

The Photographer



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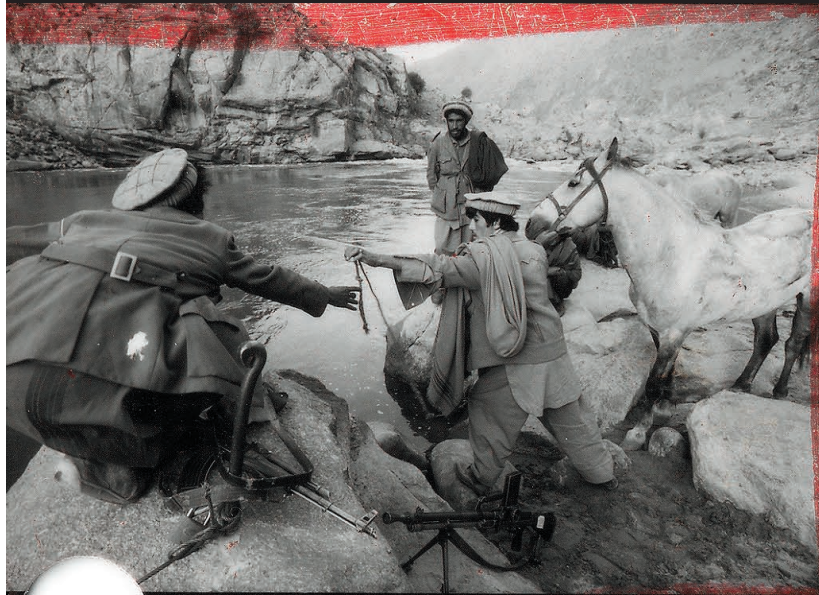
Emmanuel Guibert · Didier Lefèvre · Frédéric Lemerrier

Translated by Alexis Siegel

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First Second

New York & London



Introduction

by Alexis Siegel

UNTIL THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, Afghanistan had been off the radar of nearly all Americans for many years. *The Photographer* takes us back to 1986 and brings us along on a journey through that war-torn nation. In the process, it illuminates many of the challenges that Americans have been struggling to understand since 9/11.

A turning point, in a strategic place

We discover Afghanistan through the eyes and camera of photojournalist Didier Lefèvre, who is admittedly naïve about the geopolitical complexities that he is stumbling into. The story begins in 1986 in Peshawar, Pakistan, where Didier kicks himself for not being savvier about all the intrigue swirling around him as he prepares to cross into Afghanistan—although it would have taken a particularly effective crystal ball to understand the situation completely.

As it turns out, Didier's innocence, openness, and eagerness to learn make him an ideal guide for us as readers. His reportage has a depth of honesty that comes from a passion for service—service to his art, first and foremost, and, second, to the mission that he has agreed to be part of: a humanitarian expedition of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). That sincerity about his work even leads Didier to make a high-risk decision, against all advice and common sense, on how to conclude his stay in Afghanistan.

At the time of this story, most Westerners saw Afghanistan simply as one of the regional theaters of the Cold War, a place where local resistance movements, backed by the CIA and by various groupings from around the Muslim world, fought the Soviet Army and its Afghan Communist allies. But we now know that it was a key turning point in the Cold War—a military overreach by the Red Army that exposed fissures in the



70-year-old Communist system, brought about the breakup of the Soviet Union, and paved the way for America's moment as the sole global superpower.

Afghanistan had been a strategic crossroads ever since the days of the Silk Road, when the valleys of the Hindu Kush were a key passage point for trading caravans shuttling between China, the Middle East, and Europe. China borders Afghanistan to its east,

while Iran lies to its west, and Pakistan to its south and east. To its north are three of the five Central Asian "Stans" (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) that were part of the Soviet Union at the time of Didier's story (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan being the other two).

During the days of the British Raj in India, the British and Russian spheres of influence collided in Afghanistan. Britain's attempt to dominate this mountainous, sparsely populated country led to protracted guerrilla wars. Afghanistan's complex ethnic and tribal makeup, as well as its history of internal strife, made it notoriously hard to control. But, because of its strategic position, foreign meddling in its affairs continued, amplifying domestic conflicts. The country finally gained full independence in 1919, establishing itself as a neutral buffer zone between neighboring empires. Afghanistan then experienced a period of stability as a monarchy, and even as a democratic parliamentary monarchy starting in the mid-1960s and continuing until a series of coups began in 1973. Against a backdrop of rising Soviet influence, power struggles between rival Marxist groups developed, and in December 1979 the Soviet Union decided to invade the country to support the faction it favored.

