was less complicated. I'd exited a short marriage cleanly, with no children. My career in quality assurance administration was on the upswing and gave me enough dough for a small condo. My own side-hustle was about developing my creative skills in graphic arts and it was making me new friends. For me, travel was about adding texture and color, romance and good stories to a tidy life at risk of dusty middle age.

More than fifteen years ago, we had agreed not to marry, not to live together, but to maintain our friendship through sports like skiing and scuba diving and through travel. The fact that I was solidly on my own two feet gave you a sense of calm and freedom. The fact that you dealt with chronic anxiety by parlaying it into risk-taking and a fearless embrace of all things beautiful and historical motivated me to do whatever it took to keep up with you.

On another level, we both harbored fantasies of alternate careers.

When the struggle to fit into all the neat boxes of academic life got you down, you spoke of dumping it to become an international art dealer, to travel in freewheeling circles where everyone loved and appreciated you. Your best friends were dealers and collectors from all over the world and you loved the excitement of the trade.

Back in your thirties, you stacked up years of health systems consultations throughout Africa and Latin America, which made you proclaim your love for life on the road. Now, on the Karakoram Highway, we aimed for its northern end point at Kashgar, in the far west of Islamic China, a legendary oasis on the ancient silk road, and home of the Sunday market, the largest bazaar in all of Asia. Maybe there you would find the stuff your dreams were made of.

In my fantasy career, I was a novelist, writing a mystery series featuring a pair of globetrotting, undercover art-crime detectives. Like you and your international art dealer fancy, I had lots of elements in place. I'd written two books, found an agent for one, and now brought my characters with me to Central Asia. I had steeped myself in the research on grave robbing, black markets, and smuggling. Traveling the old trade route to Kashgar might give me a more visceral understanding of how the longing for exotic things translated into a vast marketplace where traders risked everything to keep their goods moving.

I also happened to have a passion for collecting old beads and loved to study their paths across the world in my reference books. Venetian glass beads, Baltic amber, Mediterranean coral, Chinese turquoise, Burmese rubies, Japanese pearls—so many found their way into necklaces along these roads. These I would write about as well.

But on Wednesday, August 5, 1992, our imaginations were on hold as we stood together on the airport sidewalk, a horde of taxi drivers rushing toward us.

You called out, "Flashman's! Flashman's!"

One of the drivers nodded and tossed our bags into his trunk. We were off.

Flashman's had a vacancy, but when you pulled out your credit card, the manager shook his head. Cash only. This was unexpected. On our last big trip—to Thailand—every back-country merchant eagerly processed a MasterCard. I suffered a rush of panic, but you dug out your Travelers Cheques and worked a deal that resulted in a room key.

Flashman's was configured like a motel. As we hauled our bags across a courtyard to our room, its *colonial charm*—cracked and crumbling walls—reminded us that the British Empire had pulled out of here in 1947. Still, our room that first night was lovely and clean.

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A word about *foreboding*. If this story were a movie, we'd be hearing an anxious musical score. Nothing had gone really wrong so far, but everything was a little off-kilter. We had fallen a day behind or maybe we'd jumped a day ahead, I still don't know. Public bathrooms had sinks on the floor. English had disappeared. Credit cards were rejected.

We had come far—nearly 14,000 air miles—with our only plan to escape the right angles and straight edges of our workaday lives and to exercise our imaginations. We were willing to throw our arms around the unknown, the mysteries ahead, the romance of the open road. Maybe you understood what that meant, but I didn't.

There should have been a soundtrack—jittery violins and trumpets in a minor key. But real life didn't have a string section. Real life was the roar of jet engines and the babble of airports and the quick thinking needed to keep moving.

At the end of the day, however, real life was a soft bed. We curled together in love. And then we slept.

02::Stalled in Rawalpindi

Days in the anxious blur of transit, followed by twelve hours of deep sleep, got us to Thursday, August 6, which we will call Day 5. I was still tired. I wanted food, more naps, and a meandering walk around the neighborhood. We had four long weeks ahead for the strange and the wonderful. What was the hurry?

But you were fired up. Awake at dawn, you were studying maps and guides and picking out destinations: the English-language bookstore, the distant hotel with a buffet lunch, and bazaars that might be selling beautiful rarities. You were ready to hunt.

I grumbled, but, after fifteen years of traveling together, I trusted your enthusiasm. After a quick hotel breakfast of tea and eggs, we gathered our maps and notes and set out.

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Our first stop was the English bookstore. When the owner identified us as Americans, he launched into a long lament over the U.S. threat to designate Pakistan as a rogue state and haven for terrorists.

"It is completely unfair," he pleaded. "We are a peace-loving people."

All we could do was nod in sympathy. We wouldn't have come if it were dangerous. The Vassar-educated Benazir Bhutto was the Prime Minister and the world press was all dewy-eyed about her having a baby in office. Whatever mischief the Soviets were up to in the region had settled down with its collapse nine months earlier. And of course, we had checked the State Department bulletins and knew to avoid the province of Baluchistan bordering Iran and the disputed territory of Kashmir.

We wished the bookseller well and continued our walk to Saddar bazaar, but the conversation haunted me. Had we been naïve to come here on our own?

Rawalpindi was an ancient city, occupied for thousands of years, often at the crossroads between competing foreign powers. To my eyes, it had a broken-down, left-behind feel. We had to watch our step because cracked sidewalks too often had collapsed into the drainage ditches below.

As a monsoon shower swept through the streets, we pulled out our umbrellas. The short rain gave the crumbling city a muted glow that reflected in every puddle, so we put away the umbrellas and took out our cameras.

We walked and gawked… and got lost.

Our maps were useless because the street signs were indecipherable.

We started catching the eyes of fellow pedestrians. "Flashman's?" Someone would point in a direction. We'd turn. "Flashman's?" Another pointing. Eventually we found ourselves back at the hotel, rattled that our map had failed us but relieved that the locals were happy to help out.

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For lunch, we taxied over to the posh Pearl Continental Hotel for a buffet in the Marco Polo room. With its modern glass walls and wing of sparkling retail shops, the Pearl gave us a breather from *colonial charm*. But we quickly agreed this wasn't what we came to Asia for. The whole point was to embrace the strangeness of a new

culture—tightly hanging on to each other, for sure. The whole point was to lean into adventure and challenge our beliefs about the world and maybe even about ourselves.

For our afternoon walk, you studied the map in more detail and plotted a course to the Raja Bazaar. In the pouch with your map and guidebook, you added a compass.

Back on the street, as we crossed a footbridge over some railroad tracks, we caught our first sight of the distant Margalla Hills—foothills on the southwestern edge of the Himalayas. Oh! We were *here*. We were really *here*, I thought, on the edge of the highest mountains on earth, on the verge of a grand journey.

This glimpse of our path north also reminded me that we didn't have a clue how to jump start our exit from Rawalpindi. Where was the on-ramp to the Karakoram Highway? Our book said Flashman's housed a PTDC office, but it was as invisible as the one at the airport. When you had asked the manager about it that morning, he only shrugged in puzzlement.

As we continued to walk, watching the sidewalk for crevasses, minding the map, and keeping an eye out for interesting shops, I wondered how we would get to Kashgar.

For sure, Rawalpindi wasn't yielding any treasure or inspiration. Raja Bazaar was a sprawling commercial district, crowded with an impossible mix of cars, trucks, motorized rickshaws, and horse-drawn buggies. The shops sold auto parts and sheet metal. We drew brief stares here and there, and, if we smiled, the men—it was always men—smiled back, then returned to their tasks.

I was surprised we didn't draw more attention. Both of us were tall and blue-eyed pale. Our smiles reflected top-notch dental care. Our big feet demanded sturdy, no-nonsense shoes. You wore a striped shirt and khakis. I wore baggy cotton trousers and an extra-large, extra-long bright blue man's shirt. Panama hats and sunglasses protected our faces from the sun.

In contrast, the Pakistani men wore sandals and pajama-like *salwar kamiz* in tan or white. They were slender, with walnut-color skin, and large, golden-brown eyes. Some had mustaches. Some wore skull caps.

You could have purchased a *salwar kamiz*. They looked very comfortable. But you would have looked silly—a square-jawed, silver-haired American in hiking shoes and bi-focals, trying to go native.

As it was, we were a sight.

Later, our clothing and our big American smiles would be a convenient signal. They telegraphed the message: *Help these people. They are lost.*

But that afternoon we floated along, as nothing more than fleeting glimpses of color in someone else's work day, no more.

Over dinner that night at Kashmirwala's, we talked about whether we should have been afraid. Had we been wandering through "bad neighborhoods"? Were we at risk? Who would miss us if we disappeared?

You made a confession to me. In all your professional travels to Africa and Latin America, you had adventures for sure, but you were always a part of an

organization, always had escorts or minders. Maybe you'd sneak off for an afternoon of art-hunting, but someone always had your back.

I had an epiphany. Till this moment, I saw you as my Master Traveler, my Lewis and Clark, my Edmund Hillary. Fearless and savvy. But what if being a Master Traveler meant having moxie enough to recruit a Sacagawea or a Tenzing Norgay to march by your side, to discern the path ahead, and to decipher its mysteries? If that was being a Master Traveler, then what were we? Here in Pakistan, you were just as bare naked as I was against the challenges of a closed society that hadn't invited us in.

Years later, I read that during the Middle Ages, at the height of the land-based trade routes, Muslim rulers along the way required that every trader have a *rafiq*, a traveling companion, usually a fellow trader. They entrusted their personal safety to each other as they threaded their way through hardship and peril across the continent.

Without knowing the word, I realized that evening that we were not master and apprentice. We were merely equals, pledged to look out for each other in the absence of a professional minder. We were each other's *rafiq*. This could be trouble.

03::The False Friend

On Friday morning, we walked around the corner again to Kashmirwala's—a small hotel whose restaurant was a cut above the Chinar at Flashman's. We quickly learned to enjoy the spicy Pakistani dishes, though I avoided the gristly chunks of meat. For breakfast, Kashmirwala's served scrambled eggs and a butter-drenched flat bread—*paratha*—that I could have easily made the mainstay of my diet.

As we were finishing our meal, a small man in a *salwar kamiz* initiated a conversation from the table next to us.

"Americans?"

We smiled our American smiles.

He turned his chair toward us and handed us a business card that identified him as Dr. Iqbal Alam., M.D. (U.S.A.), Director of an Afghan Refugee Project.

"I got my medical degree in Houston," he told us and went on to say that he was married to an American pediatrician. His English was fluent.

You launched into a lively conversation, revealing your own medical training and your experience in international health care.

Out of the blue, he asked, "Why don't you come with me to Kabul?"

The words struck me like lightning. Kabul? Afghanistan? The U.S. State Department had issued stern warnings against venturing into Afghanistan.

"I have many friends in the diplomatic community," he said, "so it won't be problem."

"Yes!"

We both said it without hesitation. All our worries about "dangerous neighborhoods" and "what next" vanished in an instant. The universe had kindly sent us a friend. He fit our aspirations so perfectly: an insider, a guide to the mysteries of forbidden territory, but not an opium smuggler or an arms dealer. Our magical guide was a humanist.

After agreeing to this fine idea, you turned to a more immediate problem. It was Friday—the Muslim holy day—and the town was shut down. You wondered aloud about how we might get out to Taxila to see the archaeological ruins of an early Buddhist community. Buddhism was one of your lifelong interests. Iqbal said he had the day to himself, so how about if we all shared a taxi out to the site? Another problem solved.

On the twenty-mile ride, you and Iqbal continued to exchange stories about international development work. Then you went on to talk about our ambition to travel the Karakoram Highway up to Kashgar.

When Iqbal learned our intention, he announced in amazement that his wife and he were about to start their holidays and that's exactly where they were headed. They had arranged for a big Toyota Land Cruiser, which certainly had room for another couple, and his wife was hungry for contact with Americans. We would fly north to Gilgit, which would allow us a close-up view of the famous Nanga Parbat peak. In Gilgit, we'd pick up the car and head for Kashgar. Shopping in Kashgar, a couple days camping here and there—

"My brother-in-law is an officer stationed in Kashmir. He can guarantee us safe passage for a side trip there."

We would return to his home base in Peshawar, which is on the border with Afghanistan. From there we would we make our journey into Kabul.

By the time we got back to Flashman's late that afternoon our itinerary was planned in detail and we couldn't believe our good fortune.

To make the timetable work and not miss our flight back home, Iqbal volunteered to change our air tickets so we could depart from Peshawar instead of needing to hightail it back to Rawalpindi.

"Just a few dollars extra."

Sounded good.

"I also have access to low prices in diplomatic shops, so I will pick up supplies for all of us."

Fantastic. After some fast figuring, you forked over $230 in cash for the plane tickets to Gilgit, for our share of the supplies, and for the flight differential to Karachi from Peshawar. We dutifully wrote down our names and passport numbers for the airlines.

"Okay, fine," he said. "My wife and I will pick you up at 7 a.m. sharp on Sunday morning. By the way, if you are needing more of cash, I can exchange several hundred for you at the diplomatic currency exchange. Better exchange rates than bank!"

Finally, the muscles in my neck knotted in alarm and I shot you a glance. To my great relief, you politely declined.

Money in hand, our daylong companion—our magician, our fixer—quickly left.

He must have taken the supply of fairy dust with him because as soon as the door shut behind him, you and I looked at each other and knew we'd been robbed.

Or were we? Iqbal had invested a whole day in us. He had business cards and an impeccable story.

We laughed. What a hysterical bet we just made. What were the odds that, when Sunday came, we'd be riding like kings to Kashgar? I suppose we should have run after Iqbal and our fistful of cash, but we simply laughed. We had deliberately pushed our chips onto the table and watched the roulette wheel begin its spin. We were fascinated.

Nothing we could do till the careening ball came in for a landing at 7 a.m. on Sunday.

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Our Saturday was a joy. We ate well, listened to the monsoon rains, took pictures, and watched hundreds of mynah birds cavorting in the giant banyan tree outside our room. The streets in our neighborhood became familiar.

On Sunday morning at 7 a.m., we were all packed up and checked out from the hotel. As the minutes ticked by—7:15, 7:30, 8:00—we began to talk our way out of disappointment. We had leaped at the idea of visiting forbidden Afghanistan, but then we'd agreed to spend the next three weeks sitting in the back seat of someone else's plans. We would have had their vacation, not our own. Suddenly, we felt an

enormous relief at getting out of this obligation. We agreed: $230 was a small price to pay for our independence.

But there we stood, all packed up, going nowhere. We were back to being our own *rafiqs*. Time to get our twosome out of neutral and on the road. But how?

We walked outside, not at all sure what to do, and there, set up at a card table on the lawn, was the PTDC agent.

"Uh, we are trying to get to Kashgar…?" I asked.

"To Kashgar? No problem!" His smile was dazzling.

Within minutes, he had summoned a driver, Mr. Sayad, and suggested a plan.

"Go as fast as you can to Kashgar," he said. "You'll make it by next Sunday's market. Then, take your time coming back."

I see now that I have two lines of gibberish in my notebook where I tried to jot down the details. It hardly mattered, I was so excited that we were finally going.

We agreed on a price but, guess what—no need to pay the driver till *after* the trip was completed. This, we soon discovered, was the real Pakistan: payment on satisfaction.

Smiles on our faces, we jumped into Mr. Sayad's compact Toyota Corolla and headed for the hills.

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When we later told this story to friends, the word *stupid* always seemed unavoidable. We'll have to own that. But if we were grown-ups, couldn't we ever accept candy from strangers?

You knew the answer to that question. Accepting the risk of betrayal was rule number one in your love affair with the world.

Commented [SBP1]: Back when I was learning to ski, you declared that if I didn't fall, I wasn't trying hard enough. The occasional face plant or sprained thumb or dislocated shoulder was simply the price I'd have to pay for the thrill of speed-powered maneuvers in the snow. This doctrine extended to your whole life.

The worst advice your mother ever gave you, you liked to declare when you had too much to drink, was to *be sensible*. Of course, you were no fool. You paid your bills, held down a job, and saved for retirement. But on the margins—sports, art collecting, travel, and even love, the payoff for prudence was a kind of spiritual death. It stifled your curiosity and blunted your powers.

We had spent all day on Friday with our talkative companion, most of it strolling around the acres of ruins in the cradle of Buddhism at Taxila. But by Sunday, this World Heritage Site was just a boring pile of stones compared to the artful con of Dr. Iqbal.

