



Relief: Afghanistan, 2001
by J. Malcolm Garcia

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Selected by Edward Hoagland, author of *Early in the Season*, *Compass Points*, *Tigers & Ice*, and *Balancing Acts*.

I picked Garcia's Afghanistan piece, not just for its timeliness, but its unassuming verisimilitude. I feel as though he's me, experiencing everything he did. The authenticity is potent. – EH.

December, 2001

Christmas Eve. I stop to buy a pound of rice and a half gallon of cooking oil on Flower Street, a commercial district in downtown Kabul, for an impoverished family I'd seen days before. Even though I am half way around the world covering a war, I want to continue my seasonal habit of giving to poor people during the holidays.

This is the first Christmas season openly acknowledged in Afghanistan in five years.

The holiday tune Jingle Bells crackles out of a merchant's static-filled cassette player for the amusement of westerners who have converged on Kabul following the fall of the Taliban last month. Small, spare evergreen trees cut down in nearby mountains line sidewalks crowded with European and American journalists, troops, and embassy personnel.

No Taliban, Christmas, Yes, a sign reads.

Happy Chersmess, 2001, a baker writes carefully lettering a cake with icing.

"Sales of Christmas trees has been very good," a merchant says.

Northern Alliance soldiers stationed at intersections use metal cables and leather whips to chase beggars away from westerners flashing money in a country where the average income ranges between five and fifty dollars a month. Every day, desperate men, women and children swarm me when I step out of my car. Their calloused hands clutch my pockets, fingers scrambling over my clothes.

"Buro!" Northern Alliance soldiers shout in Dari, thrashing the beggars. "Go!"

"It's all right, it's all right," I'll yell at them. I try to protect the beggars and get away from them at the same time swinging my arms to free myself from their grasp. Merchants tug at my coat urging me into their shops. I swat at their outstretched hands swarming around me.

I put the rice and oil in a rented car and tell my translator Bro to drive me into the ruins of south Kabul. After nearly twenty-five years of war, Afghanistan is a shattered country. The Soviet Union invaded in 1979 but withdrew ten years later, humiliated at the hands of fierce Mujahadeen guerilla fighters. Factional fighting between Afghan warlords followed and reduced most of Kabul and the rest of Afghanistan to rubble. Then the Taliban restored order in 1996,

with its harsh, almost paranoid, interpretation of Islam. Women weren't allowed to work or show their faces in public. Adultery and other "crimes" were punishable by, among other things, stoning the accused to death. Public executions were announced on the radio and held in a soccer stadium built by the United Nations. Music and television were outlawed.

Now the Americans have come and ousted the Taliban following the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001. Fighting continues in the south around Kandahar. Every day Bro and I struggle to make ourselves heard above the drone of B-52 bombers and Apache helicopters roaring overhead.

At twenty-three, Bro has only known war. We met last month three days after I arrived. I had interviewed his uncle, who administers a de-mining operation in Kabul and who offered to help me with my story I was writing about the war. He spoke English and I asked him to recommend a translator. He introduced me to his unemployed nephew, Khalid. the way I mangled his name drove him crazy. To pare us both, I started calling him Bro and offered him fifty dollars a day, a fortune here but you wouldn't have known it by his calm reaction.

"Why not?" Bro said, accepting the job after he thought about it while taking a piss in the remains of a bomb-blasted house.

We're an odd pair. Stocky Bro, young and tough. Old skinny, pony-tailed me, a decrepit social worker from San Francisco who shook off a midlife crisis by going into newspaper work. The disaster of September 11th gave me my chance to cover a war.

Bro and I leave the pandemonium of Flower Street and jostle down bomb blasted roads under gray skies seething with storm clouds. Long stretches of rubble reach into the horizon.

Men, women and children linger around tents donated by the United Nations as temporary shelters for refugees. The tents tip oddly on the uneven ground. Some are arranged on rooftops, beneath which nothing remains but the hollow shells of windswept apartment buildings, pocked from mortar fire.

Barefoot children chase us shouting, *Please Mister help us! Please Mister!* until Bro out distances them and they fall behind us wrapped in dust and exhaust. We've not driven far when we're stopped at a military checkpoint.

"He is an American journalist," Bro explains to the Northern Alliance commander in charge of the checkpoint. "For him, this time is Christmas, a holy time. He wants to give food to poor families. That is his custom this time of year."