Hints of trouble to come

Beyond boycotting the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, there was little the United States and the West could do openly about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan without risking a dangerous escalation. Local Afghan resistance movements, which formed up in the countryside into a myriad of groups, often with competing agendas, were left to fend for themselves against the Soviet army, one of the most powerful in the world. Their prospects seemed dim. However, some four years into the conflict these groups were still putting up a tenacious fight, and they began to attract outside attention. Behind the scenes, the CIA and several other players organized covert assistance to the Afghan fighters, known as mujahideen (fighters in the jihad, or holy war).

One of the Arab players who began to rise to prominence at that time was Osama bin Laden. He came from one of the wealthiest families in Saudi Arabia: his father, originally a poor immigrant from Yemen, had built a vast construction empire with close ties to the Saudi royal family. Osama set about using the oil wealth of the Arab world to liberate the Muslim country of Afghanistan from the Soviets. By making generous donations, he gained considerable influence within the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan (at the time the Afghan refugee population, numbering over 4 million, was the largest in the world), and he supported Pakistan-based fighters. Bin Laden's project was facilitated by the CIA, through the Pakistani secret service, the Inter-Services Intelligence. This was not the only dangerous alliance that the logic of the Cold War led the United States and its allies to entertain, but it is probably the one that has had the most grievous consequences for America.

Foreshadowing trouble that would come later, a member of the MSF team explains to Didier that their mission has to seek protection from warlords*; otherwise its members would be at the mercy not only of bandits, but also of Wahhabi fundamentalists, who have infiltrated the region of Nuristan.



Wahhabism is the deeply conservative interpretation of Sunni Islam that is dominant in Saudi Arabia, and this passage refers to the violent, militant element within it (not yet organized into Al Qaeda, the founding of which is generally dated around 1988). The worldview of these extremists centered on an all-out war between Muslims and non-Muslims, thus even health workers from the West could become targets.

Life under the Taliban

As difficult as the situation in Afghanistan was at the time of Didier's story, we now know that it took a turn for the worse in the following years. The Soviet Union's eventual withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 did not lead to harmonious sharing of power. Instead, the unstable anti-Soviet Afghan alliance dissolved, and

* This is one instance where Didier's account is inaccurate regarding one important detail: he recalled that the warlord's protection was bought with a *baksheesh*, a bribe. In fact, Aider Shah was acting out of gratitude and respect for the work that had been done in his region in the 1960s by Jacques Fournot, an engineer with the United Nations Development Program, and the father of Juliette Fournot, the leader of the MSF expedition. See the Portraits section at the end of book for more about this.

fighting resumed among the many different factions: ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in the north, Pushtuns in the south, and minorities like the Hazara, a Shiite group, plus political, tribal, and personal rivalries within each of the groups and parties. Afghanistan became a failed state between 1991 and 1996, to the point that many Afghans, even liberal-minded ones, welcomed the eventual victory of the Taliban: they saw that faction's control over most of the country as the only way of restoring law and order and eliminating drug-financed warlordism.

Because the Taliban movement was not monolithic, many hoped that the more pragmatic elements within it would prevail, as they did for a time and in some provinces. However, the government in the capital city of Kabul came more and more under the ideological sway of foreign elements, particularly Al Qaeda, and drifted toward increasingly repressive policies that caused dismay around the world. Women and girls were denied any professional or educational opportunity. Club-wielding thugs from the "Ministry of the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue" enforced a long list of prohibitions, from music to chess. And the unique giant Buddhas of Bamiyan Valley, which had stood for 1,500 years as one of the great wonders along the Silk Road, were dynamited in 2001.

The Taliban did curb opium production, but this was achieved only through authoritarian control, without creating viable alternative livelihoods for farmers. This meant that the drug economy promptly bounced back after the fall of the Taliban, and today 90 percent of the world's opium comes from Afghanistan. Crop substitution remains a daunting challenge to this day, for multiple reasons. Much of the country's good agricultural land is heavily contaminated by landmines, which continue to maim and kill farmers and their families. With arable land so limited, the opium poppy is not only far more profitable than perishable crops; once harvested, it can also be stored when the roads are unsafe.



Probably no American needs reminding that it was the Taliban's harboring of Al Qaeda at the time of the attacks of September 11, 2001, that led to their downfall at the hands of the US and its allies of the Northern Alliance. This coalition (also known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan), dominated by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, had just lost its foremost leader, Ahmad Shah

Massoud, a hero of the resistance to the Soviets and a leader of truly national stature. He is referred to a few times in the course of this story, since he was based in Panjshir Valley, next to Badakhshan, where the MSF team worked. Massoud, “The Lion of Panjshir Valley,” was murdered by Al Qaeda suicide bombers posing as journalists, on September 9, 2001, two days before the attacks on New York and Washington.

