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# Crossing the River Kabul

Kevin McLean

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# Crossing the River Kabul

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# Crossing *the* River Kabul

*An Afghan Family Odyssey*

KEVIN MCLEAN

Potomac Books  
*An imprint of the University of Nebraska Press*

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Unless otherwise stated, photographs originally appeared in *Afghanistan: Ancient Land with Modern Ways*, published in 1960 by the Ministry of Planning of the Royal Government of Afghanistan.

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*For Naomi, the love of my life*

By blood, we are immersed in love of you.  
The youth lose their heads for your sake.  
I come to you and my heart finds rest.  
Away from you, grief clings to my heart like a snake.  
I forget the throne of Delhi  
When I remember the mountaintops of my Afghan land,  
If I must choose between the world and you,  
I shall not hesitate to claim your barren deserts as my own.  
—AHMAD SHAH DURRANI

## Contents

- List of Illustrations | x  
Author's Note | xi  
Acknowledgments | xiii  
Prologue | xv
1. Kabul Airport, Afghanistan, October 1980: Flight | 1
  2. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, October 1980: Behsood Bridge | 6
  3. Abdién, Afghanistan, October 1980: Nasir | 11
  4. Somewhere Near the Afghanistan-Pakistan Border,  
October 1980: Minefield | 16
  5. Afghanistan | 22
  6. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1919: General Nadir | 26
  7. Paris, France, 1920: H el ene | 31
  8. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1929: Nadir Shah | 34
  9. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1933: Zahir Shah | 37
  10. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1934: Tajwar | 39
  11. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1953: Pashtunistan | 43
  12. Faizabad, Afghanistan, 1955: Badakhshan | 47
  13. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1959: Baba Naeem | 55
  14. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1961: Kite Flying | 60
  15. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1962: The New Great Game | 64
  16. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1963: The King Acts | 66
  17. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, Winter 1963: Duck Hunting | 68
  18. A Farm North of Kabul, Afghanistan, 1964: Buzkashi | 72
  19. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1965: Lessons | 74
  20. Ghazni, Afghanistan, 1967: Sia | 78
  21. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1967: The Mystic | 83
  22. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1967: Basketball | 86
  23. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 1969: Afsana | 90
  24. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1970: A Turkish Bride | 95

25. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 1971: Daoud | 98
26. Bombay, India, 1973: The Wind | 101
27. Kabul, Afghanistan, April 1973: Coup d'État | 106
28. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1974: Sitar Lessons | 109
29. Paghman, Afghanistan, 1974: Japan | 111
30. Moscow, USSR, 1977: Daoud and Brezhnev | 113
31. Kabul, Afghanistan, April 1978: Daoud Is Overthrown | 115
32. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1978: Professor Wazir | 117
33. Kabul University, December 1978: The Final Exam | 121
34. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1979: Hiding | 124
35. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1980: Pol-i-Charki Prison | 129
36. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1980: Kandahari | 132
37. Kabul, Afghanistan, October 1980: Leaving | 134
38. Back in the Minefield | 138
39. Landi Kotal, Pakistan, 1980: Prison | 142
40. Landi Kotal, Pakistan, 1980: Connections | 146
41. Peshawar, Pakistan, 1980: Pir Gailani | 149
42. Peshawar, Pakistan, 1980: Hazrat Sepgotolah | 153
43. Peshawar, Pakistan, 1980: The United Nations Humanitarian Aid Office | 156
44. Afghanistan, Somewhere Near the Pakistan Border, 1980: Mujahideen | 160
45. Karachi, Pakistan, 1981: Train Ride | 166
46. Ankara, Turkey, 1981: Shoeshine | 172
47. Istanbul, Turkey, 1981: U.S. Consulate | 175
48. U.S. Consulate, Istanbul, 1981: Hazaras | 177
49. Frankfurt, Germany, 1981: The Parcel | 179
50. Frankfurt, Germany, 1981: The Interview | 181
51. Frankfurt, Germany, 1989: Warlords | 185
52. San Diego, California, 1992: SpeedDee Oil | 190
53. Kabul, Afghanistan, 1995: The Taliban | 194
54. New York City: September 11, 2001 | 197
55. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: The Dance of the Dead | 200
56. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: Karta-i-Char | 202
57. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: The Gate | 206
58. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: Ghosts | 211

59. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2002: Hazrat Ali | 214
  60. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: The Cemetery | 217
  61. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002: Money | 219
  62. San Diego, California, July 4, 2002: Citizens | 221
  63. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2003: Number 3 | 223
  64. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2003: Rebuilding | 228
  65. Kabul, Afghanistan, 2004: Orders | 230
  66. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2004: Din Mohammad | 233
  67. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2004: Hazrat Ali | 235
  68. Office of the Governor of Jalalabad, 2004:  
Gul Agha Sherzai | 237
  69. Jalalabad, Afghanistan 2004: Hadji Jawid | 240
  70. Security Headquarters, Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2004:  
The Gardener | 243
  71. Abdien, Afghanistan, 2004: The Funeral | 246
  72. Compound of Hazrat Ali, Afghanistan, 2004: Jirga | 248
  73. Jalalabad, Afghanistan, 2005: The King's Arabians | 251
  74. Karta-i-Char, Kabul, Afghanistan 2008: Rasoul | 255
- Bibliography | 257

# *Illustrations*

## MAPS

1. Afghanistan and surrounding countries | xviii
2. Baryalai's route of escape, October 1980 | xix

## PHOTOGRAPHS

*Following page 120*

1. Popal family
2. Ambassador to Iraq
3. Zahir Shah and Daoud
4. Afghanistan cabinet
5. Khrushchev and Daoud
6. Eisenhower and Daoud
7. Camel caravan
8. Buzkashi
9. Kabul University biology class
10. Karta-i-Char, 2002
11. Karta-i-Char, 2009
12. The author, Abbas, and Baryalai

## *Author's Note*

Baryalai Popal fled Afghanistan in 1980 after the Russian invasion. When U.S. and Afghan forces ousted the Taliban in 2002, Bar returned to Kabul for the first time in twenty years. That summer Bar told me the story of his return. “That is the most amazing story I’ve ever heard,” I said.

“I have many such stories,” he replied.

Bar’s stories became the threads from which I would weave the history of his family and, with it, the history of Afghanistan.

I have chosen to tell Bar’s story in his voice. At his request some family names have been changed.



## *Acknowledgments*

This book represents two journeys, Baryalai's incredible journey from Kabul to America and the ten-year journey we took together in writing this book. I am in Baryalai's debt for taking the time and effort to relate his many stories to me, for his diligence in ensuring my telling of them was accurate, and for his amazing memory. Baryalai's wife, Afsana, contributed stories of her own and helped flesh out others while sharing her extraordinary Afghan dishes. I am grateful to Pamela Feinsilber, who provided invaluable editorial help teasing out more from every story and finding an organizational approach to a sprawling saga. My thanks to Tim Foxley and Nabi Misdaq, who reviewed the manuscript and provided useful input based on their vast knowledge and experience in Afghanistan, and to Dr. John B. Alexander, former U.S. Army colonel, for his advice and support. I also owe a great deal of thanks to Ronald E. Neumann, former ambassador to Afghanistan, whose positive response and faith in my book shepherded it to publication.

And I owe my undying thanks to my wife, Naomi, without whose constant support, suggestions, editing, and encouragement this journey would not have seen an end.



## Prologue

My story is entwined with that of my country. As in any relationship, you will find love, hate, battles, resolution, despair, hope—all greatly magnified because my country, the country of my birth and that of my grandparents and parents, my uncles, aunts, and cousins, my wife and my children, the country that I hold most close to my heart in my thoughts and memories, is Afghanistan. When an Afghan tells a story, he knows not to begin by boasting of how powerful his family is. For the storyteller to make himself appear more important than his listener is disrespectful, and the most important thing you can offer others is respect. But I must tell you that I am a Popalzai from one of Afghanistan's two royal families. Legend has it that one day, many centuries ago, when the aging King Zirak asked his eldest son, Barak, for help getting onto his horse, Barak mocked his father's weakness. Popal, the youngest son, took pity on his father and helped him into the saddle. When King Zirak named Popal to succeed him, Barak refused to recognize his younger brother as king. From that time on the Popalzai and the Barakzai have fought for control of Afghanistan.

In 1747 King Nadir Shah, who had created a great empire that stretched from Persia to Delhi, died. Ahmad Khan, a Popalzai, declared himself the new king—but of course, the Barakzai refused to accept him. Rather than go to war, Ahmad Khan called a *loya jirga*, a decision-making council of tribal elders that is still used in Afghanistan today.