I show the commander the rice and oil.

"We are hungry too," the commander says stroking his matted beard. Broken shards of concrete crunch beneath the boots of soldiers walking behind him. Other soldiers sit off the road by small fires. They wear ragged sandals and pull blankets around their bony shoulders. They look up at a B-52 streaking across the sky.

"Americans," one says.

The other soldiers nod and stand up. They approach our car hunched against the cold, hands out.

"Bakhsish, mister," one says using the Dari word for tip. His breath steams in the cold. Bro offers the soldiers cigarettes. They take the smokes and Bro lights a match for them. I look around at what appears to have been a residential area.

Gaunt families wander through bomb shattered apartment buildings. Sheets of plastic

provided makeshift walls. The plastic balloons monstrosly from the wind, then abruptly snaps inward drawn by invisible currents. Shadows cast from the orange glow of cooking fires bob and weave.

The commander sucks on his cigarette and contemplates me. He squints an eye as smoke curls above his cheek. Bro gives him three more cigarettes.

“Bakshish,” the commander says.

Bro turns to me and I hand him two Afghani, the equivalent of twenty-five cents. The commander takes the money, lowers a rope drawn across the road and waves us through.

We stop at a mortared office building about a mile from the checkpoint. Trash clings to the broken walls stained with human feces. A spiral staircase rises out of the rubble to the second floor where an old man with a long white beard stands on a broken balcony. He looks out over the road.

A dog tied to the rail of the staircase barks at us slathering saliva in the air. Brown chickens scramble over the parched ground and donkeys chew on dry grass growing between torn chunks of concrete. I hear the hesitant start-up sounds of a bus wheezing and coughing. The engine finally catches and explodes. The old man winces. A plume of diesel exhaust rises behind the building.

Bro and I climb the stairs giving wide berth to the dog. The old man presses a hand over his heart and bows in traditional greeting. Bro and I do the same. The old man speaks and Bro translates.

“Please, mister,” the old man says. “We have nothing to cook with.”

“I know,” I say. “That’s why I’ve come.”

I had seen him before when I passed this way earlier in the week. He was alone at the top of the stairs surrounded by about a dozen children. I saw their torn clothes, dirty, lean faces. The old man’s white beard was lined with soot. He was rail thin. His tan smock billowed around him. The sky was black and an electrical storm snapped coils of lightning into clouds. He had turned slowly following our car, eyes buried deep in his head.

I know the old man and the children are only a few of the many desperate people I see daily. I can’t help everyone, but I can help them.

“I’ve brought you this,” I say offering the bag of rice. Bro sets the cooking oil on the ground. The old man holds the rice and bows again. A slow smile creases his face. Women in burqas emerge from the hall. At first, all I can see are their masked faces approaching us. They gather around the old man and start fighting one another to squeeze the bag of rice. They tear the bag. Their shrill cries make me cringe. Kernels of rice fall on the floor.

“We should go,” Bro says.

A stooped woman with stringy gray hair shoves the other women aside. The old man lets her take the rice. She raises it to her face, sniffs. She looks at me without expression and then moves away down the hall. Her burqa inflates around her as she turns down another passageway absorbed into the gloom made darker by the black soot burned into the walls from cooking fires.

“You are very kind,” the old man says to me. “I am a farmer. I once grew rice in the Shomali Plain. We come to Kabul City because of drought.”

I ask how long he has lived here.

“Six years we live like this. I send my children out to beg in the morning. They go to the

bazaar. Early, when goats and lambs are butchered. They bring back scraps of meat. They fight dogs to bring us food.”

“That must be very hard. I am sorry.”

“We have not seen you for a long time. Why have you taken so long?”

“What do you mean?”

“He thinks you are NGO,” Bro explains, referring to the dozens of international “non governmental organizations” that provided humanitarian aid in Kabul.

“No, no,” I say. “I’m not an aid worker. I’m a reporter. I’m just trying to help.”

The old man moves close enough to me that our noses almost touch, the lines in his face deep and hard. He tightens a turban around his head without taking his eyes off me. Men appear behind him followed by more women and children.

The men crowd around us smelling of sweat and mildew. They reach toward me and touch my clothes with hesitant fingers, speak in guttural tones. Bro translates. He grips my arm, motions toward the stairs.

“We should go,” he whispers.

“Wait. What are they saying?”