The humanitarian mission

Long before these events, in the fall of 1986, the MSF team that we follow in *The Photographer* set out to build a hospital, and also to staff one that had been set up by the previous mission. It was a dangerous expedition. The team ran the risk of being bombed or captured by Soviet forces or of running afoul of rivalries among the various factions of the Afghan resistance. Incredibly, the whole endeavor was helmed by a young French woman. This unexpected leader, Dr. Juliette Fournot, has a fascinating discussion with Didier on her work and the meaning of gender in Afghanistan, which is bound to make many readers question their assumptions about Afghan society.



Dr. Fournot, who had firsthand knowledge of the country and culture and fluent command of its Dari Persian language* thanks to having spent her teenage years in Afghanistan, had assembled an exceptional team to do important work, against long odds, to help alleviate some of the Afghan population’s suffering. Sadly, we learn from the historical update in the Profiles section at the end of the book that those odds lengthened in subsequent years, with international and national aid workers becoming targets of attack. Finally, after the murder of five of its staff in Baghdis province in June 2004, MSF considered the risks too extreme and pulled out of the country, although the organization is currently seeking to return given the deteriorating humanitarian situation.

* Afghan Persian, known as Dari, is a close relative both of Tajik and of Iranian Persian (sometimes called Farsi). The lettering of the Persian-language dialogue in *The Photographer* was done by none other than Marjane Satrapi, the acclaimed Iranian author of the graphic novel and animated film *Persepolis*.

Médecins Sans Frontières, as the group is known in French, was founded in 1971 by a dozen French doctors and medical journalists, several of whom had witnessed atrocities in the southern Nigerian state of Biafra during a failed secession in 1968-69. Driven by the urge to go wherever medical and humanitarian needs are greatest, MSF grew from its French beginnings into an international organization, now providing aid in nearly 60 countries. It was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999.

Witnessing an MSF mission in a war zone, as we do reading *The Photographer*, is a humbling experience. The members of the MSF team demonstrate a thorough knowledge of Afghanistan's culture and circumstances, and it is clear that an astonishing amount of preparation went into making a dangerous undertaking take shape as safely and peacefully as possible. Didier is struck by how Robert, a French doctor, can look and sound more Afghan than the Afghans, and he delights in photographing the complex negotiations for the purchases of the expedition's horses and mules, conducted in an elaborately coded sign language. The photojournalist also notes how the team defers to local hierarchy by taking hours to thoroughly examine the paralyzed arm of a regional leader, even though there is no hope of treating it.



We see the team endure many tribulations in this mission, and we hear even more recounted. We can only marvel, as Didier does, at their seemingly limitless drive and determination. When Didier feels unable to go on, either because of physical fatigue from climbing mountain peaks or from the psychological strain of seeing children injured when a village is bombed, he draws strength from the example provided by the doctors and nurses around him. What fuels them seems to be both a profound respect and love for the people of Afghanistan, and a belief in the importance of their work.



This dedication is evident both in Didier's remarkable photographs and in Emmanuel Guibert's art, which seamlessly completes the narrative around the pictures and gives them further depth and meaning. Through the alchemy of this rare collaboration, *The Photographer* ushers us into a deeper understanding of a fascinating country and a truer appreciation of humanitarian workers who risk their lives in the service of others.

*

In 2007, the life of the talented and empathetic photographer Didier Lefevre was cut short at the age of 49, just as his work was starting to reach a wide audience.

Alexis Siegel
New York City, 2008







Part 1





I SAY GOOD-BYE TO EVERYONE. TO THE FOLKS AT MSF.



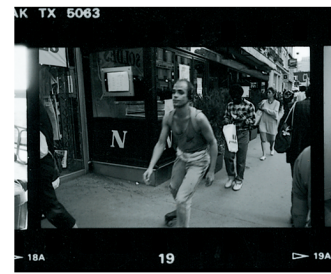
TO MY MOM, WHO IS MOVING INTO A NEW HOME IN BLONVILLE, NORMANDY.

TO MY GRANDMOTHER, AND TO HER DOG, BIENCHEN.