The *loya jirga* elected Ahmad Khan king and proclaimed him Durr-i-Durrani, the “Pearl of Pearls.” His kingdom became known as the Durrani Empire. Under Ahmad Shah Durrani the nation of Afghanistan began to take shape. Until the Communist coup in 1978, Afghanistan was governed by either a Popalzai or a Barakzai.

All members of the Popalzai tribe once had Popalzai as their family name. It is said that my grandfather Mukarram, a Pashtun and a khan of Kandahar, shortened our last name to Popal over a disagreement with his fellow Popalzai. My grandfather's cousin

*Prologue*

Khair Mohammad, another local khan (and the grandfather of former Afghan president Hamid Karzai), changed his family name from Popalzai to Karzai, for the village of Karz near Kandahar where the Karzai family has its roots.

In 1952, the year I was born, the United States allied itself with Pakistan to counter Russia's influence with Afghanistan and India. Like two mighty storm fronts on a collision course, the Cold War clash between the United States and Russia would bring death and devastation to Afghanistan and my family and force me on an odyssey that would keep me from my country for over twenty years.

# Crossing the River Kabul

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MAP 1. Afghanistan and surrounding countries. Map by Kevin McLean.



MAP 2. Baryalai's route of escape, October 1980. Map by Kevin McLean.



## Kabul Airport, Afghanistan, October 1980

### *Flight*

Our driver, Saed, sat behind the wheel of our old black Mercedes, shivering in the predawn October darkness. My cousin Abbas and I slid quickly inside. We headed for the airport on the far side of Mount Asmayi, the mountain that separates my neighborhood, Karta-i-Char, from downtown Kabul. Behind the walls of our family compound, the weight of my absence rested heavily on my father and mother and on my wife, Afsana. The whole of the life I had known was behind me now. What lay ahead was completely unknown.

I had no plan of escape beyond flying to Jalalabad. I could make no plan because I could trust no one. The division and mistrust that had overtaken Afghanistan had infected friends, neighbors, families, cousins, brothers, fathers, sons. Even relatives might turn you in because they had been threatened or because they felt the ruling Communists were here to stay or because they were tempted by the rewards offered to those who would identify “Enemies of the People.” Although you suffered greatly if you did not cast your lot with the Communists, many refused to do so. The problem was one could never tell who had sold out and who had not.

It was deathly silent in the car as we made our way through a maze of streets, all deserted at this time of morning. We knew National Security had set up checkpoints, which the guards changed nightly—often putting them on one-way streets so there was no escape. We prayed we would not encounter them.

We drove past the Kabul Zoo, which I had visited with my class when it first opened in 1967. We were all excitement and noise because none of us had ever been to a zoo. I held a rabbit for the first time, petting its soft fur, feeling its warmth in my hands, the beating of its heart as it nestled against me, little knowing that during the civil war to come, the rabbits would be food for starving families. As we passed near the tomb of Babur Shah, a descen-

dant of Genghis Khan who had created the Mughal Empire, which stretched from Afghanistan to India, I thought of the words there: “If there is a paradise on Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this!” What had been my own paradise was gone—perhaps forever. Suddenly Saed pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. My heart stopped as well. “You must walk from here. It’s too dangerous to get any closer,” Saed announced. “May God protect you.”

We carried no luggage—that would arouse suspicion—only documents in small plastic bags. The mountains surrounding Kabul appeared as jagged teeth against a rose-colored sky. Afraid to be seen in the growing light, we followed the large, old panja chinar trees that lined the road to the airport. Afghan rebels fighting the Russians—the mujahideen—would later use these trees as shields to shoot at the Russians. The Russians would solve this problem like they did so many others—they destroyed the trees.

The airport terminal was a long, low, cement block structure from which the control tower jutted skyward. The small plane for the short flight to Jalalabad sat on the tarmac, the stairway in place awaiting its passengers. Dozens were already at the entrance gate, pushing to get on board. This part of the airport was also used by Russian military planes and helicopters. Security was tight. Guards scrutinized each passenger. Abbas and I quickened our pace, making our way into the middle of the crowd, which carried us past the guards. “We made it,” I said to Abbas, feeling relieved.

But my relief soon turned to terror—a Russian soldier and his Tajik translator, both armed, stood at the bottom of the stairway, checking passengers’ papers. They wore the gray wool uniforms of the Russian military, the Russian’s trimmed in the black of the Russian Special Forces. The Russian’s eyes narrowed as he studied each passenger’s papers. The Tajik waved them on with his Russian-made Kalashnikov. I had to fight the urge to turn and run as I tried to think of a way to explain why I had no papers.