Now I like to think of him as a test. A stranger had offered us candy and we grabbed it—grabbed the chance to travel with him and his insider knowledge, grabbed the chance to enter forbidden Kashmir, forbidden Afghanistan. We put money on the table—not a crazy amount, but a serious amount. Then—*poof!* Iqbal and his pediatrician wife, his diplomatic ties, his humanitarian work, his officer brother-in-law—vanished. An illusion.

Yes, we were stupid. The scam brought us to a fork in the road. If we had taken the path of suspicion and anger, we would have headed to the airport and retreated to the predictability of Thailand or Hawaii. But we decided to accept our naivete for the adventures it promised.

When we took the con in stride, when we laughed, the door swung upon on the rest of our journey.

Part 2

On Edge

Rawalpindi, Pakistan, to Kashgar, China, is about 800 miles, or the distance between Rochester, New York, and St. Louis, Missouri. The route was a straight run on the Karakoram Highway, which was one of those twenty-year "eighth wonder of the world" construction projects, undertaken jointly by Pakistan and China and opened in 1979. It would take us through the Khunjerab Pass, the highest navigable mountain route in the world, at 16,000 feet. These were guidebook facts. Ink marks on paper. As an American accustomed to interstates, I saw the word "highway" and figured *what could go wrong?*

I didn't understand the implications when the PTDC agent said the fast-track to Kashgar required three overnights. Mr. Sayad was instructed to take us to the designated tourist hotels in Besham, in Gilgit, and then in Sust on the Pakistani side of the Khunjerab Pass, after which he'd see that we got on the bus into China. Maybe the plan was that Mr. Sayad (who spoke only a few words of English) would wait for us in Sust till we came back, but I can't remember anything except the excitement of being on our way and the can-do attitude of the tourism guy: *No problem*.

No problem.

Leaving Rawalpindi, the road meandered through scruffy towns and took a good three hours to deliver us the eighty-five miles to Abbottabad. Mr. Sayad stopped for gas and pointed us to a restaurant where we grabbed a quick lunch and bought bottled water.

Along our route, Abbottabad was all truck depots and warehouses. Little did we know that, years into the future, the city would be the secret home of Osama bin Laden, the evil intelligence behind the 9/11 attacks in 2001, as well as the site of his assassination by Navy Seals in 2011. I think now about that bookseller we met and his fears of losing U.S. support if we thought his nation harbored terrorists.

But along the Karakoram Highway that Sunday, August 8, 1992, we knew nothing about politics, only the road. As we resumed our travel that afternoon, roadside villages retreated into mountainside dots, marked only by their glowing green rice fields, like patches of moss in the distance. We were entering the Himalayan mountains.

Beyond Abbottabad, our glorious Karakoram Highway revealed itself as two lanes wide, a ribbon of asphalt notched into a slanted landscape, looping and curling as the mountains dictated. And traffic was heavy. Our little Corolla was a mouse darting in and out of our lane to make tracks against a parade of lumbering trucks and buses, all painted in bright colors with poetry and pictures of home and bedazzled with wood carvings, mirrors, and chains. This folk-art on commercial vehicles was their magic, their charm against rockfalls and the sudden skid of tires into eternity. *Inshallah,* Mr. Sayad said when we asked how long it would take to drive the ninety miles Besham. "Four hours, *inshallah*, he said, as he honked his horn and swerved around the truck ahead. *God willing*.

Studying the art on trucks as we passed them kept us from howling at the vehicles roaring toward us in the oncoming lane. But Mr. Sayad always scooted back into our lane with perfect timing.

The world began to tilt. We wanted to drink it all in but sometimes it got too dizzy and we'd lower our eyes to the map you held on your lap. Our faithful map anchored us to a flat graphic: Himalayas jutting into Pakistan from the east, Karakoram ahead to the north, Hindu Kush rising from Afghanistan to the northwest.

Looking at the map reminded me that years earlier, I'd wanted to visit Nepal or Tibet in the eastern part of the Himalayas where we could gaze upon Mt. Everest and enjoy the Buddhist vibe. In my mind's eye, that region shimmered with chants and chimes and prayer flags, godly lamas and long-suffering Sherpas.

But, in the end, we were drawn to the western Himalayas and its sister ranges to the north and west, which were more associated with the hardship and skullduggery of ancient trade routes, the ambitions of territorial expansion, and the bloodshed of continual invasions. They weren't about monasteries but about roads, connecting trading post to trading post, earthier, more carnal, serving the all-too-human desire for what is rare, what is precious, what is forbidden except to the bravest and most adept.

I raised my eyes away from your map to the real world outside our windows and whispered, "We made it. We're here."

Commented [SBP2]: headed straight into the maw of Something Else

On the side of the road was man walking along with his one-hump camel, laden with cargo—a vestige of the old road and a reminder of its history. Then a sharp curve shoved me against you—no seatbelts—and I grabbed your leg, the reverie lost.

We zoomed northwest, zigzagging through a deep valley, as the mountains rose around us, forcing the road to dip and dive, forcing us to white-knuckle our armrests, brace our shoulders against each other, and stabilize our legs by pressing our knees together over the transmission hump.

A couple hours into the afternoon's ride, Mr. Sayad pointed northeast to Nanga Parbat, the ninth highest mountain in the world, which would appear and disappear depending on our angle and heading. We scrunched together on the right side of the back seat to catch a glimpse of its snowcapped peak through the window, far away but still looming higher than its neighbors.

Commented [SBP3]: , known for its killer avalanches, its treacherous glaciers, its lethal crevasses

Then at Thakot, we confronted head-on the roaring presence of the Indus River. I knew that south of here, out of the mountains, the river widened, and nourished the fertile plains of the Indus valley, civilized since 2000 years before Christ. But here in the mountains, fed by hundreds of high altitude glaciers, including those on Nanga Parbat, the summer spate turned it into a monster—a boiling cement-gray monster, scouring its way through rock, thick with pulverized minerals. As the road wound along its banks, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

Neither of us were ready to be bowled over by this place, this sublime and terrifying place. The harmony of our horizontal world was literally undone—left and right were vanquished by up and down.

Yes, I'd studied the contour maps and checked the photos in the color insert of our guidebook, but nothing prepared me for the possibility that exquisite places were scary as hell.

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It was about 5:30 p.m. when we pulled into Besham, a narrow strip of civilization along the west bank of the Indus. The plan was for Mr. Sayad to register us in the tourist hotel at the south end of town. He parked the car, dashed into the lobby, but returned quickly, shaking his head.

"Sorry. Full."

What? We sat up straight, alarmed. He wasn't happy either.

"Next place. *Inshallah*."

I felt a twinge of panic. We were in the middle of freaking nowhere without a place to stay. You were quickly flipping through the guidebook to "Besham" but the no-vacancy tourist hotel was the only lodging listed.

But the patient Mr. Sayad drove us north toward the end of town that served truck and bus drivers, stopping at three or four more places before he finally found us a room at the Abassin Hotel, a newish multi-story building with a small diner.

Mr. Sayad and the desk clerk lugged our bags up five flights to the roof, which was mostly an open-air dormitory of *charpois*—wood-and-rope cots. The clerk showed us our tiny "penthouse," a concrete-block hut containing three single beds with fresh white sheets, a sink, and toilet alcove. Good enough. We thanked them and were happy to be alone again. Hard to believe we'd been stymied for a plan at 8 a.m. that morning and now we were here in the Himalayas, nestled in a valley along the thundering Indus River.

My relief was cut short when I went to use the toilet. I had chuckled when we pulled up to the hotel and saw its big colorful sign boasting "flesh toilets," but I squawked when I saw that our "flesh toilets" were also "flesh" to the floor –the kind you have to squat over.

"What's the problem?" you said. "They're very sanitary. Just relax and I'll fix you a drink."

When I finished, I found you organizing happy hour. You dug out our plastic glasses and made cocktails from a packet of Sugar-Free Kool-Aid and Pakistani gin.

While I'd been haphazard in my itinerary planning, I was well-prepared for a range of basic needs. I had packed iodine in case we needed to purify water and Kool-Aid to cover the taste. My bottle of iodine had already been jettisoned because it leaked and threatened to dye all my clothes red-brown. But Kool-Aid was just the right mixer for the hard-edged alcohol we had access to.

Alcohol is forbidden in Pakistan, but the powers-that-be indulge non-Muslim foreigners with a local brand of hooch. In Rawalpindi, you were allowed to buy a bottle of Murree gin after a furtive conversation with the hotel restaurant manager, who made us fill out what amounted to affidavits, swearing that neither we nor our parents or grandparents were Muslims. The bottle had then been discreetly delivered to our room.

Commented [SBP4]: ~~Back in 1992, I might have developed the thought that we had opened our souls to genuine awe, but unlike St. Paul, we had no spiritual mentor to coach the meaning out of the madness.~~
~~Unlike St. Paul, we arrived in Besham, out of wonderland, back to the real world.~~

Commented [SBP5]: I was not thrilled. It's one thing to face death speeding along narrow mountain roads, but quite another to face constipation because I couldn't coordinate relaxing my sphincter with tightening my thigh muscles.

So in Besham, you made us cocktails to ease our travel stress and help us melt into this new landscape. We took our drinks out on the roof, past the empty cots to the edge. The roof was fifty or so feet above the main street, so we enjoyed our cocktails at twilight looking out over the rushing river and the townsfolk getting ready for evening.

"What did you think of our drive today?" I asked.

"Like nothing else I've ever experienced," you answered.

"Would you call it mystical?" I wondered aloud. "The crazy mountain angles, the wild-painted trucks, death nipping at our tires? So full of, you know, 'Otherness.'"

"Otherness?" You sipped your drink. "I got more of a oneness, like I was molding myself into the curves of the road and the shapes of the hills."

We hadn't embarked on this trip with any spiritual quests in mind. At the time, I had little interest in religion and knew nothing of Islam. I was more interested in plotting a thriller than in seeking an awakening. Way back in college I had shrugged off Catholicism and proclaimed my bible to be *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell's demonstration that all the world's religions had common themes, as every tribe dressed the unknowable truth in its own powerful stories. I expected the world to reveal itself in a narrative, coherent and universal.

Commented [SBP6]: The use of myths to help grapple with the unknowable.

You studied the history and philosophy of Buddhism, delved deeply into Buddhist art, but preferred to call yourself an agnostic. If you had a bible at all it was Darwin's *Origin of Species*, a work of scientific observation that shattered Christian beliefs about creation and the lofty place of man in God's universe. I thought maybe you were more comfortable in letting the mystery unfold on its own terms.

"Were you at all scared?" I asked.

"More fatalistic," you said. "If life ends here, it'll be with my eyes open."

After mellowing out on sharp gin and philosophy, we meandered downstairs to the diner, which was crowded with men who made their living from the highway. The menu was in Urdu only.

"Vegetables?" I asked the waiter. "No meat. Only vegetables?"

He had no idea what I was asking for but I insisted. The day had been beyond my control, from the morning's betrayal by Dr. Iqbal, through the death-defying drive along what I'd thought would be like an interstate, to the damn squat toilet. I couldn't face another meal featuring chunks of gristle and bone.

You covered your face in embarrassment, but some of the guests knew a few words of English and they tried to guess what would please me.

"Okra?" the waiter finally said, wrinkling his nose at the thought.

"Yes!"

I'd never eaten okra before, but that night it was slimy-spicy delicious.

After dinner, we climbed back up to our room. It was dark and rainy. Inside our hut, we drew the curtains but soon began to hear footsteps, squeaks of leather and wood, and the soft conversations of men who would be sleeping outside our door.

I felt sorry for them having to sleep in the drizzling rain. Even though our own room was dry and immaculate, a sense of dread swept over me, a kind of itchiness.

At the end of the day, neither the gin nor the hearty meal blunted the stab of deep strangeness, the fundamental out-of-place-ness I felt.

You undressed and snuggled into your single bed, out like a light, true to your expression of harmony with the unknown. But I couldn't take my clothes off here. I couldn't drop my guard. I couldn't surrender myself to those white sheets, so I stretched out fully clothed on the other bed, my tiny flashlight on its lanyard around my neck… still feeling the vibration of car wheels on asphalt, still sensing death licking at our tires.

Breakdown

The next morning, Monday, August 10, was a new day. I had slept. We got up at five for a 6 a.m. departure. When we exited our room through morning twilight, the rooftop *charpois* were filled with sleeping men, blankets pulled over their heads to protect from the drizzle. The sight made me feel silly for my discomfort.

After some eggs and a mug of weak instant coffee, we were back on the road. Truck traffic thinned out north of Besham, but the pace was slower. The road was wet and, here and there, flooded with runoff from above. We skirted a crew of men lugging away stones from a rockslide.

Then a herd of goats stood in our way. Mr. Sayad got out to speak to the children tending them, so we pulled out our cameras. The kids giggled and posed for us before they cleared us a path.

The world became increasingly vertical.

Dubair, for example, looked like a flatland village as we drove through—small shops lining both sides of the road, but as the road veered east, we saw it sat on a ledge, with the backs of southside buildings cascading over the edge for multiple stories. They were cliff-dwellers, really, surviving by virtue of twisting, narrow terraces skillfully shaped out of stone and silt. Like our road.

Below the buildings, the landscape dipped and swirled. Women worked on the terraces, carrying big silver pots on their heads, their purple and black veils fluttering in the breeze.

It took us eight hours to travel the 124 miles to Chilas. We ate lunch and replenished our hoard of travel snacks and bottled water at an old roadside inn.

Here, the scenery changed dramatically. We had crossed the invisible boundary—the tectonic rift—between the Himalayas on the Indian sub-continent and the Karakorams of Eurasia. We had entered Indus Kohistan, a region once known as Yaghistan, "Land of the Ungoverned."

The landscape was barren, the mountains so immense that I lost all sense of proportion. At one of our stops, I looked down into a dried river bed—no, wait, those little sticks along its "banks" were distant utility poles along the edge of a great canyon—a canyon, maybe a mile away, straight down.

We began to make peace with our situation—the dizzying height, the plunging depth, the loss of control. After all, we hadn't signed up for a scenic Jeep tour in Colorado, home by lunch. We had committed to going as far as we could get, with the fantasy-fueled destination of a Sunday market in distant China. Our maps and our guidebooks oriented us only to one dimension—distance. But the real world is 3-D. Plus gravity. Plus velocity. Plus time, historical, geological, and personal. We wouldn't be home for lunch till early September.

Commented [SBP7]: I guess we could have made a fuss, cried like babies, made the driver deliver us to the nearest airport for a quick exit to someplace where the mountains were equipped with gondolas and hot cocoa.

And we were fine.

Our entry into Kohistan added another factor. Five times in the eighty-three miles between Chilas and Gilgit, we stopped to register at government checkpoints. They usually consisted of an outdoor shelter, with a couple of *charpois* serving as benches, and a table with a large paper log book. At each station, we smiled at the officials and dutifully filled in our names and passport numbers.

At the second checkpoint, I asked Mr. Sayad why these were necessary.

He gestured to take in the vast, desolate terrain. “Bandits.”

Ah.

We were oddly comforted at this benign procedure. People were paying attention to us. If we went missing, someone in an office somewhere would figure out where we were last seen. It made us feel less alone.

::

We arrived in Gilgit feeling good about the day’s drive. But once again the targeted tourist hotel was filled. Luckily, it was still early enough for Mr. Sayad to take us to the PTDC office. After much consultation, we were sent to the Hunza Tourist House, a pleasant motel with a flowery courtyard.

Outside our air-conditioned car, we confronted the heat. Yes, we were at an altitude of 4000 feet, but under a flame-blue sky, surrounded by heat-reflecting mountains, the valley baked like a brick oven. The window air conditioner in our room worked only intermittently as the power cut on and off—just enough to make us crazy over it.

On the other hand, the shower water was ice cold.

And the toilet… It wasn’t a squatter like the one in Besham, but the flusher didn’t quite work. I was frustrated. You were practical.

“You just have to use your hand,” you instructed as you reached in and swished the sluggish contents up into the drainpipe.

Oh, brother. I slumped down on the bed, ready for a nap.

You washed your hands, refolded your map, and checked the marked pages in your guide.

“Let’s go for a walk,” you said.

“What?”

“Come on. Gilgit is a famous place.”

I might have known that if I’d read my Rudyard Kipling or been a better student of British imperialism. Or a mountaineer excited by its fifty peaks taller than 23,000 feet.

Okay, if I was ever going to be a Master Traveler, I couldn’t let petty annoyances wear me down. I did grabbed my hat, sunglasses, and the trusty shoulder pouch that held my notebook. “Okay, let’s go.”