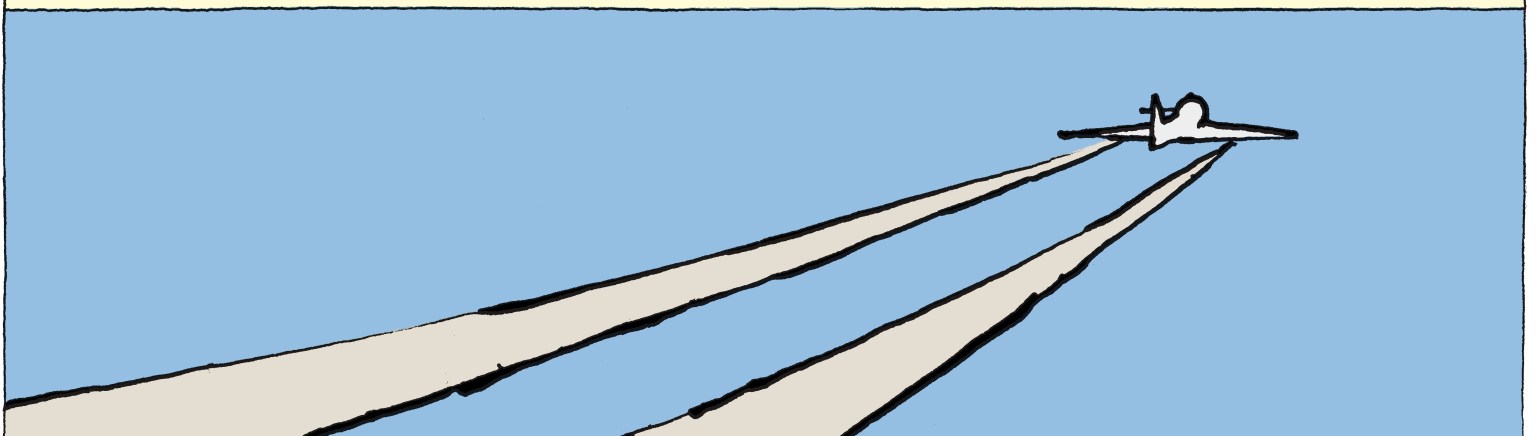


IN THE PARIS APARTMENT THAT MY MOM HAS JUST MOVED OUT OF, I TAKE PICTURES OF THE HI-FI SYSTEM LEFT ALL ALONE.

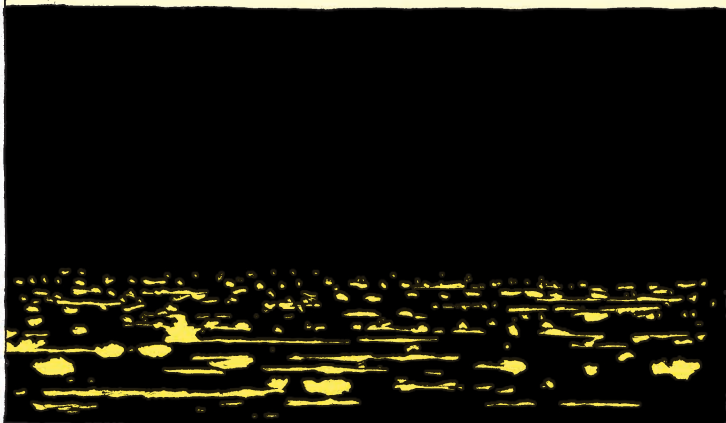
AND THAT'S IT. FAREWELL, PARIS.



IT'S THE END OF JULY 1986. I GET ON THE PLANE AND TAKE OFF.



WE HAVE A NIGHTTIME LAYOVER IN KARACHI, PAKISTAN, FOR ABOUT TEN HOURS.



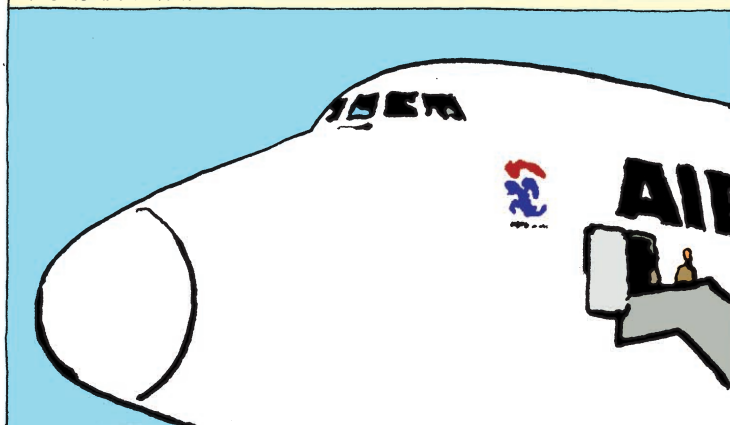
I HEAD TO A HOTEL NEXT TO THE AIRPORT. THE COST OF THE ROOM IS INCLUDED IN THE PLANE TICKET.