We need food.

I have not had anything to eat in three days.

Please mister.

Please mister.

Please mister.

“Let’s go,” Bro says.

“I want to make sure they don’t think I’m an NGO.”

“Let’s go.”

Girls hold scarves across their faces and giggle looking at me. The women slap them. Sharp, hot words echo in the hall, high voltage shrieks clawing at the walls. A rooster crows. The dog snaps. One man pushes toward me holding a baby.

“My son is sick,” the man says holding the naked infant out to me.

“Malcolm,” Bro says moving toward the stairs. “We have stayed too long.”

“Bro what are they saying?”

“Everyone is sick,” he says translating for the old man. “We look for work but there is nothing.”

The old woman who took the rice emerges from the hall, touches the old man on the shoulder.

“He did not bring us enough rice,” she tells him.

“We are twelve families,” the old man says to me.

“How many people is that?”

The old man frowns.

“Sixty,” he says after a moment. “We need more than one bag of rice.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve done what I can.”

A rooster crows again. Bro yanks my coat but I shrug him off.

“When will you come back?” the old man asks.

“I don’t know. I’m not with an NGO. This is not a regular thing I do.”

“No one ever comes this way. We have no food. It has been a long time since you were

last here. And now you did not bring us enough food. After all this time.”

“This was something I could do today. Something I wanted to do today.”

“Why didn’t you bring more food?”

“I’m not an aid worker.”

The old man says something but his voice is drowned out by the din of the women screaming, *please mister, money mister!* Everywhere I look, outraged faces snarl words I don’t understand. Bitter eyes glaring. Their hot breath clouds my face. I can’t breathe.

The man holding the baby grabs my hand and pulls me through the throng down the hall. Bro lunges after me. I’m pulled into a long narrow corridor. The man walks ahead of me holding my coat with one hand his other hand pressed against his stomach. Dry cow manure used for fuel fills barren rooms and stuffs my lungs with its stench. Chickens squawk, scurry ahead of us.

We stop at a room concealed by a heavy blanket. I hear a donkey snorting below us. The man parts the blanket and a foul rotting odor swamps me. A startled woman looks up raising a scarf to cover her face. She sits on the floor, back against a wall. Her swollen legs and blackened feet seem detached from her body.

“Both of my wife’s legs are broken,” the man says shifting the baby in his arms. “We can not get her to a doctor. This is my son. He is sick. His mother hasn’t any milk.”

He holds the blanket squeezing it until his hand curls into a tight fist and fabric bulges between his fingers. He drops the blanket and pulls up his smock. A blood soaked bandage sticks to his stomach.

“We need medicine. Food. How will you help us? Why have you taken so long to come?”

“I’m not an aid worker,” I try to explain. “How many times must I tell you?”

“This is from land mine,” the man says tugging off the bandage and exposing a deep red hole surrounded by mottled flesh.

“Don’t!” I shout turning away. “I don’t need to see it. There’s nothing I can do. I’m not a doctor.”

“Where is our medicine? Why do you come if you have no medicine?”

“Because I’m not a God damn aid worker!”

“What are you going to do for my son?”

“I brought rice. Let’s go, Bro.”

Bro gives me a hard look.

“We should already have gone,” he snaps. “Now it will be difficult.”

We step around the man and retrace our steps toward the balcony.

“Where are you going?” he shouts after me. I hear the rapid slapping of his sandals on the floor as he runs behind me and grabs my shoulders. I shove him off, keep walking.

“Where are you going?” he demands.

The old man has not moved. He stands on the balcony staring toward the blood thin line of the horizon. Wind whips his smock into a tumult of writhing fabric.

“Before drought, the Shomali was beautiful,” he says his back to me. “Every day we beg. Eat a little and then we beg. You are kind, but the rice is not enough.”

Men and women follow Stomach Wound and encircle us. Someone punches my back. When I regain my balance, I look for the old man, but he has disappeared. A woman shouts at me, throws the empty rice bag at my feet. Someone kicks me. Another grabs my left arm. I turn

ready to land a punch. It's Bro. He holds onto my arm, covers his face with his other arm and pushes his way out dragging me with him.

We run down the stairs, leap past the dog lunging at our legs. The man with the stomach wound follows close behind, shouting at us as the baby bounces in his arms. I slip on the stony ground, fall on my knees and scramble back up. We reach the car and I turn around. A group of men and women at the top of the balcony scream, "Money mister!"