As we left the room I made space in my heart for the prospect of welcoming shops, tea and snacks at a sidewalk café, and picturesque produce markets.

But my bravado was not rewarded. Gilgit was dirty and not in the business of hospitality. The food for sale was covered with flies and a lot of the fruit was rotten. We saw some kind of tea houses, but they were dark, windowless caves for men only.

In general, we saw a town turned in on itself, preoccupied with its own business, uninterested in entertaining outsiders. The homes were fortresses: encircled by solid rock and cement walls, broken only by the occasional opening. Now and then, a woman in black would dart through a door or disappear down a passageway. We wondered if the massive structures were cultural (protecting women and children

from prying eyes) or environmental (shielding the family from the baking sun and the freezing winds), but there was no one to ask.

Everything was impenetrable.

Suddenly, I hated it. Why was I here? Why had I thought that being a stranger would be fun?

It was 7 p.m. and getting dark. We began to argue. I spotted a dingy Chinese restaurant on a back street.

"Can we just stop here for dinner and get it over with?" I suggested.

"Oh, come on," you said with a scoff. "We'll go to the room, fix a drink, and worry about dinner then."

The place didn't look very appetizing anyway, so I gave up and trudged after you.

Back at the Hunza House, you sat me down at a white wrought iron table in the flowery courtyard, disappeared into the room, and came back with a tall cocktail for me. I started to bawl, feeling doubly bad for being such a drip.

We had adjusted to the mountains, I thought, to the checkpoints and the danger. Our room was clean but combative. We tried to be friendly but no one was interested. Despite our supply of gin and Kool-Aid, despite our efficient bags, our flashlights, our respectful clothes, and our supply of medications for all maladies, I was unprepared for this journey.

You consoled me with another drink and my despair faded.

Darkness fell and the garden danced with colored fairy lights. So what if the universe was snubbing us. Tonight was ours. Then by some magic, you got the motel staff to bring a savory dinner right to our table.

In the blur of love and alcohol, my anxieties faded. No compulsion to sleep on top of the sheets fully clothed that night. Off with the clothes and under the sheets, I slept happily with my dear man.

Interlude

We set out the next morning at 6 a.m. for our trip to the Chinese border. But a half-hour out of Gilgit, traffic came to a halt. We got out to reconnoiter.

A landslide had blocked the road.

It was immense—and horrifying. A chunk of the mountainside damn well just fell apart. It plum gave out. What I assumed was solid rock had collapsed into a ten-foot high pile of dust and stones, obliterating the highway.

A dozen travelers milled around, shaking their heads and conferring with one another.

You got out your camera while I walked up close, flabbergasted. Yes, we had seen a few rockfalls on the road yesterday. Yes, I understood that these mountains were the spawn of continental drift, India pushing up under Asia. But my simple mental picture of this fact left out all the grinding and crunching that turned boulders to dust, with nothing but gravity holding it all together.

No glue. I gazed into the mile-deep chasm to my left and the mile-high wall to my right. Was the mountain little more than a gigantic pile of rubble just waiting for a good rain or a baby temblor to shake it lose?

"What now?" I asked Mr. Sayad.

He shrugged. "Maybe we get through tomorrow. *Inshallah*."

Mr. Sayad delivered us back to the motel, where we got a room for another night. You already had your finger on a page in the guidebook.

"Can we get a ride out to the Kargah Buddha?" you asked. Mr. Sayad didn't know the local area, so the desk clerk arranged a guide.

In the car, I grabbed the book and checked out where you were leading us. The attraction was a twenty-foot high standing Buddha, carved into a cliff face back in the seventh-century, when there were monasteries here.

You had studied and collected Buddhist art for decades. When I asked you why, you spoke of serenity—you always chose your pieces based on the beauty and serenity of the faces. And your enthusiasm to see more was boundless.

After the short ride, we traipsed along the rocky bottom of a glacier-carved valley that boasted a few scrubby trees. Near the monument, the path was blocked by a fast-moving stream. You gestured to our guide that you were willing to ford it.

Not me.

"Wrong shoes," I said, grabbing the excuse to sit under a tree and scribble in my notebook. I could see the giant carving from there and was content to watch.

Nevermind that you were sixty years old and certified as 60% disabled by the Veteran's Administration. You rolled up your pant legs and waded across the stream, yelping at the icy cold. Then you climbed over a rock wall, ascended a stone staircase, and mastered the footholds up the face of the cliff to reach the ledge below the Buddha. I thought you were crazy. The young guide thought you were magnificent.

::

After lunch, we wandered along the Gilgit River, followed by a friendly gaggle of children, who lined up to pose for pictures.

Back at the Hunza House, I was happy to take a nap but you went out again. By the time I woke up, you were back, excited to report that you found a little shop and made a purchase.

You showed me a couple squares of dirty rug fragments.

"Faces of old camel bags, tribal weaving from around these parts!" you exclaimed.

How did you know that? My brain swerved from your collection of Buddha smiles to the complex geometries of rug-making.

"How do you know…?"

"Collect enough things… you see, you know."

I smiled.

Years later, when I got around to studying Buddhism myself, I learned the important of admitting, *I don't know*. And I think about the vigor of your curiosity. Unlike the ghost of unmet expectations that haunted your life back home, the spirit of the unknown opened you up, kept you moving, kept your eyes clear for seeing. It was the source of your joy.

Guardian Angel and the Darlingtons

Our Wednesday began with optimism that we'd soon be on our way to China. But what did we know? We were bumping along in a world without conversations, without reservations, struggling to make the best of whatever came our way. When we got into the Corolla with Mr. Sayad, the most he could offer was *inshallah*.

We arrived at the landslide only to find it still massively blocking the road. The pile of boulders and dust had only been flattened out enough to let people climb over on foot and to challenge the most adept and desperate drivers to tackle it in their vehicles. We watched a Jeep driver gun his engine and race up the slope, our hearts stopping as his wheels began to spin, slipping and sliding toward the abyss. He made it across and the crowd cheered, but no way could Mr. Sayad's Corolla do that.

What now?

Then a tall figure, a handsome man with curly brown hair, stood on top of the rubble beckoning us. He was angelic in his fluttering white *salwar kamiz*.

"Come," he called. "Come with me."

What? Who was this angel, this savior? Suddenly you and Mr. Sayad were opening the Corolla trunk and taking out our bags and clambering up the scree. I scurried up after you but my feet lost their hold, and the angel scrambled down to grab my hand and steady my ascent.

Oh yes, I remembered. Najeeb. We met him at breakfast, where you talked (in English!) about the landslide and the uncertainty of road conditions. I saw him afterward conferring with Mr. Sayad, but neither of us guessed that he was offering to help.

It turned out that Najeeb was a guide for Travel Walgi's and had been hired by an English couple, Henry and Pamela Darlington, to escort them to the Chinese border. When the landslide blocked the road, Walgi's sent a van to pick them up on the other side. The van was large, so Najeeb invited us to go along with them.

Our whole outlook suddenly brightened. We paid off Mr. Sayad and joined our new companions.

The Darlingtons were not going all the way to the border at Sust that day, but only as far as Karimabad. We went along with their plan, not having much other choice and thrilled to have a plan at all.

As we drove north, the scenery grew lush and friendly. We made photo stops and gazed upon the sunny, snowy vision of Rakaposhi, standing out from its neighboring mountains with a stunning vertical rise of nearly 20,000 feet.

Near Karimabad, we transferred to Jeeps for the rugged climb up to the Mountain View Inn, where the Darlingtons had reservations.

We were disappointed (*déjà vu*) that there was no room for us, but before panic set in, Najeeb whisked us farther up the road and got us a room at the new Rakaposhi View.

Our room was small but we were dazzled by the new locale. We perched at 7000 feet, with mountains of staggering beauty in every direction. *This is what we came for*, I thought to myself. While you headed to the bathroom, I donned my red

insulated vest, found my new blue windbreaker at the bottom of my pack, grabbed a guidebook and my notebook, and went outdoors.

Our small hotel was built on a concrete slab that could have used tables and chairs or a few benches, but no matter, I sat on the edge, my feet dangling over the steep slope, letting this ancient world inhabit me.

The guidebook had told me that these isolated people—the Hunzakuts—survived through history by robbing caravans along the old north-south trade routes. But what I saw was a harmonious village where every flat roof was bright orange with layers of apricots drying in the sun. Sounds carried upward: babies crying, children shouting, women calling to one another as they threshed wheat.

Najeeb appeared and sat down next to me. He'd changed into jeans and a leather bomber jacket, with a flowered scarf around his neck. In profile, with his straight nose and mop of hair, our angel looked like a descendant of Alexander the Great, whose armies swept through this region three hundred years before Christ and whose coins made his profile legendary.

Najeeb made his living as a tour guide, but sitting with me there, he confided that his first love was mountaineering.

He pointed to the snowy peak of Ultar Sar to the north. In 1992, it had still never been climbed to the top. He knew a Japanese climber who swore he would summit the peak or die trying. On his third attempt, an avalanche swept him away.

It made me wonder why people embarked on such foolhardy adventures… as I sat with a handsome stranger, as far from home as I could get, with no real plans except for a fantasy market in China. Ambition fueled the roadbuilding, the trailblazing, the pathfinding—the need to carve out conduits for our desires both deadly and absurd. Like the climber, I wanted to be out on the edge, at home in a world larger than my cozy container, even if I didn't know how, or what to do when I got there.

And yet Najeeb and I sat there, overlooking a community of people content in their valley container, in perfect harmony with the power of Ultar. Instead of pounding pitons and stringing rope up to its peak, they molded channels to direct its glacier runoff into centuries-old irrigation canals, which in turn fed a capillary system of water to hundreds of shallow terraces. The rocky slopes blossomed with fruits and grains. The bounty of apricot trees sustained the Hunzakuts winter after winter and were said to be the secret of their long lives.

When you joined us, we made an easy walking tour of the village heights.

For dinner, we walked down to the Mountain View, where you and a rowdy group of Italian climbers demanded some local wine, known as Hunza water. I took one sip—ew, turpentine—and spit it out, but you drank up.

We found the way back to our room by starlight, where you made a dash for the bathroom and threw up.

Was it the Hunza water? Or the meat I'd avoided? You spiked a fever and spent the night with a classic case of Montezuma's revenge.

All you had to clean yourself up with was glacier water, which poured out of our faucets ice cold and literally sparkling with ground granite. Maybe this water that

grew life-extending apricots worked its healing magic on you too. By breakfast you were fine and none of our traveling companions were the wiser.

On Thursday, we discovered that Najeeb had arranged a Jeep and driver to get us to the border at Sust. Najeeb, we realized, was a professional shepherd whose flock fell into two categories: disciplined goats with their minutely planned climbing expeditions or docile sheep with their envelopes of hotel vouchers. We were stray cats, not even fitting the predictable goofiness of wandering college-age backpackers. We were older, eager but undemanding, slightly daring, slightly ridiculous and Najeeb took a liking to us.

We followed the Darlington's jeep to the border town of Sust, but—oh-oh—the bus through the mountain pass into China had already left for the day. We asked about hiring a car but the guy in charge had a better idea: *go with the Darlingtons!* They had a big Toyota Land Cruiser all to themselves.

Perfect.

Do you remember the Darlingtons? He was a data analyst, she was a teacher. Like us, they loved to travel. But—while we were letting it all happen to us, they had left nothing to chance. They were paying top dollar to be properly escorted and billeted through Pakistan and then across China, their itinerary worked out in detail. Where we wound up being grateful every night to have a pillow under our heads, they whined about anything that didn't meet their specifications. In fact, Henry confided to us that complaining—holding the locals accountable—had become a kind of sport for them.

We understood that all we had was our charm. And, like those *rafiqs* of the ancient trade routes, held no one accountable except each other.

But there we were, the planners and the charmers, our paths crossing in the same vehicle, headed for the same place—the breathtaking Khunjerab Pass, seventy-five miles to the Chinese border checkpoint at Pirali.

Midway, at 16,000 feet, we stopped to take pictures. The thin air was cold, but sunny and made us light-headed. A colorful van of Pakistani men and boys also stopped. They formed a circle, whooped and danced, a joyous ritual upon reaching this world wonder—the highest bus-navigable mountain pass in the world! We were delighted, but also happy to return to the warmth of the car.

Miles later, we stopped at a checkpoint and our driver welcomed on board two young Chinese soldiers headed back to their quarters in Pirali.

The youth who was jammed between you and me in the back seat admired my camera and micro-recorder, which I must have been fiddling with. He spoke no English and I remembered only a few words from high school Chinese, so I pulled out a phrasebook for tourists and we had a conversation by pointing at phrases and passing it back and forth to each other. For me, that was a sparkling moment of international communication—exchanging sentiments with a Chinese soldier squeezed in the backseat of a Toyota on the Karakoram Highway, both of us giggling.

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Pirali turned out to be an isolated border post consisting of a few barracks for the militia who patrolled the crossing. We proudly showed our visas. This had been

the focus of what little planning we did back home—finding a way to get Chinese visas. Somehow, I'd found an agency in San Francisco, a fixer for California Chinese, who got us the stamps. But before we could pat ourselves on the back for having our paperwork in order, we learned that our only way out of Pirali, the daily bus, was long gone and that the line-up of private vehicles we saw had all been reserved in advance.

Lodging for the night? No.

So we dragged our bags to the vehicle area and stood there, smiles pasted on, stray cats once more, straining to catch the eye of someone in charge, hoping to strike the right note between pathetic and endearing.

Around us, bags were flying and travelers were yelling as they jockeyed for better cars. The Darlingtons were in an uproar. Their new guide, their Chinese Najeeb, hadn't shown up yet and the car they were assigned wasn't what they'd ordered. Henry scowled and waved his papers at the official in charge.

The official was in no mood to be challenged. He punished the grumpy Brits by assigning the smiling Americans to their car—a smaller version of their Land Cruiser, in which the luggage had to be stowed on board instead of strapped to the roof.

The Darlingtons were a bit less gracious than before. Yes, they had their requirements and their fat sheaf of vouchers, but in that part of the world, no one was truly in charge of his destiny. The Darlingtons' cozy package for two got squeezed into a cramped improvisation for four.

Their guide Cherry finally arrived, a sweet slip of a girl who wore a sky-blue dress and a Sunday bonnet. When Pamela stated her dissatisfaction with the car, Cherry shrugged her shoulders, and said, "I can only do my best."

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At the time, you and I were oblivious to their discomfort: we were once again mesmerized by the landscape as the jagged Karakoram range gave way to the vast windswept Pamirs—a mountain desert in shades of gray and red-brown. It was grand opera, vast and rolling, dark and endless.

We were also ignorant of the fact that the night's destination was not Kashgar, but Tashgurkan, a small oasis town only sixty miles into the 240 mile trip. Once again we were dumped out in front of a hotel that wasn't expecting us. Luckily, the Pamir Hotel had a vacant room and we had a couple hours to get our first taste of Islamic China, where, unlike Pakistan, the women were out on the street shopping, not draped and veiled but in colorful short dresses, with brown stockings and headscarves to preserve their modesty.

After strolling around the town's market, we returned to our room and found a giant thermos of hot water, which we used to wash up and to fix Kool-Aid toddies. We were in a great mood when we joined the Darlingtons for dinner. The platters of spicy vegetables were a feast for us, but the English couple picked at the food and complained.

We could have used a good night's sleep, but the toilet ran continuously and finally the bed collapsed beneath us. We could only laugh.

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The next morning when we rejoined the Darlingtons, it was clear that they had "talked us over" and found the words to ask us to *please* find another way to Kashgar. Pamela explained that Henry's back problems had kicked from sitting on the transmission hump yesterday. And, really, they had paid dearly for a luxury ride.

You and I were sensitive people. We thoroughly understood a couple's need for privacy and comfort. But there in a place called Tashgurkan on a vast desert plateau amid the endless mountain ranges of Central Asia, we stray cats dug our claws into the Darlington's magic carpet, desperate not to be shoved off. Did we act crazed? No. We smiled our big Yankee smiles.

"Hey, man," you said. "Let me reimburse you for our share. It slipped my mind…"

Before they could respond, I piped in. "I noticed a fold-down seat in the back. One of us can sit there!"

The Darlingtons caved.

You worked out the money and sat your ass on the tiny seat over the wheel-well, without a complaint.