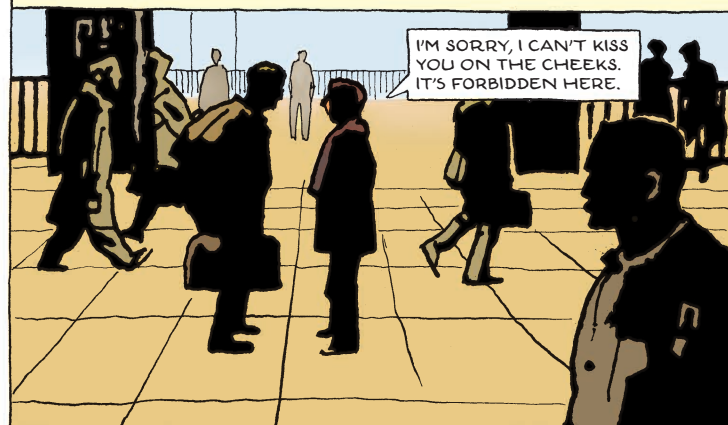
A LOUSY NIGHT'S SLEEP, TOO SHORT. I TAKE TWO PICTURES OF MYSELF IN THE MIRROR. THOSE ARE MY FIRST SHOTS FROM THE TRIP.



THE NEXT DAY I LAND IN PESHAWAR, IN NORTHWEST PAKISTAN. IT'S REALLY HOT.



A WOMAN FROM MSF COMES TO PICK ME UP.



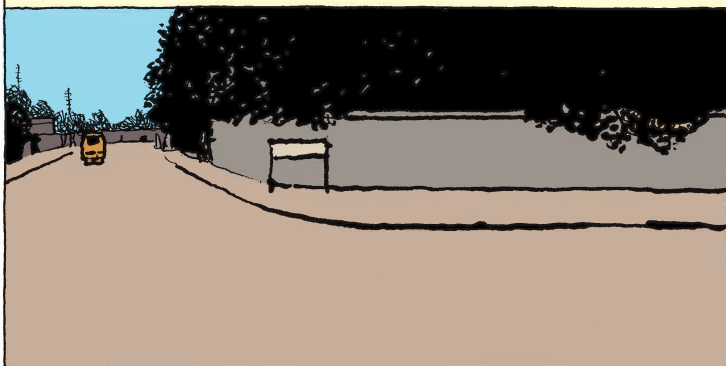
HER NAME'S SYLVIE AND SHE'S A NURSE. APPARENTLY THE AFGHANS CALL HER "BATCHA"—"THE LITTLE BOY."



I DUMP MY THINGS IN A RICKSHAW, WHICH TAKES US TO UNIVERSITY TOWN.



WE GO THROUGH WIDE STREETS BETWEEN COLONIAL-
STYLE HOUSES WITH PARKS AND GARDENS, IN THE PLEASANT
RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD AROUND THE UNIVERSITY.



WE GET TO THE MSF HOUSE. ARMED GUARD ON DUTY.



I'M GIVEN A MATTRESS IN A
CORNER OF A ROOM.



IT'S LATE AFTERNOON.
EVERYONE'S COMING BACK
TO HAVE A DRINK AND
TAKE A SHOWER. I MEET
UP WITH A NUMBER OF
PEOPLE I KNOW.

JULIETTE, THE HEAD OF OUR MISSION.



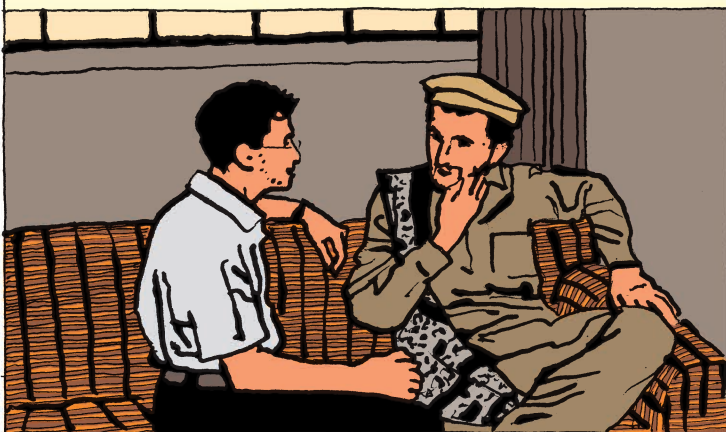
JOHN, A SURGEON.