Suddenly I found myself staring into the cold black eyes of the Russian Special Forces soldier as the Tajik gripped the trigger of his AK-47.

“How many more passengers?” a voice boomed from the top

of the stairway. “We’re almost full.” The guards turned their attention from me to the bear of a man in a pilot’s uniform towering above them. I looked up. Sorosh! His father had worked with my father in the Foreign Ministry. Before the Russian invasion, he had piloted international flights. Now the Russians used him to fly short domestic flights. With his bushy black eyebrows and black goatee, his large head and body and huge hands, he was an unmistakable presence. He was not a man to disagree with. As he surveyed the passengers, he caught sight of us and pounded down the stairs.

“They’re okay. They’re with me,” he said. The guards eyed Sorosh with contempt but said nothing.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Sorosh asked us as soon as we were aboard the plane. “Where are you going in days like these?”

“We have some things to do on our houses in Jalalabad,” I said.

“Ah,” he smiled, “it seems everyone has a problem with his house in Jalalabad now. I wish I were free to check on my house in Jalalabad.” Lowering his voice, he added, “You know, the Russians transport their troops in planes like this. The mujahideen will shoot down anything, especially this kind of plane. I never know if I’ll live from day to day. You’re lucky—you fly only today.”

I had not thought of myself as lucky, but even in war, everything is relative.

Our route took us high over the snow-covered mountains to the east of Kabul. Suddenly several passengers began shouting and pointing out the windows. The rest of us jumped out of our seats to see what was happening. National Security guards ordered us to sit down, but everyone ignored them. Russian helicopters were firing rockets into the sides of the mountains below, sending great plumes of dust and smoke skyward. I felt sick. The mujahideen would be firing back and could easily hit an aircraft like ours.

But soon we were crossing high above the sixteen thousand-foot Safid Koh, the “White Mountains,” which are perpetually covered in snow. I sat back and stared at a photograph of my family, the only one I had brought with me. It had been taken in the spring in Uncle Ali’s front yard, the day my Uncle Gholam and his German wife, Lilo, left Afghanistan. Because Afghans assumed any

foreigner was Russian and should be killed, Gholam and Lilo were returning to Germany for Lilo's sake. There I am, towering over everyone. Uncle Gholam is to my right, then Uncle Ali and Uncle Sultan. To my left, hands on hips, is my son, Walid, only five years old. Beside him stands my mother, Babu, so kind and patient. She loved to spoil me—which my father disliked because he thought she distracted me from my schoolwork.

My wife, Afsana, is at the far end because she is not a blood relative. She is not even a Pashtun but a Turk. My father could never forgive her for not being a Popal. But I could not resist her intelligence, her compelling eyes, and her wonderful sense of fun—something that my mother and father lacked and that I, as an only child, had longed for. Baba is missing from the photograph. His amputated leg made it difficult for him to leave the house—and he never liked having his picture taken.

As we descended into Jalalabad, flames flickered through heavy layers of smoke. The terminal, its walls pockmarked with craters and bullet holes, was ringed by Russian military vehicles and tanks occupying the parking lots and nearby streets.

Abbas and I let the other passengers exit ahead of us, planning to leave with Sorosh. One of the guards shouted at us, “Get up! Go!” We didn't move. He approached us, brandishing his Kalashnikov and a fierce look, and stuck his face in mine, his bushy mustache shaved in the form of the Persian symbols for the numbers 2 and 6—the date Daoud, backed by the Communists, overthrew the king. Such mustaches were worn only by the most fanatical and brutal Party security men.

Abbas and I slowly made our way to the front of the plane, where Sorosh sat in the cockpit writing in his log. He looked up as we stood outside the cockpit door. “Wait for me,” he said. The security guard immediately barked, “You must wait outside.”

We stood still as if we hadn't heard him or didn't understand.

“Why are you not moving?” he demanded. “Show me your papers.”

“Leave them alone,” Sorosh said, ducking his head low as he exited the cabin. The guard turned his weapon on Sorosh and

*Kabul Airport, Afghanistan, October 1980*

glared. “They work for me,” Sorosh said more firmly. The guard hesitated before lowering his weapon. He turned to the other guard, spoke to him in Russian, then they left the plane. Outside dozens of Russian military personnel and Party members guarded the entrance to the main terminal. Not even Sorosh could get us past all that security.