Back on the road, we began to see the occasional camel, the beast who made transcontinental trade possible, with their reliable pace of twenty miles a day, fully loaded. We saw their owners too—Kyrgyz nomads, who lived by summer in felted wool yurts, moving as needed to find pasture for their sheep, their horses, and their yaks. Yes, we saw yaks too.

For lunch, we stopped at Lake Karakuli, a turquoise blue lake, 12,000 feet high, fed by glacial waters from the sprawling, snow-covered mountain to the south, the 25,000-foot Muztagh Ata. I don't remember being cold or light-headed. I only remember eating bright red tomatoes covered with sugar—a treat that made me think of tomatoes in a whole new light.

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We finally got to Kashgar. There were basically two choices there for travelers who didn't want to sleep in fleabags: the Seman Hotel (which used to be the Russian consulate) and the Qinibak (which used to be the British consulate). We followed the Darlingtons into the Seman. While Cherry and they went off to examine their reserved room, we were shooed away by the desk clerks. They didn't give any sign of knowing English but the message was clear: no rooms… not for one night much less for four… not anywhere… not anywhere at all in Kashgar.

Not again! I cracked. On came the tears. What the hell were we supposed to do now?

Meanwhile, the Darlingtons returned to the front desk. They were in a huff about the quality of their room. With a swipe of my eyes, I whispered to Cherry that we were willing to take their rejected room. But that was not to be. Somehow the Darlingtons were cajoled into realizing they had no other choice. So then (mustering my biggest smile) I promised Cherry that, if she found us a room, I would send her a little micro-recorder like mine, which she had admired during our drive. She rose to

the challenge and did manage to get us a room—for one night only, then maybe, just maybe, they'd find us a room for the other three nights.

We did get our four nights, in four different rooms, and I did send Cherry a micro-recorder when we got home.

The rooms were dreary. Plumbing leaked, wallpaper peeled at the seams, bed linens were frayed. One night a maid carrying a long pole barged into our room without knocking, followed by a distraught Japanese man, who had been drying his clothes on his window sill and they blew off, now caught on something outside. We were undressed and scrambled under the bed sheets. They flung open our windows, retrieved the clothes, and whisked out without a word to us.

For two nights we had a room without plumbing and used the unisex facilities down the hall. The lavatory was stinky because, despite the flush mechanism on the squat toilets, guests tended to put their used toilet paper into the trash cans. But in the evenings between 7 and 1 a.m., the hot water came on and a group of Italian tourists swarmed in to scrub children and clothes. Their soap made the place smell mercifully fresh. That was all we needed: hot water and the fragrance of soap and soft beds with clean sheets.

Kashgar

The first thing we noticed about Kashgar was its vivid contrast to Pakistan. Where Pakistan is brown and gray, Kashgar was green and pink—a succulent watermelon oasis on the edge of nowhere.

Yes, the old hotel was decrepit and gloomy and staffed by sullen young women. But we learned that there were two Kashgars. We were in the far west of Xinjiang province, just a few miles from the old Soviet republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This traditional Islamic region was the victim of an internal "colonization" policy that relocated thousands of Han Chinese (the dominant ethnic Chinese from eastern China) to exert Communist authority and stifle the voices of independence. These transplanted Chinese were the bored, arrogant tourist-office functionaries and hotel clerks.

But that Saturday morning, as we left the hotel to begin exploring, we discovered the parallel Kashgar, in the community of Uyghurs, the ethnic group who make up most of the city's population. Walking through the local bazaar we found a bustling neighborhood of makers, working in the lanes outside their shops—people young and old sewing, turning logs into chair legs and baby cribs, pounding galvanized metal into pails and pans, shaping raw cotton into batting, baking, blacksmithing, and shoeing horses.

We hopped rides on two-wheeled donkey carts, cheap public transportation largely managed by little boys, while men with horse carts carried heavier loads. Everyone smiled and mugged for pictures. Their faces reflected centuries of intermarriage among tribes along the silk road trading routes—a beautiful and diverse blending of Asian and European features that defied category.

As we'd seen in Tashgurkan, Kashgar women sported short dresses in silky reds and satiny pinks and rainbow prints. They all wore brown stockings, but many young ladies jazzed up the look with red socks. Older women wrapped their heads and shoulders in heavy shawls, but younger women and girls chose gauzy red chiffon scarves shot with gold threads.

Red was the accent color in every one of our photos. Red scarves. Red socks. Red oil cloth on tables. Red awnings. And at the food stands, next to the red tomatoes, red-dyed hard-boiled eggs.

At lunchtime, we discovered John's Information Café, a Sixties sort of a place under a lush grape arbor, where young backpackers picked up second-hand guidebooks, posted messages, and ate cheap meals.

In the afternoon, we walked into the main square of the city, past the mammoth statue of Mao, to the People's Park, where men sat together playing cards, chess, and other board games. I had carried a jar of soap bubbles all the way from home to signal my friendliness. I sat on a bench blowing bubbles while you took pictures. We drew a crowd. Little girls begged to swish the wand themselves. Boys chased the bubbles to pop them. Adults just stared and mumbled to one another about the daffy foreigner.

That evening we ate at Leman's, another restaurant that catered to footloose foreigners. Then we strolled back into the streets again and found the Uyghurs

congregating at open air bars, which served non-alcoholic honey drinks and blasted melodramas from large-screen TVs.

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On Sunday, we got up early for the main event: Sunday market. This was the apex of our entire trip, the very reason we set out on this course.

Why?

Our Karakoram Highway guidebook told us it was the biggest market on the vast continent of Asia, attracting dealers from all over Pakistan and western China and now from the newly liberated republics of the old Soviet Union. We would never have called ourselves treasure hunters, but there we were. You had spent decades collecting world folk art and small antique Buddhas. During our travels in 1990, I caught the bug for ancient beads. Our guidebook had given us a treasure map—*X marks the spot*—and that spot was Kashgar's Sunday market. What did we expect to find? Fifteenth-century Russian icons? Eighth-century Tang Dynasty figurines? Beads from the ancient Indus Valley civilization?

As a novelist, I had already researched the ethics of collecting ancient artifacts that had been liberated from national collections during political conflict or dug up by careless pot hunters and grave robbers.

Of course, we would never knowingly buy stolen merchandise and were appalled at the desecration of sacred sites by looters, but still, we were curious. There was something juicy about seeking out the forbidden, walking in the footsteps of ancient traders, who trod these roads long before nations worried about losing their cultural treasures, and long before international treaties put a damper on what goods could cross which borders.

So on Sunday, we got up early, ate breakfast from our stash of stale bread and Kool-Aid, and flagged down a horse cart for the hour-long ride to the market.

By the time we arrived, tens of thousands of people were already doing business. We joined the melee and pressed our way through stall after stall of goods for sale.

But the joke was on us. Yes, we had stepped onto the highway of history and brushed elbows with the descendants of traders who had operated here for two thousand years. But the goods displayed before us were fat bucking bulls and long-haired goats. Our treasures were vast wholesale quantities of fabric, fly swatters, pens, soap, squirt guns, shopping bags, knives, nuts, fake snow leopard skins, and felt hats. No one was in the art business.

Damn. I'd had this theory, see, about political disruption giving legs to precious goods, sending them in search of cash, to support crashing economies and desperate refugees and grassroots insurrections. I'd seen it at work in Thailand, where lovely stuff was pouring out of Burma to cash in on tourist dollars.

But today, watching a camel-drawn cart haul boulder-sized chunks of salt, we had to laugh at ourselves. We had to set aside our amateur theories and our romantic expectations and simply surrender to the color and the vitality of our market experience, the here and the now.

When we tired of the crowds and had enough pictures in our cameras, we hailed a horse cart and clip-clopped our way back the hotel.

Commented [SBP8]: As a traveler to the far reaches of the planet, I had already shrugged off the idea of a spiritual quest—no monasteries, no chanting, no turning my back on the woman I had become. We had opted for Something Else, we had chosen a more profane path, a region of ancient trade routes, teeming with the ghosts of merchants who competed for the most rare and beautiful goods, who for two thousand years bargained and cut deals on behalf of customers who coveted Mediterranean coral, Chinese silk, Baltic amber, Venetian glass, nutmeg, cinnamon, incense, and opium. It was a route paved with desire.

During a late afternoon walk, we finally found a shop that sold art. No ancient treasures there, no beads, but you fell in love with a painting by a local artist—a water painting on a long scroll, with a mountain, a lake, and a camel. At least we wouldn't leave China empty-handed.

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That was Day 15 of our trip. Time to turn around and start our three-week journey back through the high mountains into Pakistan, toward home.

Part 3

Leaving Kashgar

Where were the Darlingtons when we needed them? It was time to plan our trip back into Pakistan and we were on our own. No angel Najeeb sweeping in with a solution, no planful English couple with a Land Cruiser, not even a con man full of promises. Just you and me, babe, facing the road ahead.

We tried to be the Darlingtons. We went to the national tourist office to arrange for a car but, like the sullen young women who staffed our hotel office, the clerk shrugged his shoulders and had nothing to offer.

We had only one choice: the bus. Bus tickets had to be bought in advance, but only one day in advance, and only at the Qinibak Hotel, and only before 1 p.m.

We didn't worry. Kashgar was beautiful and, by our current standards of hardship, easy. On Monday, we had our usual late breakfast outdoors at John's Information Café.

We were at home enough now to rent bicycles. We would make the short excursion over to the Qinibak, then spend the rest of the day touring the sights outside the central market. But we made a tactical error.

China has two currencies: local *renmen-bi* ("People's money") and foreign exchange currency (FEC or *yuan*). We wanted to spend down our less useful *renmen-bi* so we left our FEC as the deposit on the bikes and headed for the Qinibak with the People's money.

The quaint angled lanes of Kashgar weren't nearly so sweet when we had a destination in mind. We got lost. Arriving at the Qinibak at 12:45, we offered our money at the ticket window and heard, "No *renmen-bi*! FEC only!"

Before I could whisper *goddammit* to myself, you hopped on your bike.

"We'll be right back!" you yelled.

I followed as you raced ahead to the bike rental, switched the money, and reversed course—not a second to spare. Your hat blew off. I stopped to retrieve it and, when I looked up, I gaped in horror to see you make the wrong turn. I raced after you, dodging pedestrians, screaming at the top of my lungs, "Jim! Jim!" tears of anger and frustration springing to my eyes.

On your own, you realized the screw-up and turned around. As you passed me, your cloud of dust got into my eyes and under one of my contact lenses, so I wobbled after you, half-blind and shaking.

But you got the tickets.

::

The next leg of our journey arranged, we celebrated with lunch and Chinese beer, then set off with our bikes to look at historic mosques and landmark tombs on the outskirts of town. But what we enjoyed most was our stop at a little refreshment stands where we bought ice cold orange Fantas and were treated to free slices of watermelon. A cadre of honeybees buzzed in to share the sweets and the shopkeepers thought it was hilarious that I was unnerved by them.

We loved the kindness of these Uyghurs, as much as they got a kick out us traveling strays who were afraid of their bees. And I always have to remind myself that we said so much to one other without a common language.

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Today, in 2017, it upsets me to read that Chinese officials—forever in my mind as those cranky hotel and bus bureaucrats—have torn down much of Kashgar's old town, forcing the Uyghurs into apartment buildings miles from the city, while authorities replace the ancient dwellings with luxury units geared to attract more Han Chinese settlers from the east. If Uyghurs want well-paying government jobs they have to forsake Islam and adopt state atheism. They have to stop speaking the ancestral Turkic language and become fluent in Mandarin. Mosques have been bulldozed in the name of public safety as the Uyghurs who demand regional autonomy and personal freedoms get tarred with the brush of extremism. And so, remembering those small moments of brotherhood mean a lot to me.

Kashgar to Tashgurkan

Kashgar didn't want to let us go. On Tuesday, August 18, I awoke full of travel nerves. The bus was scheduled to leave from the Qinibak Hotel at 11 a.m. We were under strict instructions to be there by 10. We finished packing and at 8:45 raced across the street to the Liman Café for a quick breakfast, but at 9:30 still weren't served.

"We have to go," I said.

"But I'm hungry," you said, way too relaxed.

"Well, I'm going." I dashed back to the hotel and dragged all our bags downstairs, where I found you had followed me and were now hung up with the desk clerk, arguing over the key deposit. I rushed outdoors and hailed a horse cart.

"Qinibak Hotel! How much?" I shouted.

"Qinibak! Ten yuan!"

Okay. When we got loaded up, the horse galloped off in an unexpected direction. What's this? Then the driver started yelling, "Twenty yuan! Ten for each!"

Was he kidnapping us till we agreed?

"Okay, okay! Qinibak Hotel!" I yelled back.

Suddenly, there we were at the hotel. But now the driver wanted more: an additional ten yuan for each bag.

You, the soft-spoken traveler, surprised me by screeching, "You agreed! Ten each!" You yanked our bags off the cart and slapped down the twenty yuan. "Now get lost!"

Phew. The horse cart trotted off and we jogged over to the bus stop in the nick of time.

But 10 a.m. turned to 11 and we still milled around the lot watching men slowly load two buses—inside and on top—with cardboard boxes. We spoke with fellow passengers: a Canadian photographer-turned-guide, a fussy little man from Barcelona, and a couple of bedraggled young women who'd been traveling through China on the cheap for months.

No one knew the rules. Everyone wanted a good seat. Were we supposed to queue up? No one knew, but a queue formed anyway next to the third bus. A few people threw small articles through the window to save the seats they wanted. We stood on line in the midday glare for more than an hour, like idiots. When the bus staff was good and ready to let us board, they threw off everything anyone had tossed through the windows and gruffly assigned seats according to nothing but their personal whims. They howled when we didn't move fast enough. With the other two buses in the caravan already filled with cargo, there wasn't enough room for all the passengers and arguments broke out.

We got sent to the back of the bus, so had to thread our way down the foot-wide aisle already filled with everyone's carry-ons.

The bus finally pulled out of the lot at 2:45, only to stop an hour later for lunch! Everyone was furious. Little did we realize that this crude outdoor restaurant was the last shred of civilization before Tashgurkan, some eight hours south.

From there we hit the desert, going slowly uphill. We were already at 4000 feet. The night would bring us to 10,000 feet. Every couple hours, we'd have a "water stop," which meant getting out of the bus and finding our own private sand dune to squat behind for a pee.

I was squeezed in between you and a civil engineer from Pakistan, who was traveling with his two sons and nephew. He used the little English he knew to ask rude questions: were we married? Why not? And he felt sick—did we have aspirin? I gave him a couple from our stash. Water please? Oh dear. I handed him my canteen, hoping he wasn't contagious. Stupid, I know, but the gesture made me feel less like a stranger. For a fleeting moment, he was my brother.

It was nearly 11 p.m. when the bus finally stopped in Tashgurkan. Everyone jumped up and rushed out. We worked our way from the back of the bus, and found ourselves last in the long line of travelers waiting for a room at the Traffic Hotel, a decaying inn with all the charm of an old army barracks.

It was after midnight by the time we got the key to a surprisingly cozy room. But, no surprise, the bulb was burned out in the bathroom, the toilet ran constantly, and dogs howled outside our window. There was a TV but it had a nonfunctional Western plug— someone must have swiped the adaptor. I was headachy and restless from the altitude and thrilled to have a soft bed. On the dresser, we found a big thermos of hot water, so we feasted on hot Kool-Aid, wine, peanuts, and stale bread. Life was good.

Leaving China

A chill in the air woke us up the next morning and we discovered that the hotel generator had broken down. No problem. In the dining room, we watched our omelets being cooked over an open fire and sat down with our fellow travelers to eat in the gray morning twilight. The Canadian photographer-turned-guide told us the news: the weather had changed. Rain here, snow ahead!

Later, outside in the drizzle, we saw the mountain peaks to our south and west were now dusted white. My spirits soared. To this day, I can't figure out why I got such a boost out of seeing that snow and feeling that damp cold against my skin. My guess? For a week we'd been traveling in bone dry conditions anywhere from 4000 to 16,000 feet. Kashgar was a succulent oasis but the sky still burned relentlessly blue. I was dried out and we had three more weeks to go. I needed watering.

Everyone, apparently, had been a little desert-crazed and the weather created giddiness all around. It was insane. Rain and snow on steep mountain roads was a recipe for disaster—and don't even ask about the tread on the bus tires. And yet the whole group took on a holiday spirit.

As the bus began its labored climb from Tashgurkan at 10,000 feet toward Pirali and the Khunjerab Pass at 16,000 feet, we were blanketed with snow. The engineer's sons had never seen snow and screamed with delight. Every water stop became a romp, a celebration. A Paki businessman—the bus clown—brought chunks of snow on board and passed them around for us to eat.