ROBERT, A DOCTOR.



RÉGIS, A NURSE-ANESTHESIOLOGIST.

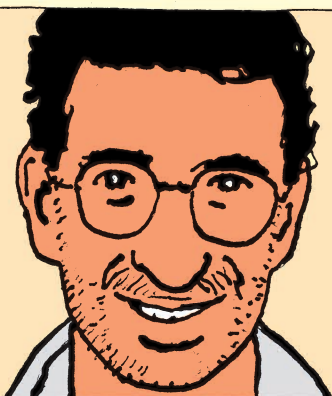


I'M INTRODUCED TO MAHMAD, AN AFGHAN WHO'LL BE OUR GUIDE
AND INTERPRETER.



ALL THE GUYS HAVE BEARDS. I STARTED LETTING MINE GROW IN FRANCE, BUT THE RESULTS AREN'T TOO IMPRESSIVE YET.

YUP,
THAT'S
ME.



THE PHOTOGRAPHER

A story lived, photographed,
and told by DIDIER LEFÈVRE

Written and drawn by
EMMANUEL GUIBERT

Laid out and colored by
FRÉDÉRIC LEMERCIER

CLICK.

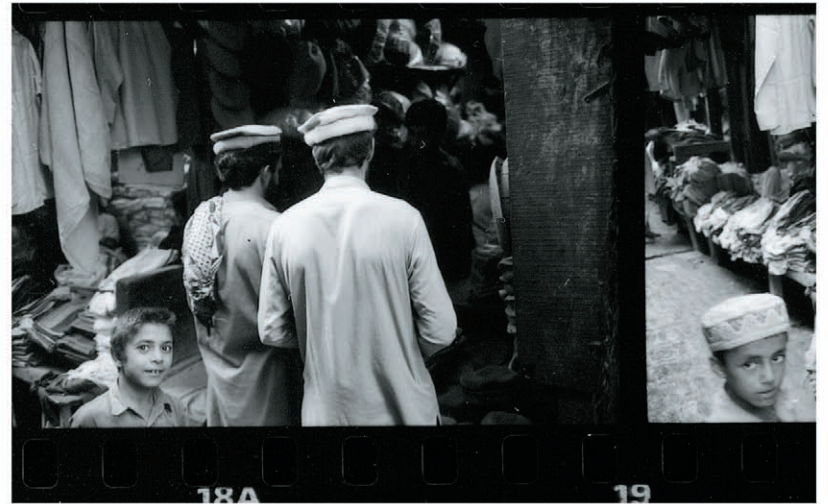
Translated from the French
by ALEXIS SIEGEL

PESHAWAR'S BEAUTIFUL—A TRUE CITY OF THE EAST, TEEMING WITH PEOPLE, NOISY, POLLUTED, WITH NONSTOP TRAFFIC: BRRRMMM, BRRRMMM...



EVERYTHING'S INTENSE: SMELLS ARE STRONG, NOISES ARE LOUD, CROWDS ARE HUGE, THE MIDDAY HOURS ARE UNBEARABLY HOT. IN WESTERN DRESS YOU SIMPLY CAN'T COPE.

ROBERT AND RÉGIS IMMEDIATELY TAKE ME TO A TAILOR.



HE TAKES MY MEASUREMENTS. BY THE NEXT DAY, HE'LL MAKE ME A FULL SET OF CLOTHING, INCLUDING PANTS, A VERY LONG SHIRT, A VEST, A HAT, A SCARF, SHOES, AND THE FAMOUS AFGHAN BLANKET CALLED A PATOO. HERE PEOPLE DON'T WEAR UNDERWEAR.



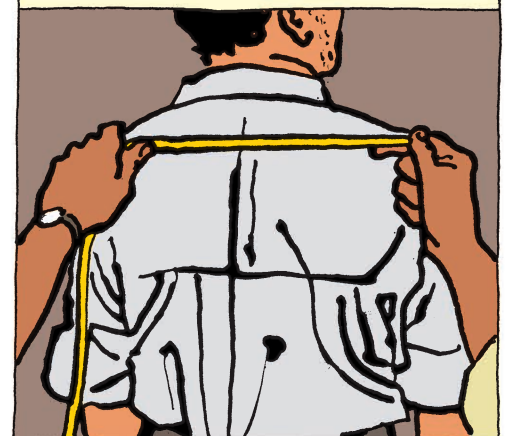
HE MAKES THREE OF EACH ITEM SO I'LL ALWAYS HAVE A CHANGE OF CLOTHES. IT COSTS PEANUTS AND THERE ARE A NUMBER OF BENEFITS TO DRESSING IN THE FLOWING AFGHAN STYLE. FIRST, I'LL BE COMFORTABLE.