Stomach Wound reaches the bottom of the steps, shifts the baby to his other arm and runs toward us.

"Hurry!" Bro yells at me.

I open my door and he fumbles with the keys. Stomach Wound scrambles up behind the car and leans on the trunk rocking us up and down. He kicks the fender. Suddenly, he stops and bends over. He stands back up without the baby, arms outstretched above his head.

"Where's the baby?" I say.

"The baby is not our concern."

"Where is it?"

Bro glances in the rear view mirror, leans out his window. I look out my window and see the baby's legs.

"He's put him behind the right rear wheel," I shout.

"Jesus! Don't back up."

"I can't go forward!"

We are parked about two feet in front of a sheared concrete pillar.

"You can't back up. We'll have to get out."

“No.”

The man keeps rocking the car.

“Bastard!” Bro says.

He shifts into neutral and lets the car roll forward turning the wheels hard to the right.

The metal screeches as the car scrapes against the pillar. Stomach Wound follows us punching the trunk with his fists. When Bro can see the baby in his rearview mirror, he starts the engine and spins onto the road.

I look back. Stomach Wound holds his bandage above his head and shouts after us, the hole in his belly raw and exposed. The ragged bandage snakes out of his hand, whirling into the black sky while below it the baby sits shapeless in the dirt.

“Crazy man,” Bro mutters. “You should not have stayed.”

“They thought I was an aid worker.”

“People have lost everything,” Bro says. “You came with food. You are a good man. But you are not in United States.”

“Did you lose your home in the fighting?”

“We lost the home where I was born and had to move in with an uncle. What have you lost?”

Nothing. My mother lost an uncle in the Spanish Civil War. My father was in the navy but never saw combat in World War Two. I was too young to fight in Vietnam. Years later, my mother said she would have sent me to my aunt in Mexico had I been old enough for the draft.

Bro was born in 1978 a year before the Soviet invasion. I was entering a private,

midwestern college at the time. He was just 12 when the Soviets withdrew and Afghanistan descended into civil war. I was a social worker helping homeless people. In 1996, when Bro was seventeen, the Taliban took over. I was studying journalism at the University of California, Berkeley. Last month, Bro watched from his house as American bombers overwhelmed Taliban fighters on the outskirts of Kabul. I was in Kansas City, Missouri working for *The Kansas City Star* and watched the war on television.

“You’ve been lucky not to have been hurt with so much war,” I say.

“Inshallah we will stay lucky.”

"What's that mean?"

"God willing."

We drive silently into downtown Kabul, park near Flower Street and get out of the car. Bro feels the crumpled metal where his door had scraped against the pillar. We lean against the hood and cross our arms, keeping our thoughts to ourselves. I stare at the barren mountains hulking ink blots against the sky.

What was I thinking? I was a social worker for thirteen years, long enough to have known better. But what should I have known? That people suffer and I can do nothing about it? Even in the smallest way, I can do nothing? At least in San Francisco, I could hand out bus tokens, refer someone to a shelter, offer a sympathetic ear. None of that matters here.

A boy approaches us with a smoking can of incense. He waves the smoke over the car, a blessing Bro explains. A spiritual cleansing. Bro brushes smoke against his face inhaling deeply.

“Bakhsish,” the boy says.

Bro gives him two Afghani. The boy shakes his can around me.

“Buro,” Bro says.

I watch the boy wander off and glance at my watch. It’s a little after five o’clock. I’ve been so busy thinking about Christmas that I’ve forgotten December is the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. They eat only in the evening. Bro must be starving. I point at a man cooking kabob on an open grill.

“You hungry? You haven’t eaten.”

Bro shrugs, stares at Flower Street where the sidewalks remain crowded with westerners bargaining with rug merchants and the tired tape of “Jingle Bells” continues to play. Afghans wrapped in shawls crowd into restaurants. Beggars collect on the sidewalks waiting for traffic to stall. A few move toward us. Bro watches them, tells me to get in the car.

“You will not help any more poor people today,” he says. “I will eat later. Let’s go.”

J. Malcolm Garcia is a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. He has reported periodically from Afghanistan since November, 2001 for Knight Rider Newspapers. His essay, “Curfew,” was published in the Spring, 2004 issue of *The Virginia Quarterly*.