At Pirali, the Chinese border checkpoint, with our warm clothes and heavy shoes strapped to the roof of the bus, we danced through inches of snow in our socks and sandals to get to the emigration window and shivered in line waiting for our passport stamps.

Back on the road, our bus continued to plow through snow till we reached the highest point in the Khunjerab Pass. Celebration was mandatory. When we came through northbound, a week ago, a group of men formed a circle and danced in the sun. This time, in dense snow and fog, the youngest bus passengers whooped and hollered in a friendly snowball fight.

As we descended into Pakistan, the snow turned to icy rain and the switchbacks got scarier. The weather had caused a lot of small rockslides that road crews were trying to clean up.

"Oh look," you said from your window seat. We were passing a small front-loader that had just flipped over and its driver lay dead on the pavement.

Yet giddiness on the bus continued. The clownish businessman decided to hack open his Kashgar watermelon and pass slices around to each of us. Without thinking, you threw your rind out the window and it bounced off the windshield of a Jeep driving behind us.

"Jim!" I rattled a plastic bag with my rind and other snack wrappers in front of your eyes. You were sheepish.

Then the little man from Barcelona wet his pants and our clown teased him for the rest of the drive: "Toilet? No toilet?" The Spaniard took it in good humor—what

choice was there? On a bus in a narrow mountain pass, we were a single organism, the fate of us all intertwined.

It was in this state of absurdity that we said goodbye to China.

VIP Pakistan

By early afternoon on Wednesday, August 19, our bus arrived in Sust, the Pakistan border checkpoint. It was raining, hard. The hilarity of our bus ride ended quickly as passengers rushed out and crowded into a single line to have their documents stamped at an unsheltered window. The bus driver climbed on top of the bus and began throwing off the bags.

"There must be another bus going south from here," I said. We'd spent a lot of energy figuring out our exit from China, but now we were back at square one, without a plan.

"I'll check it out," you said, spotting our bags.

We dug into them for umbrellas and jackets.

Suddenly, a voice called, "Mr. James! Mr. James!"

We looked up at a Jeep driver, who trotted over to us.

"Najeeb send me! Jeep for you!"

Oh! Our angel Najeeb had remembered our return date. The driver picked up our bags and rushed us to the head of the line yelling, "VIP! VIP!"

Suddenly, we were the Darlingtons, waving good-bye to the lesser beings condemned to public transportation, getting our papers stamped with no questions, and disappearing into an empty first-class restaurant where the help had been instructed to serve us no matter what time we got in.

With our bellies full, the driver then whisked us south to Karimabad and the lovely Mountain View Hotel, where Najeeb had reserved us a room for three nights.

Back in Karimabad, we were a shade more experienced, a tad more at ease than when we'd arrived (could it be?) only seven days ago. Back then, we had just been rescued from the landslide at Gilgit and were anxious about finding our way to Kashgar. But now, we could relax and appreciate this mountain paradise.

As it turned out, our seventy-two hours in the Hunza Valley turned out to be the most social interlude of our journey and, little did we realize, the last sane place.

Our first afternoon, on the way back from a slow and light-headed climb to the glacial spate at nearly 9000 feet, we were thrilled to run into Najeeb on the path. While his tour group of Italian bicyclists rested, he had gone for a walk and had (as was his habit) picked up a threesome of stray travelers. He introduced us and they invited Najeeb and us for tea on the porch of their hostel. They were wanderers in their twenties, British, soaking up the world on the cheap, wondering who they'd be when they grew up.

Hugo was tall and blond, a chatty young man, who immediately set out to impress you, the 60-year-old alpha male, with his catalog of adventures. The women were more interesting. Catherine was raised in Ghana, had worked for CNN in Hong Kong, and was aiming for a career making travel documentaries. Jennie was a professional photographer, recently working in Moscow, now on her way back to school. In Rawalpindi, she'd been thrown from horse cart in traffic and was badly bruised.

Jennie was a Churchill (Winston's great-grandaughter) and I discovered her grandmother was Pamela Harriman. Mrs. Harriman had for years been on my list

of great dames. She was a legendary socialite, born in 1920, who found her way to power by seducing and occasionally marrying tycoons and politicians. As a second-wave feminist, I admired her intelligence and her sexual boldness.

But in fact, it was Jennie and Catherine who represented the woman of the nineties, exploring the world on their own, gathering experience for "new media" careers, with ambitions to change the world. I envied them. They were who I had wanted to be in my twenties, but such independent adventures were reserved for men and I didn't have the resources or the know-how to break that barrier.

But here, now, on a Wednesday afternoon, over tea, our paths merged along an ancient caravan route. We shared a table on a mountainside in Pakistan, exchanging our travelers' tales as fellow citizens of the world.

For two full days and a morning we continued to explore the Hunza Valley on foot. We walked slowly because the altitude made our hearts pound.

Downhill from the village, along the Karakoram Highway, we studied the dizzying geology of the Karakoram Mountains: solid layers of basalt sprung from deep in the earth, splintered chunks of granite sparkling with black and gold mica, and tumbled-smooth stones of all varieties in patches of glacial moraine. It was an ocean of rock, its movement too slow to discern—except when it suddenly broke apart and crashed down all over the place. There had been early Buddhist shelter caves here, but they had long collapsed.

We scrambled up the roadside scree for a close view of the cathedral-sized Sacred Rock, where passing travelers (as long ago as 200 C.E.) had inscribed words in multiple ancient languages and figures of people and ibex sheep. We spent too much time exploring and taking pictures in the searing sun but, fortunately, by the time we faced the steep climb back to our lodging, a Jeep came along and we hitched a ride.

We also walked deep into the agricultural terraces of Karimabad, where we finally got near the women as they went about their chores. They smiled at us and prompted their toddlers to say "hello" and "bye-bye." Little girls asked, "What is your name?" Little boys asked, "Where are you going?"

On the Friday holy day, we hiked down to another village, occupied by more conservative Shia Muslims. Everyone was indoors except for a young boy who gave us a complete tour of his picturesque village in exchange for some views through our binoculars.

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At lunch on Thursday, Najeeb joined us and asked what we had planned for the rest of our trip. We still had thirteen full days before us till we needed to catch our plane out of Karachi. You already had the guidebook marked with a few ideas. We hadn't originally considered Peshawar, but your conversations with the disappearing Dr. Iqbal had stirred your interest. Najeeb agreed. He pulled out a scrap of paper and jotted down a plan.

"Tomorrow, I get you a Jeep to Gilgit. Park Hotel—24-hour hot water." He smiled and continued. "You have to see Nanga Parbat, so I'll get you a driver who will help you rent sleeping bags. Spend the night Saturday at Fairy Meadow tent camp.

"Monday, back to Gilgit. Tuesday, I'll reserve seats for you on the scenic flight around Nanga Parbat, from Gilgit to Islamabad. I'll have a car waiting for you there to take you to Peshawar. You can make many side trips, then fly to Karachi from there."

Relieved to have a plan, we tipped Najeeb generously for his help.

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That afternoon, we invited the British threesome to our place for happy hour. Our guest of honor was Jan Sakih, whose family owned our hotel and who was a passionate mountaineer. You bought a bottle of the local moonshine from him and it

went well with our Kool-Aid. Jan's English was good and he was curious about us and our travels.

You ducked back to our room and dug out the watercolor you bought in Kashgar.

"Oh, I know what that is a picture of," Jan exclaimed. "It's Karakuli and Muztagh Ata!" Ah, the lake and giant mountain we passed on the way to Kashgar. He had skied down the steep slope of that mountain, but the story he wanted to tell us was a love story.

For three years, he had lived with a girl at the university in the big city of Lahore, where he played on the Olympic soccer team. But, alas, she ran off to Canada. With a broken heart, he quit school, quit soccer, and returned home to the mountains.

He finally found "true friendship" (his words) with his current wife, whom he was supporting through medical school, a popular profession for women of means in Pakistan.

After his story, I showed him the two necklaces I bought from a little shop we'd found that day in the town's tiny "Main Street." They were sad, really, made from poor turquoise and low-grade silver, the result of my desperation to find something, *anything*, to add to my bead collection as a souvenir of this trip.

Jan shook his head. "Not local," he apologized, "maybe from Afghanistan."

But my interest in jewelry made him dash back to his residence and get something to show me—his wedding ring.

It was a great chunk of silver, inlaid with lapis lazuli—three central rectangles, with a cluster of six tiny hearts on each side—manly but powerfully sweet. He had worked with an Afghan jeweler—a master craftsman—for a long time, getting the design just right. But oh my goodness, when he started to wear it, he became sick all the time and couldn't work. He finally consulted a traditional healer, who advised him that the powerful energy of the lapis lazuli was somehow working against him, so he put the ring aside for a simple silver band.

I was enchanted by the ring and by his story. He offered the ring to me for $24 and I eagerly accepted the sentimental treasure.

That evening, we were joined for drinks on our terrace by a guide named Akhtar Karim, who was dressed in blue jeans and a leopard-skin shirt. He was taking a break from his very demanding Japanese tour group. He had lived in Japan but had polished his English there by hanging out with Americans in bars. Akhtar was a cosmopolitan, a philosopher, and an observer of his own people. Ominously, he told us that the diversity of languages and sub-cultures in Pakistan was tearing the country apart. Islam's denominations of Shia and Sunni, traditionally harmonious in these parts, were increasingly at each others throats. We were to remember those words days later…

Part 4

Nanga Parbat

I have a 1954 book called *Nanga Parbat: The Killer Mountain*. The cover blurb says "The gripping story of more than fifty years of heroism and tragedy… on the most murderous mountain in the world." It's one of those books I should have read before our trip to Pakistan, before we set off that Sunday morning to "have a look."

Nanga Parbat is 26,660 feet high and anchors the western end of the Himalayas. The ninth highest mountain in the world, it soars higher than the surrounding mountains and presents a seductive challenge. In the early twentieth century, conquering its peak was less a sport than an imperialist frenzy as Germany set out to prove its national superiority to Britain. Those early climbers were arrogant adventurers.

On August 23, 1992, we found ourselves climbing Nanga Parbat. We were not arrogant adventurers; we were merely ill informed. In fact, I had never heard of Nanga Parbat before Mr. Sayad pointed it out on our drive north from Rawalpindi.

Najeeb had been so casual about "an overnight at the Fairy Meadows tent camp." A glance at one of our guidebooks gave an equally bland impression. I had a mental picture of a parking lot where buses stopped to give stout British matrons a thrilling view of the mountain and a chance to visit the loo.

But you have to remember that, even though Najeeb was the most watchful of guides, he was a mountaineer at heart. His father climbed with Reinhold Messner, the first climber to summit Mount Everest without supplemental oxygen, and the first climber to ascend all fourteen peaks over 26,000 feet. Despite our age, we had apparently impressed Najeeb as intrepid and capable.

The afternoon we arrived in Gilgit, Ali, the driver that Najeeb hired for the side trip showed up at our hotel with an interpreter (that is, a man who knew about ten more words of English than Ali). They took us to a kiosk near the hotel where we rented sleeping bags and we agreed on a morning departure time.

When Ali picked us up the next day, we asked him to make a quick stop at the airline office so we could pay for our tickets from Gilgit to Islamabad, per Najeeb's plan. But they had no record of our reservations and the Tuesday flight was already booked solid. Ali drove us to the Travel Walji's office, where a friendly agent named Ali Akhbar regretfully told us he hadn't heard anything from Najeeb.

We didn't think much about the mix-up. We'd figure it out later.

Off we went.

Heading south from Gilgit that Sunday, I was reminded that Pakistan was not a land of handicap-accessible national parks and bus tours for stout British matrons. We were back in Indus Kohistan with its bandits and police checkpoints, this time not in an air-conditioned Toyota, but in an open Jeep. Even at an elevation of 4000 feet the air was stifling. Despite the canvas roof, we baked.

After a couple hours we reached the Raikot Bridge over the Indus River and turned onto the Nanga Parbat road, where Ali picked up a hitchhiker—an ancient man whose blue eyes were lined with kohl.

My imagined "fairy meadows" did not prepare me for the road ahead. The fact that there was a road at all was a tribute to human ingenuity and patience. There

was no natural roadbed, no ancient yak path to build upon. To our right and ahead was the mountain, soaring at a breathtaking angle from 4000 to 26,660 feet. To our left, the roadside dropped into a bottomless canyon, ground out over the eons by the Raikot glacier.

The road was built on the steep slope, not as a notch blasted out by dynamite like the Karakoram Highway, but through a more ancient and meticulous method of stacking stones without mortar. It was exactly the width of the Jeep's axle.

With the driver on the right, you and I sat on the abyss side, you in the front (with no door), me in the back with the old man. We couldn't see any road beneath us, only instant death.

Was our driver worried? Not a bit. He careened happily along, chatting with the old man, lighting cigarettes, turning around to offer the old man a drag. *This isn't a bit safe*, I was saying to myself. What happens if a car comes from the opposite direction? A saner couple might have stopped this daredevil madness, and yet… how could we get past the fact that Ali was so casual? He had such an all-in-a-day's work air about him—no white-knuckled look of terror, no suicidal glint in his eyes. So you and I just sat there, eyes darting between the abyss and the road ahead, wishing Ali would stop fiddling with his pack of cigarettes.

Seven miles and forty eternal minutes later, now at an altitude of 7200 feet by your pocket altimeter, the landscape flattened out a bit at the village of Tato. We parked. The old man got out and trundled off. Ali consulted with a group of men and boys. Was this our destination?

After some conversation, Ali turned to us. "No more Jeep. We walk. Two hour. *Inshallah*"

What?? A two-hour walk… uphill? NOT what I had in mind. Where were the damn Fairy Meadows?

There was more conversation and an exchange of money. A boy took my pack and sleeping bag and we set off up the slope. What else could we do?

After fifteen minutes or so the boy stopped and handed me back my stuff. More conversation with Ali. Apparently we had a choice: continue on the washed out road or take "the Way." The boy pointed up into the scrubby pine woods. A short-cut, great. But a short-cut to what? Why hadn't we asked Najeeb more questions?

Ali shrugged his shoulders, kindly took my sleeping bag, and clambered up the steep path with you close behind. The boy took off back home. My brain was still stuck in the groove of *this isn't what I had in mind*.

You, with your mountain goat legs, set an energetic pace. I was strong enough but my brain kept saying *wait a minute, wait a minute.* Oh, maybe I was just being a ninny. Fairy Meadows was right over the ridge, wasn't it?

No. It wasn't. Nor was it over the next ridge or the next ridge or the next ridge.

I began to feel delirious. Why were we here, climbing on the ninth highest mountain in the world, marching mindlessly upward from 7200 feet, without knowing where we were going? We tramped through alpine forest, looked over the edge of cliffs, and got a rush of hope every time the path opened out into a flowery meadow. *Is this it? This must be it!*

After about an hour and a half, Ali turned to me, gestured uphill, and said, "I never… this way."

So I wasn't crazy. We might actually be lost.

The pace slowed. Our legs were the least of our problems. Oxygen depletion in our blood kept our hearts pounding wildly. We needed to stop more and more often just to slow the beating in our chests.

We had each brought a single canteen of water and suffered for it, as we quickly dehydrated in the bright thin air. Looking at you terrified me because I could see the saliva turning into a foamy white paste on your lips. Flies clustered around our faces.

I had to wonder: *Are we going to die? Is this how people get themselves killed—they just keep marching upward till they keel over and die? When do we turn back? When will it be too late to turn back?*

Every once in a while we'd come to a cool stand of pine trees and I'd be overwhelmed with the rich aroma of Christmas. *Why can't we stop here?,* I'd whisper to no one. *I wouldn't mind spreading out my sleeping bag right here. Right here. No more walking. No more. There is no Fairy Meadow, can't you see that?*

Two hours turned into three. We were approaching 10,000 feet. My body thought it had run a marathon and hit the wall. When we came to a little creek—sweet with bubbling clear water—I knew I would drink it despite all my civilized training about "raw" creek water. What the hell could possibly be upstream to pollute it?

"I'm staying here," I announced to you. "You do what you want."

You spread your arms, palms up, in a gesture of frustration and puzzlement. You didn't know what to do, especially now that somehow we'd lost track of Ali, who'd gone on ahead. "Well… you rest here… I'll see what's ahead."

Of course, I couldn't rest and let you go on without me, so I dragged along.

We came to a sunny field that slanted up to another ridge. There were signs of civilization: cows, donkeys… We stood there stupidly... just stood there.