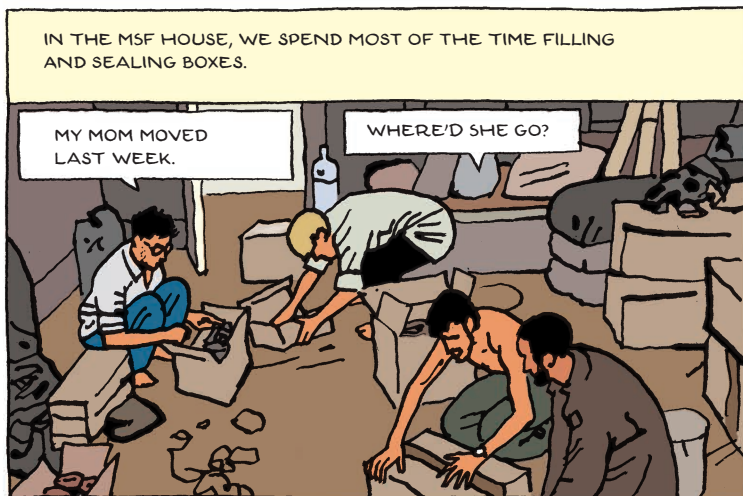


SECOND, I'LL CONFORM TO ISLAMIC STANDARDS OF DECENCY BY WEARING LONG CLOTHING THAT CONCEALS THE BODY WELL.



THIRD, I'LL BLEND INTO THE CROWD.





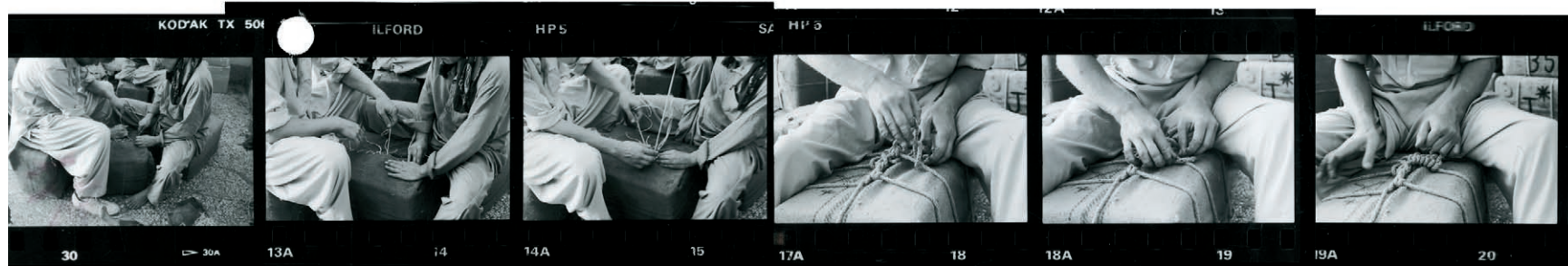
YOU HAVE TO FILL EACH BOX PERFECTLY, NOT LEAVING THE TINIEST BIT OF EMPTY SPACE: WITH THE BATTERING THOSE BOXES WILL TAKE DURING THE EXPEDITION, THE CONTENTS OF A PACK OF PILLS COULD ARRIVE CRUSHED TO A FINE POWDER IF THEY WERE TO SHIFT EVEN SLIGHTLY.



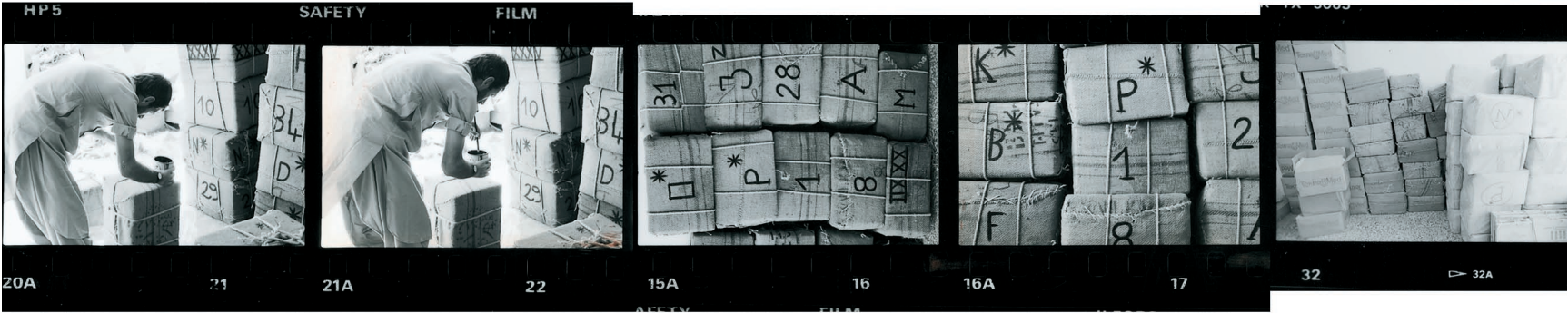
IN CASE A BOX FALLS INTO A RIVER (THIS DOES HAPPEN), EVERYTHING HAS TO BE CAREFULLY WRAPPED IN A WATERPROOF TARP.