Then Ali appeared over the ridge, followed by a man in a giant red parka. We trudged up the hill toward them. They held out drinks to us and we slurped up the most delicious gulps of sweet nectar that the planet had to offer that day. We had arrived at the Fairy Meadows tent camp and the owner had greeted us with cups of Tang.

At the top of the ridge was a small plateau with the view we'd been chasing all day. Nanga Parbat. The details of the snow-covered peak filled our vision. As the crow flies, it was only about a mile away. Its glacier, in summer spate, fed a thunderous river. It roared in our ears. We were suddenly cold. Nabi, our host in the red parka, switched us to hot chicken broth and set up our tent, a spunky little dome. Our exhaustion turned to shivers and we dug the windbreakers and insulated vests out of our packs.

Instantly, the misery of the climb disappeared. If this wasn't paradise, what was?

We met the other guests, two Austrian men who'd just made a climb on one of the smaller peaks. Meanwhile Nabi killed a chicken, cooked it up in a spicy sauce,

and served it with rice and fresh white radish. We dined in Nabi's kitchen, a makeshift dwelling of pine logs stacked against a house-sized boulder to form a room. Afterward, Nabi built a fire outside and we four foreigners sat on benches around it, facing the peak. We watched the glow of the mountain's golden sunset and listened to its roar.

If I have any regret, it's that I didn't spend more time gazing at the billions of stars we began to see when the fire burned out. I wasn't much of a camper and got distracted by searching every corner of our little tent for insects (there were none) and then, of course, after the day's adventure, we collapsed into sleep.

I woke up about 2 a.m. needing a comfort call. There were no latrines. The idea was just to find a private place away from the stream and squat. I remember walking back to the tent awestruck by the sky. Instead of scurrying back to the warmth of my sleeping bag, I wish I'd sat on the bench for a while and watched the heavens. I should have savored the moment more. The "killer mountain" nearly got me but there I was. I didn't climb its deadly peak, but clearly I was on top of the world.

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At daybreak, we huddled outside our tent, binoculars up, eyes glued to the snow-covered ridge of peaks, as avalanches sprung from nowhere and tumbled down for hundreds of feet, their white-on-white made visible in the slanted morning sun.

Avalanches, falls from ice ledges, slips into crevasses, and just plain freezing to death were the main reasons people died on expeditions here. Prior to our visit, fifty-five climbers had lost their lives pursuing the sport of mountaineering. The first three—Albert Mummery, Ragobir Thapa Ghurka, and Goman Singh Ghurka—had been swept away by an avalanche right where we were watching, on the Raikot Face—on August 24, 1895. Without knowing, we sat staring at avalanches on the ninety-third anniversary of their deaths.

We were walking in the footsteps of strong-willed super-achievers, willing to risk their lives for a view of the world from 26,000 feet. When the Austrian Hermann Buhl summited in 1953, he had gone on alone after his companions had returned to base camp. Fueled by a concoction of stimulant drugs, he made the peak too late to get back and had to bivouac standing upright on a ledge all night long, while holding on for dear life with one hand. Had he shown courage or only an absurd kind of *say-yes* bravado?

Maybe we were drinking from the same cup of crazy.

In Kashgar, we fancied ourselves on the path of ancient traders, pulled along by the eternal hunt for precious goods. Here on Nanga Parbat, we were still walking the path of desire, of course, but now that desire was inflamed beyond all prudence, beyond the realm of reason.

We knew none of these details at the time, yet knew we were in the presence of something gargantuan. Nature had put up forbidding barriers against trespassing into the high virgin wilderness, but humans insisted on transgressing and paid with their lives.

Observing such forces of nature—and being safe from them—put us in a solemn yet serene mood that morning.

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Now in 2017, I checked Google to look at the map of Nanga Parbat and research its mountain-climbing history. It looked like there was more lodging available around Fairy Meadows so maybe the road has improved. Since the summer of 1992, another fourteen mountaineers have died as a result of their passion for the sport. But in 2013, an international climbing party, camped about 3000 feet uphill from where we stayed, was attacked by a band of self-proclaimed Taliban. Ten were killed and two suffered non-fatal injuries. The murderers claimed loyalty to Osama bin Ladin and were avenging U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan.

My first thought: the world was now a more dangerous place. But that's a delusion, isn't it? The world was never "more innocent" and the times were never "simpler." The wicked complexities just spill out in different locales, at different times, in different forms.

Traveling with you that summer, being able to grab your calmer hand, and follow your bolder footsteps, I began to understand that, to experience the world first-hand, I had to be *out there*. To have a sublime experience akin to the passion of mountaineers, to sleep in thin air under a canopy of a billion stars, I had to walk on their trails till my heart pounded for oxygen. I had to drink crazy from their canteen till it was dry and I was willing to fling myself face-first into a wild creek to gulp more. I had to be willing to admit I didn't have a clue what was over the next ridge, but climb it anyway.

Violence in Gilgit

Leaving the tent camp that Monday in '92, our driver Ali decided to avoid yesterday's three-hour meander through the forest and led us down by the washed-out road. Broad chunks of the dirt-and-rock road had indeed crumbled into the abyss, in places leaving only a narrow footpath, but overall the walk was far easier and shorter than yesterday's. Or were we more relaxed?

We picked up the Jeep at Tato and headed back to the Karakoram Highway. Funny, Ali still fiddled with his cigarettes and matches on the impossibly narrow road but we had acclimated to the risk, I guess. Our minds were no longer absorbed with mysteries ahead but were now focused on our VIP suite in Gilgit—hot showers, Kool-Aid cocktails, and a spicy restaurant meal.

But—as usual—it wasn't that simple.

On the outskirts of Gilgit, after about a hundred miles in the baking heat, we were stopped at a checkpoint. A soldier with a rifle gave us the simple message: "Gilgit is closed. Curfew."

Ali threw the Jeep in reverse and was heading away from the town before the message sunk in. Gilgit is closed? How do you close a town? And why? Isn't *curfew* something imposed on unruly teenagers? As we drove away, we began noticing soldiers all over the place. Ali would stop the car whenever he could, to ask what was going on.

Slowly, we figured out that some kind of violence had broken out in Gilgit. People had been killed. The government responded by clamping down martial law. No one in or out. How long? Ali shook his head, saying, "One, two, three day…"

He pulled over at a dingy little lodge squatting between dilapidated buildings on the main street of a small village. Ali took you with him to see if they had a room for us. I was horrified. Alone in the Jeep, I listened to a muezzin chant the midday prayer from a nearby rooftop and heard roosters crow in response. The heat was blistering. The water in my canteen was hot. I was covered with road dust. I wanted my VIP suite.

Fortunately, the shabby inn had no rooms and we hit the road again. As Ali stopped repeatedly to implore the soldiers, it became clear that our problem was his problem. His family was in Karimabad, a two-hour drive north, but we were his responsibility and he needed to make sure we were safe.

He drove us back to the Gilgit checkpoint. I stayed in the Jeep again while you and Ali went to find someone in authority.

That authority finally strode onto the scene—a tall man in an impeccable uniform, a man with pants tucked into high spit-polished boots, a man with a swagger stick. We watched him deal with another distraught traveler. We gathered he had been on a public bus bound for Gilgit and got off to pee. The bus left without him and all his papers were on board. The officer shook his head and directed the traveler to join a growing group of detainees standing by the side of the road.

You were next to plead our case. How many people find themselves begging to get into a town under martial law? Ambitious reporters, perhaps. The folks with a truckload of humanitarian aid. Not people merely desperate for a shower. But I

think we were way past your mother's warning to be sensible. We'd been to the mountain, *beyond the realm of prudence*. Now we were hot and hungry. *Home* was wherever our two backpacks were. So there you were, smiling and politely showing our passports. My handsome companion, my *rafiq*.

Whether it was you or Ali who worked the charm, we were suddenly approved to enter Gilgit.

"Hurry! You go now!" someone barked. You and Ali trotted back to the Jeep and we grabbed our stuff.

"Bus leaving! Now!"

We jumped on board the bus.

"Wait," I said. "Ali's money!"

You called him back and paid him through the bus window. His grin showed he was thrilled to be homeward bound.

Off we drove, with a handful of other lucky passengers.

Gilgit was indeed locked down. Heavily armed Jeeps patrolled the streets. Businesses were shuttered and everyone was indoors, except for a few curious little boys, who darted in and out of hiding as they followed the Jeeps along.

The high wrought-iron gates of the Park Hotel were locked when the bus pulled up, but as soon as we got off, the manager recognized us as guests and ran out to let us in.

Home at last.

In the lobby, sixteen members of a Spanish tour group, stranded by the curfew, stared glumly at a cricket match on a jumpy TV screen. Other than that, the hotel was running normally and the restaurant was open. We picked up our key and headed across the garden courtyard to our VIP suite. We fixed Kool-Aid cocktails with leftover Hunza wine and luxuriated in our hot-water showers.

After dinner, we got details from the hotel manager and his friend. The violence was another outburst of bad blood between local Sunni and Shiite Muslims, a feud having nothing to do with theology.

The Sunnis had started it this time by killing a Shiite gangster.

"I know him well," the friend said. "I was a political prisoner and we were in jail together. He was a pickpocket, then grew to have many political connections. I'm his friend but I no like him, understand? Very big man."

The Shias, who were better organized, retaliated. Official reports said seven were dead, but the manager suspected more.

"The last time this happen," he said, "Gilgit have curfew for twelve days."

Our knowledge of Islam was thin, but we did understand that an ancient schism divided it into two branches, Sunni and Shia. Most of the world's Muslims were Sunni, with the heaviest concentration in Saudi Arabia, while Shiites were concentrated in Iran.

In 1992, we were naïve about their political rivalry and the role of vengeance killings as the main form of justice in a culture that predated central governments. But there we were in the middle of it, learning first-hand, at the town level, as the government gave their feuding citizens a time out.

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The next morning, we learned that the curfew had been extended indefinitely. For the time being, *indefinite* was okay with us, because our plans were flexible, but the tour guide for the Spanish group—an assertive *señora*—flew into a panic. Their flight home was leaving tomorrow from Rawalpindi, an eleven-hour drive away.

She marched outside. We followed out of curiosity.

Through the front gate, we saw the street was still dominated by heavily armed patrols rolling by in Jeeps and Suzuki trucks. The *señora* caught the attention of a local policeman and tried to make a deal with him to go pick up their driver, who was stranded twelve miles out of town, but a soldier shooed him away.

She was furious and marched out into the street to talk to someone in charge.

As a couple of soldiers quickly grabbed her arms and escorted her back through the gate, the procession of military vehicles screeched to a halt. Soldiers jumped out into a line that spanned the width of the hotel property, their semi-automatic rifles held in high ready position. I felt a chill, but we were too mesmerized by the drama to retreat indoors.

The ranking officer appeared and walked toward the gate. He was carrying a shorter weapon that looked like an Uzi. The *señora* stood her ground and began explaining her plight, but he cut her off.

"Relax," he said in English. "You are not the only ones. Please know that we are more concerned about your safety than our own people. You will stay here some time. Relax."

"Relax?" she said. "We are sixteen people—"

"You are looking only through the prism of your own problem. We have bigger issues to deal with."

She argued, but the officer was firm.

"Everyone, please! Go inside the hotel," he ordered. "It is the safest place. You do not want to be murdered."

Crazy, but we both got a thrill of excitement. We were too curious about what was going on to lock ourselves in the room, so we found a stairway that led to the roof. The town was quiet except for the sounds of children playing in the confines of their own yards—those windowless fortresses we saw first time through. Two soldiers with automatic weapons stood on the rooftop across the street.

Later in the hotel lobby, we learned a little more from a traveling businessman. A while back, a prominent Shia was assassinated. Four days ago, in retaliation, a Sunni was stabbed by four or five men and was still in the hospital. Yesterday's problems started when the Shiite gangster was shot down at the bazaar in broad daylight.

As we caught up on the local gossip, the *señora* was making shrill phone calls to her embassy demanding assistance in getting out. "There are Americans here too," she shrieked in Spanish, *Americanos!* as if the smiling Yanks would command more action.

We thought that was funny. But when the manager said he heard a rumor that the violence was spreading to other towns, we thought, hmmm, maybe it wouldn't

hurt to give our own embassy a ring. Even then it seemed melodramatic, a little too much like the movies. Had riding on the edge of mountainside extinction for so many days dulled us to real danger? Had good sense abandoned us altogether?

You were willing to wait, but I said, "No, we better at least try to call, let them know what's going on."

In the back of a guidebook, I found a number for the U.S. Diplomatic Enclave in Islamabad. The hotel had an old-fashioned switchboard and you asked the hotel manager to place the call.

You held the phone. On the first couple tries the connection got lost when the embassy switchboard tried to transfer the call. You thought the operator was also having a hard time with the baritone rumble of your voice over the bad connection, so you handed the phone to me for the next go-round. Maybe my voice could penetrate the static.

The hotel manager found another number for us to try. The voice at the other end was faint but I managed to hear him tell me to hang up and try again. Up to this point, we'd been curious and excited by this experience, but suddenly, the idea that we might not be able get through to our own consulate made me break into a sweat.

When I finally heard a clear American voice at the other end of the line, I became that crazed American from the movies: "We're Americans! In Gilgit! Gilgit is in a state of martial law! People have been murdered! The violence is spreading! They won't let us out! What are we going to do?"

"Hang on," the voice said calmly. "I'll transfer you to a Consul."

Then a woman with a kind voice introduced herself as Marie DeLisi and listened to my story. It was news to her. "I have Security on the other line checking out the situation," she said. "Hang on and I'll get right back to you."

I waited. When DeLisi returned, she said Security had confirmed our story.

"Lay low in the hotel," she instructed. "It's hard to know how long it will last, but Security is keeping on top of it. Now, let me get you registered." I gave her our names, dates of birth, and passport numbers.

"And—just in case—can I have your next of kin?"

Cold sweat dripped down my back and my heart pounded as I started reciting my father's name and phone number.

You poked me and sputtered, "What are you doing?!"

"Just in case," I whispered and continued on to provide your daughter's number.

Your jaw dropped.

"Good luck," DeLisi said, ending our conversation. "Don't be too scared."

Flight from Gilgit

Relieved to be in contact with the Consulate but rattled by the need to provide our next-of-kin, we went to lunch in a solemn mood.

A break came quickly. The buzz swept through the dining room: Gilgit would open between 2 and 4 p.m. to allow townsfolk to dash out for groceries. Then, the hotel manager interrupted our lunch to say we had a call from our Consul.

"The curfew will be lifted briefly, so you can get out then," DeLisi said. "The roads will be heavily guarded. Call me when you arrive in Islamabad, so I know you're okay."

Two o'clock. In the hotel lobby again, we tried to call Ali Akhbar at Travel Walji's to book a car and get the hell out. No answer. We looked at each other and knew our only choice was to leave our safe haven and go out on foot.

We hurried down the street to Travel Walgi's and pounded up the stairs to the second-floor office. A small boy was playing there and ran off to get his father.

Today it wasn't a question of would-we-or-wouldn't-we take the thrilling twice-weekly flight around the summit of Nanga Parbat to Islamabad. Today it was, "Get us out of here. Now."

Ali Akhbar was a prince. In no time, a minivan with two drivers picked us up and we made our escape. Next stop: Peshawar!

But it didn't take long for us to realize that we were still on the wrong side of the looking glass.

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Halfway through our fourth week of travel, we were used to doing business with people who spoke little or no English. We didn't even think about it anymore. There was a natural empathy among us people of the road. The locals understood our need to eat, to pee, and to take photographs.

But for these new drivers, we might have been goats they were delivering to market. The small one was a cheerful bundle of energy. His big buddy was dour and argumentative. They were clearly as gleeful as we were to get out of Gilgit, but they were oblivious to their cargo—us.

Outside of town, they stopped at a roadside stand to buy themselves big bunches of green grapes. Down the road a piece, at a truck stop, they disappeared altogether, leaving us to swelter. You finally went after them. They were having a meal.

Then at the next opportunity, they stopped again, this time for tea.

We decided to have some tea too but couldn't make it clear that we wanted just *plain* tea. The standard brew here was tea, milk and sugar all boiled up together. Of all the insane risks we took these past four weeks, we drew the line at food-stand milk. Wasn't that funny?

At twilight we found ourselves jammed up at a police checkpoint, with all the other vehicles that were either escaping from or circumventing Gilgit.

Here, the driver of an overloaded Jeep asked us to take on a couple of his passengers because he'd just blown a tire. Sure.

The young British couple who joined us hauled their stuff into the van looking pale and shaken and very grateful to be out of the Jeep. Rescuing them made us feel as gracious as the Darlingtons. We welcomed them aboard our luxury craft.

"You very literally may have saved our lives," were the first words out of Sarah's mouth. She and Jonathon had been crammed into the Jeep with an arms dealer and an antiquities smuggler and had been driving with a flat tire for more than twenty miles.

But it wasn't like they weren't used to hard traveling. He a journalist, she a cookbook writer collecting Asian recipes, had been working their way from Katmandu in Nepal, through China, on the cheap. They described their overnight bus trip through Tibet: Their driver boarded with a case of beer. At the first pothole, the headlights went out. At the second pothole they flickered back on and he celebrated with a beer. This pattern continued all night long: lights off, lights on, beer celebration, while the passengers could do nothing but watch in horror and pray. Our minivan looked like heaven.

Back on the road, night fell and we drove deep into the stark bandit territory of Indus Kohistan. In the village of Kolimas, the police waved us down and ordered us to pull over and park. Our drivers conferred with the cadre of officials surrounding us, then disappeared down the street, leaving us to wonder what the heck was going on.

Not knowing how long we'd be, we found a place to buy warm sodas and shared our stash of stale bread with Sarah and Jonathon for dinner.

As we watched other cars being pulled over, we finally got the drift that the authorities were putting together a caravan of passenger vehicles to get us safely through the night drive in Kohistan. When it was time to go, our drivers had to be rousted from a nearby restaurant, where they were eating again.

At the edge of town, four soldiers joined us. Our luxury van was now packed with two drivers, four travelers, our combined luggage, and four soldiers, squeezed into the back seat, their long rifles between their legs, pointed at the roof. Our humor grew ghoulish. What if we were ambushed? How exactly were our guardians going to use their weapons to defend us? Blast holes through the roof? We were giddy and fatalistic as we rumbled along in the night.

Near Besham, we stopped to say goodbye to the soldiers, who waved and smiled as they disappeared into the darkness.

We arrived in Besham at 12:30 a.m. The road was lined with travelers, rolled in blankets sleeping on charpois. And, no surprise, the tourist hotel at the south end of town was full. We backtracked to the Abassin, the Taj Mahal, and finally wound up at the International. We were too tired to be fussy. At least we hadn't been reduced to sleeping on the sidewalk. In our bathroom, something scurried out of sight when I switched on the light. Like the first time we passed through Besham, I stretched out on top of the bed covers in my clothes to sleep. Hard to believe that only two nights before we were under the stars on Nanga Parbat.

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Next morning, the six of us piled back into the minivan and continued south to the capital city Islamabad. Near the city, Sarah and Jonathon got out to continue with their own plans, but said they'd meet up with us again at Dean's Hotel in Peshawar.

Since we were running out of cash, we needed to stop at American Express. You had the address and found the location on your map, but our drivers didn't have a clue what you were trying to tell them. Your finger poking at a spot on the map meant nothing to them. They were illiterate country boys, overwhelmed by the big city.

They stopped at every street corner and hailed a passerby to interpret. Everyone understood "American Express" and gave instructions with clear hand gestures. The drivers were still mystified. You went crazy with frustration, leaning between the two front seats, just short of grabbing the steering wheel yourself, pointing and waving madly to get the driver to make the damn correct turns.

Finally, the massive white American Express building loomed before us and they parked.

Inside, we enjoyed a few minutes of sanity as we got resupplied with cash and made our call to Consul deLisi to tell her we were safe, if not entirely sound.

We were wondering how in the world our country boys were going to get us to Peshawar when fate intervened. Outside the American Express building we found our drivers and a young man shaking their heads and clucking over the van.

"Defect," the young man said, pointing to a small puddle of oil under the vehicle. He happened to be a cab driver willing to carry us to Peshawar.

Fantastic!

Our drivers grinned. They had to be just as rattled as we were by their incompetence at city driving. We parted with a great burst of hand-shaking, as if our journey together had created a bond of friendship, then we turned away, each of us thanking Allah for the intervention.

The cabby was congenial and spoke a few words of English. He tried to persuade us to stay at a little guesthouse and leave at 9 a.m. the next day.

We said no.

Well, then he needed to stop at the taxi office for "special boss." To tell his boss? The office was closed. He seemed distracted, his enthusiasm gone. What was wrong?

Finally, he flagged down another cab. There was a quick conversation and exchange of money.

"You go with him," he told us. "I don't have special boss."

Oh, special *pass*! A special pass was required to enter the city of Peshawar and this new driver had the right papers.

Again, we transferred our bags. Our new vehicle eased out onto the Grand Trunk Road, the longest and oldest road in Asia, stretching for two thousand years from Bangladesh, through India, through Pakistan, and through the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan. We were back on the path of timeless traders.

Part 5

Peshawar

Day 21 finally dumped us in Peshawar, where we planned to spend our final eight nights in Pakistan. After the thin, dry air of high plains and valleys, Peshawar was a fetid swamp. My breath felt crushed into my lungs.

Najeeb had recommended Dean's Hotel and we arrived about 7 p.m. Like Flashman's in Rawalpindi, Dean's was another colonial relic, a proto-motel with a single story of rooms built around a scruffy garden. We dragged into the lobby.

To our surprise, the hotel had been alerted to be on the lookout for us and the clerk handed us a letter from Najeeb. He was panicked. We were lost. He had arranged our flight from Gilgit to Islamabad. He had arranged a car to meet us at the airport. We didn't show up. He called the Gilgit airport and found out about the violence and curfew. He contacted the Park Hotel there, but we had disappeared.

"I was much worried about you," he wrote. But he hoped that we would surface at Dean's and made reservations for us. And thus we were welcomed into the sweaty arms of Peshawar.

Our room was dumpy and its air conditioner labored against the heat, but the bed was soft and I immediately sank into it. You intended to fix us drinks but first had to kill the ants who had taken over the bathroom. Curled up on the bed, I stared at a gekko working his way across the wall. I sent him a telepathic message—*Ants are in the bathroom*—and fell sound asleep. Zonked.

Throughout the night, the drone of the air conditioner would snap off, waking us both. You would get up, reset the circuit break, and we'd fall back to sleep.

The next morning I didn't want to move from bed, didn't see why we had to go out at all. We had seven days here, and after all we'd been through…

"Can't we sleep in for a morning? I'm exhausted."

You frowned. "No, Susan. You can sleep next week. We're *here*."

We were here, all right.

The first part of our trip had been full of puzzles and inconveniences, but we had reached our goal to walk in the romantic footsteps of Kashgar traders, even if it wasn't the treasure trove we'd imagined. After a peaceful interlude in Karimabad, we walked the path of ambitious climbers who defied death to achieve the sublime view from Nanga Parbat peak. Then we were caught in the crossfire of murderous rivalries in Gilgit and ran for our lives, through bandit territory, by night. And we became lost to the one man on the planet who cared about us, Najeeb.

We had wanted to experience the world for ourselves, raw, naked, outside the bounds of middle-aged cruises and enlightened pilgrimages. We had come this far. Now we were in a city we hadn't planned to visit and knew nothing about, except that Dr. Igbal had dangled it in front of us as the gateway to forbidden Afghanistan. And drivers couldn't enter it without a special pass.

And my *rafiq* was telling me this was no time to rest.

We had arrived. I got up.

I was still sluggish over breakfast, but you had a list of things to do and let me ride in the slipstream of your energy. With your map refolded and your guidebook pages marked, off we went.

Commented [SBP9]: Your stamina drove me crazy. I thought you'd make a great prisoner of war, the one who shaved every day and organized games to boost morale, while I'd be the one blubbering in the corner, scribbling lunatic notes on the wall with a nub of pencil lead, and confessing to everything.

On foot, we found the PIA office and changed the origin of our homeward flight from Rawalpindi to Peshawar.

The people we passed on the street were different here. The women were not merely veiled but encased head to toe in heavy black burqas, with cage-like mesh over their eyes. Many of the men had patches of red-orange hair and lined their eyes with black. I wanted to know more about them.

From the airline office, we walked to the local Travel Walji's, Najeeb's employer, to let them know we were found and to confirm our hotel reservations at their low rate. I asked about the red-haired men and shrouded women.

"Pashtuns," the agent said. "Very fierce. The men dye hair with henna and line their eyes with kohl to ward off the evil eye. They speak *pashtoon*, language so rough, every conversation sounds like an argument! Want to speak *pashtoon*? Fill a box with stones and shake it."

Next on your list was Andar Shah bazaar. As the morning air warmed toward a hundred degrees, we trudged along the grimy streets. As always, we stood out in our baggy Western clothes and Panama hats.

The bazaar turned out to be a cluster of ancient three- and four-story buildings, merged together over time by a crazy quilt of canopies that turned narrow lanes into dark mazes, with occasional breaks for balconies full of flowers.

Andar Shah was a jewelry bazaar, which was exciting to discover. For a couple years by then, I had been having a love affair with old beads. They were teaching me world history and drawing me into other cultures. The hunt for old beads and antique jewelry gave me a tool, a ritual for breaking out of my self-absorption, and here in Peshawar, for putting aside the sticky discomfort of heat and strangeness.

At first, all we saw was shop after shop of new gemstone and gold items. The tiny blocks of tiny shops gave way to tiny alleys that housed a honeycomb of workshops no bigger than walk-in closets, where men squatted at their anvils fabricating the perfectly uniform gold chains.

We strolled deeper into the labyrinth. An old man in a turban beckoned to us. We ignored him. He beckoned again, pointing into a narrow passageway.

We slipped behind him into the passage, which opened into a four-story courtyard full of miniature shops. Men and boys lounged on carpets and pillows, drinking tea and smoking cigarettes. A sign for *Afghan Jewelry* revealed a closet-sized shop stuffed with beaded necklaces. Next to that shop was another, and another, and another. A young man followed us, eager to help. "Beej. Old," he said. "Old."

There were also piles of tribal rugs and stacks of miniature paintings.

What we had expected in Kashgar—a treasure trove of ancient and antique collectibles—we found in Peshawar.

Suddenly, we were awake, tingling at the prospect of discovering rare beauties on the old silk road.

The walls were crowded with strands of lapis lazuli—were the beads shaped yesterday or a thousand years ago? The knowledge I thought I had was overwhelmed by the beads' sheer physical presence. A boy brought me a cup of

green tea, making it clear through his gesture that I should take all the time I needed.

Mingled with the lapis, I found clearly ancient necklaces of blue and white faience, bronze bell shapes, and etched carnelian. Only later, with more research, did I realize that they were all likely excavated from the ruins of the Indus Valley Civilization, which thrived in this region a thousand years before Christ.

You were looking at the Persian miniatures, delicate paintings from the pages of ancient books, possibly 500 years old. The shopkeeper ran to find more for you to see.

I made my choices quickly, but you were in the mood to hunt, examining and evaluating every page, putting *maybes* aside. This was a ritual we repeated many times before we left Peshawar, since it took us several return visits to go through every shop.

Someone always brought us tea, or occasionally a cold Fanta. If we wanted to know a price, the shopkeeper wrote it on a slip of paper. If we took the next step of writing down a counteroffer, the die was cast. Without speaking more than a handful of English words, the shopkeeper wouldn't let us leave without a deal, passing the paper back and forth and engaging in any hand-waving, eye-rolling, or heart-clutching necessary to express dismay at the other's offer. Muslims across the continent had been trading since the Middle Ages, but they met their match in you. You could drink the hot tea, sweat buckets, and take all the time you needed to get just what you wanted at a price point you liked. You hadn't collected Persian miniatures up to this point, so I think you were spending much of your time examining and comparing craftsmanship and composition—learning on the fly.

While the heat was intolerable, it made our experience more authentic. We had entered a timeless zone, where yesterday's silk road entrepôt was today's trading post. And we were handling the actual merchandise that may have passed again and again through these portals. For us, buying was not merely a matter of collecting souvenirs. It completed the experience, turned the past into present, eased a long seduction into satisfaction, and allowed us to feel the heartbeat of history

We couldn't have been happier.

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For lunch that first day, August 27, we found our way to the Pearl Continental, a posh international-class hotel that had gift-shops, a bookstore, English-language newspapers, and a bar that sold alcohol, as long as we signed the required non-Muslim affidavits.

I bought a book on the Pashtuns, who were dubbed "guardians of the North-West Frontier." Their fierce influence was everywhere, including this Westernized hotel, where a large sign in the lobbied warned:

> HOTEL POLICY. Arms cannot be brought inside the hotel premisis [sic]. Personal Guards or Gunmen are required to deposit their weapons with the Hotel Security. We seek your cooperation. Management.

That evening, I read up.

Pashtuns were the dominant ethnic group in this region and in Afghanistan. They were warriors, with a merciless code of justice known as *pashtunwali*. Their tradition of blood feuds meant death for any insult. A wife or a child was swiftly killed at the first suspicion of faithlessness. From my perch in 2017, I can add that it was from the ranks of the Pashtun that the ferocious Taliban arose—the Taliban, who ruled Afghanistan from 1996 till Americans invaded in 2001, who ruthlessly punished women and brutally massacred fellow citizens who failed to live by their code. They are currently considered terrorists, but back in 1992, I was less horrified than I was curious about this culture so entirely foreign to my own, a culture we had now entered into.

While I was absorbed in reading, you were out in the courtyard, actually making friends with one of these henna-haired warriors—a cabbie named Moghul.

Khyber Pass

Moghul was a friendly middle-aged man, who wore a white *salwar kamiz*, and who was ready to take hotel guests on a tour at a moment's notice. Of course, you had been studying our guides and already had ideas.

Number one was the Khyber Pass, on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, forty-seven miles to the west. Our guidebook said it was closed to foreigners. "UN officials, diplomats, and accredited journalists," it said, "can apply to the provincial home secretary and the minister of tribal affairs for permission to drive through." So naturally, you had to see it.

"No problem," Moghul said. "Tomorrow we go. But we need to get permit."

You roused me from my reading and Moghul drove us to an office, did all the talking, and made sure we signed the correct papers.

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Friday, August 28, 1992. Daypacks filled with cameras, water bottles, and hoarded snacks, we set out for the Khyber Pass. Much to our surprise, we started our excursion by picking up a bodyguard, a young man who wore black clothes and a black beret, carried a carbine, and sported a bandoleer of bullets across his chest. He was cordial toward us, but didn't smile.

As we left Peshawar, we began to pass large Pashtun family compounds. Families lives in walled fortresses, but Moghul told us that the walls were only made of clay so that they could be easily rebuilt after skirmishes. He also warned us not to take photos, lest we catch a bullet.

At Landi Kotal, we stopped for a water break near a small refugee camp. Now that the Soviet Union had given up on annexing Afghanistan and had withdrawn its troops, refugees were returning home.

A small bus—one of Pakistan's gaily painted Flying Coaches—stopped near us. It was crowded, with men clinging to the roof. A young man got off the bus to talk to me in careful, halting English. He was sweating profusely and complained about the Pakistani heat. He said he was headed home to Jalalabad but some day he would go to America where his aunt and uncle lived. He shook my hand before getting back on the bus.

A woman nearby huddled with a baby. She was draped head to toe in black but her eyes were visible and she was taking me in. I smiled. She pulled away her veil just long enough to smile back.

While I had my moment with the homeward-bound refugees, you found a roadside stand that sold carpets, struck up a conversation with the young proprietor, and bought a small rug.

::

The Khyber Pass was stunning. When we stopped at the border station and looked back into the part of the pass just traveled, I was knocked out by both its beauty and its familiarity. The sensuous curves of the road, winding back and forth, hugged the hills like a lover. I knew this place. Why? Had I seen it in a childhood geography book? Had I traveled it in a past life? Or was it merely the "stuff dreams were made of"?

As far as historians knew, the Khyber Pass was the most ancient of well-traveled mountain passes. Crowded with traders since the beginning of time, it was also the route of many invasions: the Persian Darius in 516 BCE, Alexander the Great during the fourth century BCE, Genghis Khan and his Mongol successors starting in the 12th century CE, followed by a series of Muslim and Sikh invaders. The British saw its strategic advantage too and in the early 20th century built a railroad there, one of those monumental feats of engineering with thirty-four tunnels and cliffhanging switchbacks, now hopelessly destroyed by saboteurs.

We stood on the path of a million footsteps.

Then, we turned from the road traveled to gaze beyond the border, into Afghanistan, mountainous and dry, colorless except for sparse dots of green in the distance and the bloodstains of history.

History had been cruel, yet there we were, you and I in our Panama hats and sturdy walking shoes, shoulder to shoulder with our henna-haired driver in floppy loafers, our bodyguard with his black beret and sandals, and members of the Khyber Rifle border patrol—tall, handsome men in lavish crested hats and high boots. Our photographs show us all smiling, with Moghul hugging us together.

Friendship in a forbidden place.

More Peshawar

Over the weekend in Peshawar, we continued to explore. We met up again with Sarah and Jonathon, the English couple we'd picked up during our escape from Gilgit. We drank heavily together and shared our traveler tales.

Despite the brutal heat, we did a lot of walking and learned how to flag down a three-wheeled rickshaw when we got tired. Word got around about us. Some of the shopkeepers thought we were wholesale buyers and became very aggressive about dragging us into claustrophobic basements and backrooms, to see their "old, very old" merchandise. "How much you want to spend?" one of them demanded.

Another, Abdul Jallil Mazloom. showed up at our hotel room with a buddy and a bag full of ancient jewelry. We were curious and allowed him to spread his loot across our bed. The trove of bronze and silver, faience and Roman glass took my breath away. I felt the fever coming on and asked for a price on the Roman glass beads. But Mazloom was no common grave robber. He borrowed my pen and wrote a price on the palm of his hand, a price I might better expect in London or Paris.

"Credit card?" I asked.

"Sorry, cash only."

We didn't have that kind of cash with us, so I had to get a grip on myself and refuse his offer. Mazloom took the verdict well, and left with a smile and a hope that we might meet again when he moved to New York "very soon."

Tribal rugs were another story. Rugs and bags, hand-knotted or flat-woven were pouring out of Afghanistan and being sold for a song by friendly merchants. They were much more beautiful than the dingy fragments that lit your imagination in Gilgit. You fell for the refined style you learned to ask for as Bukhara or Tekke. These were hand-woven by the Turkmen people of northern Afghanistan, using wool dyed with rich indigo blues and madder reds, and woven in complex geometric patterns.

You tried to pace yourself about the number of pieces you bought, but on Wednesday evening, September 2, the night before our flight to Karachi, we got a knock on the door and found one of your young rug merchants Mohammed, with a stack of goods on his shoulder.

"Mister Jim! Great Bukharas!" he shouted as you let him in and he started dumping small carpets on the bed. "I know your taste!"

He had just come with fresh merchandise from the border at Landi Kotal and needed cash to return and get more. Mohammed was an Afghan émigré, who had lived in Pakistan for nine years, with no intention of returning home.

His enthusiasm was infectious and we bought two more rugs.

This would be a problem for us later.

Darra Adam Khel

On Sunday evening, August 30, you and Moghul cooked up one more day trip, this time to a town called Darra Adam Khel, fifty miles south of Peshawar. The guidebook referred to it as the "gun 'factory' of the tribal areas." It also stated plainly that Darra, like the Khyber Pass, was closed to foreigners, but you couldn't resist asking Moghul about it.

Moghul gave his usual cheerful response: "No problem!"

Early Monday morning, he drove us to a different set of buildings for the permit to Darra. He interpreted, as we shuffled back and forth among three offices signing papers and providing information. We got our permit. About an hour later, just outside of Darra, we stopped at a checkpoint so that an armed bodyguard could join us.

Darra is a surrealist cartoon, all the more bizarre because of its air of sweet normalcy. It might have been one of those village museums showing you the crafts of yesteryear—except that their handicraft was gun-making.

The dusty village streets were lined with tiny workshops, each with a brightly hand-painted sign advertising its wares—handguns, rifles, automatic weapons, any brand your heart desired.

Their open roll-up doors revealed men and boys who sat cross-legged on the floors, fabricating counterfeit arms. Their special skill involved taking a brand-name weapon (Smith & Wesson, Lee-Enfield, Kalashnikov) and reverse engineering it, so that they could reproduce it by hand. They used primitive lathes, mud furnaces, anvils, hammers, bow drills, and other modest hand-tools. Gun manufacture had little tolerance for error and Pashtuns had little tolerance for exploding weapons, so the Darra craftsmen were experts, even down to reproducing meaningless serial numbers and trademarks.

They'd been at it a long time. The story goes that in 1897 the local British authorities got tired of Pashtuns robbing soldiers of their expensive weapons, so they struck a devil's bargain: in exchange for safe passage through tribal territories, they gave the Pashtuns the wherewithal to make illegitimate copies.

Their products were still illegal. Anyone who purchased firearms at Darra had to hire a smuggler to move them past government checkpoints and into the tribal villages or across the border to Afghanistan.

And there we were, in the middle of it, with our brimmed hats and sunglasses, sweating, grinning, as we toured the town like a regular pair of arms dealers, with our proud driver and our watchful bodyguard. At one point, a boy from the small entourage we attracted found me a chair inside a shop advertising machine guns and served me hot tea in a dainty teacup with a saucer. I tried to be polite, to sit there and sip, but you were wandering off in another direction and I was afraid of getting separated.

When I eased myself away from the workshop, I found you nodding cheerfully inside a machine shop where they made Kalashnikov knock-offs—AK-47s—their most sophisticated product. You continued to nod when someone offered to have us try one out.

You forked over some cash for ammunition and we headed out behind the shop with our entourage, including the young boy who won the privilege of carrying our massive weapon.

The men gave you a lesson in shooting. As you blasted rounds into the side of a cliff, a couple guys coached you with gestures on how to keep the barrel from flying upward and a couple others braced your back against the powerful recoil.

You were beaming, enjoying every moment of this every-boy's fantasy—shooting off a barely controllable weapon to the delight and cheers of onlookers. I took pictures, then I remembered my micro-recorder and pulled it out to capture the sounds. *Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam*. I played my own fantasy role of journalist.

"So, this is a Russian AK-47?" I spoke into the recorder to the man next to me.

"Ya-a-as," he said. "Russian AK-47."

Bam-bam-bam-bam-bam.

Then I had to take my turn shooting. It didn't seem to bother our Pashtun hosts that I was a woman. They all referred to me as "Mr. Susan," so maybe by making me an honorary guy, they could hold my shoulders against the recoil without violating any tribal code.

I did it. I sprayed bullets at the hillside. I didn't find it thrilling. I found it monstrous and overpowering. The men laughed. I smiled. And I wondered when the hell we'd get out of there.

Our entourage led us back to one of the shops for more tea, while the men continued to confer with you. Okay, maybe you weren't in the market for an AK-47 or a bolt-action rifle, but look at this: a single-shot 32-caliber pistol in the shape of a fountain pen. They demonstrated how it worked by shooting it into the street.

For five bucks, you couldn't resist.

"We can pass this around when we show our slides," you said to me. "Don't you think that'll be interesting?"

I rolled my eyeballs, already thinking of the six airport security checks we were facing on our way home. "How do you think you're going to get that home?" I asked.

You didn't hear me. You were charmed.

Our "arms deal" complete, we headed back to Peshawar.

When we got back to Dean's, I asked you again how you thought we were going to get a gun home in our baggage. I knew, of course, that the pen pistol was more than cheap souvenir for you, but a token of your moment among the fierce Pashtun warrior-craftsmen. Still…

"No problem," you swore. You pulled out a dark blue zippered bag that held a variety of trinkets, and stuck your memento inside. Then you buried the pouch inside the backpack, which you planned to check. Anyway, it just looked like a fountain pen.

What could go wrong?

We had one more day left in Peshawar. We ate well, drank, visited a museum, and picked up a cheap suitcase for your rugs. We spent our evening organizing our stuff for the trip home. And, oh yes, that young rug merchant came by to sell us a couple more.

We were sad to leave Pakistan. We had fallen in step with its craziness. But home called us back.

Airport

On Thursday, September 3, just as we were about to leave our adventures behind, we were arrested. We were literally inches from entering the bland precinct of international air travel, at the x-ray machines in the Karachi airport, the final checkpoint between unpredictable Pakistan and the sterile security of the airplane gate.

It happened this way.

First, you bought too many rugs. On the short flight from Peshawar to Karachi, their weight put us way over the limit and we were hit with a severe excess baggage fee. So, in the Karachi airport, we rearranged our things. I had an extra sack folded away that we pulled out now for an additional carry-on. You stuffed it with the heaviest items from your backpack and rug bag. We were all set.

The flight was delayed for a couple of hours so we were already deep into our travel trance by the time we strolled toward the gate about 2 p.m. My bag slipped through on the x-ray conveyor belt without a problem and a female security guard gave me a quick pat-down. I was about to move on when Security summoned me back and took my bag. Your bags lay open on the conveyor belt.

To our shock, the security guard held up the damn Darra pen pistol.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"I forgot all about that," you mumbled.

Shit. The pen pistol was supposed to be in our checked luggage, but in the re-organization, the blue pouch got thrown into your carry-on.

The world stopped.

Security agents descended on us from all directions.

I wasn't scared. I was thinking, *what a pain in the ass*. I hoped they would confiscate the infernal thing so we didn't have to go through this at every damn transfer all the way home.

But they had more than confiscation in mind. Someone mentioned *ammo* and they tore into every square inch of our hand luggage.

As I watched the security guard check the battery compartment and controls of my micro-cassette recorder and mini-flashlight, I kept focusing on his hand—something wrong about it, very wrong, but I couldn't grasp what it was. When I looked at his ID badge, a line for "distinguishing features" said *Two Thumbs*. It was the kind of surreal observation that made me think maybe I was dreaming, but no…

Two-Thumbs handed me back my recorder and flashlight, which I quickly stuffed in my pocket, as a woman took my arm and led me into the Ladies Searching Station for a more thorough pat-down.

I got out of there in time to watch you being pushed up against a wall. As your guards backed away, I had a panicked moment. Were they going to shoot you? Oh my God!

But no, they only took a Polaroid.

The questioning continued. Two-Thumbs would record our answers in Urdu script on his incident report then laboriously rewrite it in Roman letters.

My annoyance—mostly at you for causing this stupid delay—turned to alarm when Two-Thumbs barked an order to have our luggage removed from the plane. Our tickets, baggage claim checks, and passports disappeared into the crowd of uniformed officials. It struck home: the flight to Bangkok was going to leave without us.

With armed guards at our sides, we began our march in the wrong direction, not toward the airport gate, not toward Bangkok, not toward home, but back into the unknown, back to being the worst kind of strangers—criminals.

You walked in front of me with your pair of guards and I followed with mine.

I wrote earlier that, on our trip to the gun-factory town of Darra, I recorded the sounds of the AK-47 and my brief exchange with one the Pashtuns. *Bang, bang, bang, bang, bang… Is that a Russian AK-47?... Yasss, a Rrrr-ussian AK-47.* And I mentioned that the recorder had been fiddled with during our search. So suddenly, the tape recorder in my pocket started playing—at top volume: "*BANG BANG BANG BANG* IS THAT A RUSSIAN AK-47? *BANG BANG BANG* YASS A RRRRRUSSIAN AK-47 *BANG BANG BANG*."

The guards all jumped, hands poised at their holstered weapons. You whipped around at me in horror as I pulled out the recorder and insanely slapped at it to make it turn off. Now we were really in trouble.

In the Airport Security Office, we were separated.

You were taken away and I got seated in a crowded anteroom, where I was handed a clipboard with a form to fill out. The purple-dittoed form was labeled *Preliminary Investigation of Suspect/Terrorist*. My imagination unhinged. We were going be in Pakistan for years to come. I'd call the Embassy but they were going to refuse to help. What could they do? We were guilty, caught red-handed. I knew nothing about bribery and we were out of dough. What were my parents going to say when I called them for cash to bribe our way out of jail? How did that even work?

When I finished my form, I was interrogated by two officials. One of them pointed to the "Vice President" title on the occupation line and asked, "Don't you know international law?"

I didn't have an answer.

"Don't you know it's illegal to carry firearms aboard an aircraft?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But it was just a stupid mistake."

They went on with their stern questions about knowing right from wrong. I tried to keep smiling at them… to be open, to be genuine, to make them see how perfectly innocent I was and what a mistake it would be to punish me or my companion even though I was at the moment furious with him.

They shook their heads, took my signed form—basically a confession of stupidity, and left me to contemplate our fate.

While I was being interrogated, you were also trying to fast-talk your way to freedom. You pointed out the *M.D.* on your passport and talked about being a physician who did research. The officials who sat around the table with you played

with the pen pistol, asked questions, and finally said they'd let you go if you signed a paper taking responsibility for your crime. And so you did.

We were idiots to sign papers. Looking back, we should have called our consulate again. Signing a confession was what people did who just wanted to get it over with and go home. It underscored for us that we were not leaving our walk on the wild side any wiser than when we began. No wiser in the sense of enlightenment or savvy, but maybe "lowly wise," like Adam and Eve after the Fall. That day, to wrap up our experience on the silk road, we got to tread in the footsteps of contraband smugglers, and inept ones at that.

The authorities released us. My heart thrilled when I saw you walk into the anteroom.

Two-Thumbs joined us, gave us back our papers, led us to our luggage, and called a porter over to help us.

"You are a very lucky man," he said to you and went on to say that once the terrorism inquiry started, the routine usually wound up with the suspects being carted off to the police station. Just that morning, a foreigner was found with three bullets in his suitcase. He was now in jail.

Then, sweetly, he apologized to us. "I was only doing my job."

And we told him how much we, as airline travelers, appreciated that.

We were okay. We were breathing again. But how would we get home now? Home—where we could be smart people again, people who got up in the morning knowing how the day would end.

But Pakistan did not let us leave disheartened by our final experience. It had saved one last goodbye kiss. The porter led us to the PIA office, where we sat on two chairs in front of a man behind a desk with a computer terminal.

"We, uh, missed our flight and need to reschedule," you said.

"What happened?"

"Uh, security problems…?" I said quickly, not wanting to hear any long-winded confessions from you.

"Oh, very good, no problem."

He cancelled our exit stamps, rebooked our flight for the next day, and (much to our surprise) gave us a voucher for a room and three meals at a nearby hotel, no charge.

By the time we reach our hotel, our overwrought nerves had relaxed into giddiness and we enjoyed our eighteen hours in Karachi.

Next day—back to the airport. Luckily, we'd planned an extra day in Bangkok, so we made our originally scheduled flight in the nick of time. Our luggage got sidetracked somehow, but as our next plane took off from Tokyo, the flight attendant brought us a telex reassuring us that Northwest Airlines had our bags and were routing them home for us, not to worry.

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Peshawar, Karachi, Bangkok, Tokyo, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Rochester. Home: we arrived on Saturday of the quiet Labor Day weekend. September 5. Everything was so clean and orderly. I remember the taxi ride from the airport and

looking around at the broad, well-paved highway and the mown grass, so green, everything so easily tamed and contoured to our convenience.

Our own beds awaited us—no reservations needed.

Epilogue

Our return to Rochester felt like we had popped up to the surface after spending an eternal moment in a deep forever place—from the timeless depths to the land of ticking clocks, rioting with expectations and obligations. We returned to our own condos and went back to our day jobs. Our lost luggage turned up on our doorsteps. We got a kick out of telling our stories, to amaze and delight our friends and family.

Everything was back to normal.

But in the quiet of our off-hours, we each returned to that faraway place.

I woke up at 4 a.m. every day to squeeze in a couple hours of writing before work. My characters were retracing our steps between Kashgar and Peshawar, running for their lives, coping with murder and mayhem. Lovers were lost to each other and desperate to reunite.

You dragged through your days. Your single joy came from cruising carpet stores and antique shops for more tribal rugs. You bought a stack of reference books. I would find you on your deck, a new rug draped over a chair, book in hand, second or third drink at your elbow, as you analyzed the weaves and puzzled through the tribal distinctions among the complex edge patterns and central gul motifs.

When we sat together on your deck and told our stories to each other, they were less about the jeopardy and more about the kindness of people who looked out for us when we were lost or befuddled. What had we learned? We had learned how to be strangers in a vast and strange world. And we had learned to trust and rely on each other for bits of courage, dashes of daring, and comfort at the end of every day.

In November, as we drove to Connecticut to have Thanksgiving with your parents, you turned to me and said, "I think we should get married."

After seventeen years of adamant independence on both our parts, I was surprised, but I didn't hesitate to answer. "Sounds good. Okay."

And so, we two *rafiqs*, we two solo travelers on life's crazy path, swore to guarantee each other's safe passage through all the surprises ahead, now and forever.