THEN WRAPPED IN BURLAP CLOTH, SEWN UP, TIED UP.



FINALLY, EACH BOX IS NUMBERED AND STORED.



IT TAKES DAYS. AFGHAN STAFFERS HELP US. SOMETIMES WE GET BREAKS.



I GET HAZED. THEY WRAP ME FROM HEAD TO TOE IN PACKING TAPE AND SHOOT DOZENS OF PICTURES OF ME WITH MY OWN CAMERA.



ONE NIGHT A BLACKOUT HITS UNIVERSITY TOWN...



THE AIR CONDITIONING STOPS. WITHIN MINUTES THE TEMPERATURE CLIMBS TO 120°F.



THE FOLLOWING MONTH WE'LL BE IN AFGHANISTAN. FOR WEEKS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN WARNING ME THAT IT'LL BE TOUGH. I'M 29, IN GOOD SHAPE. I'VE DONE PLENTY OF HIKING IN MY LIFE. I'M PRETTY RESILIENT AND I CAN PUT UP WITH A LOT.



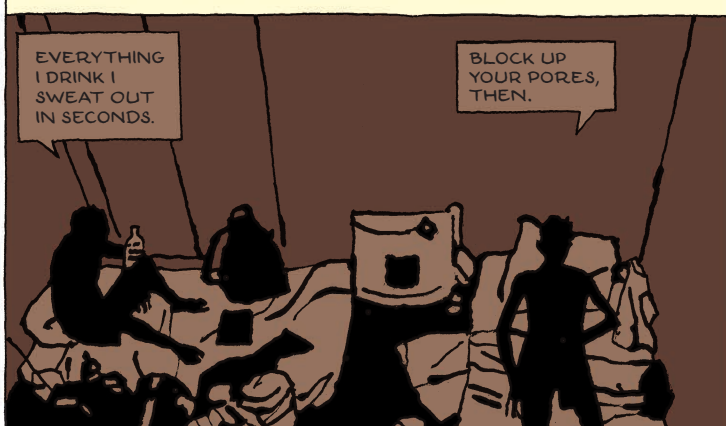
BUT THIS WILL INVOLVE CROSSING FIFTEEN MOUNTAIN PASSES OVER 16,000 FEET HIGH, ON FOOT.



AFGHANISTAN IS AT WAR. ON ONE SIDE YOU HAVE THE INVADING SOVIET FORCES AND THE ARMY OF THE COMMUNIST GOVERNMENT IN KABUL, AND ON THE OTHER ARE THE MUJAHIDEEN, THE RESISTANCE.



IN THE MIDDLE ARE THE HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS.



MSF HAS HIRED ME TO DO PHOTO-REPORTAGE ON A CARAVAN THAT'S GOING INTO THE REGION OF BADAKHSHAN IN NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN, NEAR THE CITY OF FEYZABAD.



JULIETTE, JOHN, ROBERT, RÉGIS, MAHMAD, AND OTHERS HAVE BEEN PREPARING THE EXPEDITION FOR MONTHS. THE AIM IS TO REACH A SMALL FIELD HOSPITAL IN ONE VALLEY AND GO CREATE ANOTHER ONE FARTHER ALONG.



WE HAVE TO PUT TOGETHER THE CARAVAN, BUY THE DONKEYS AND HORSES, AND HIRE THE ESCORT. THAT WILL BE THE WORK OF THE NEXT MONTH. AFTER THAT, WE'LL SET OFF.



IF WE COULD TAKE VEHICLES AND GO ON THE ROADS, THAT TRIP WOULD BE A DAY'S EXPEDITION. BUT THE ROADS ARE HELD BY THE GOVERNMENT ARMY AND THE RUSSIANS.



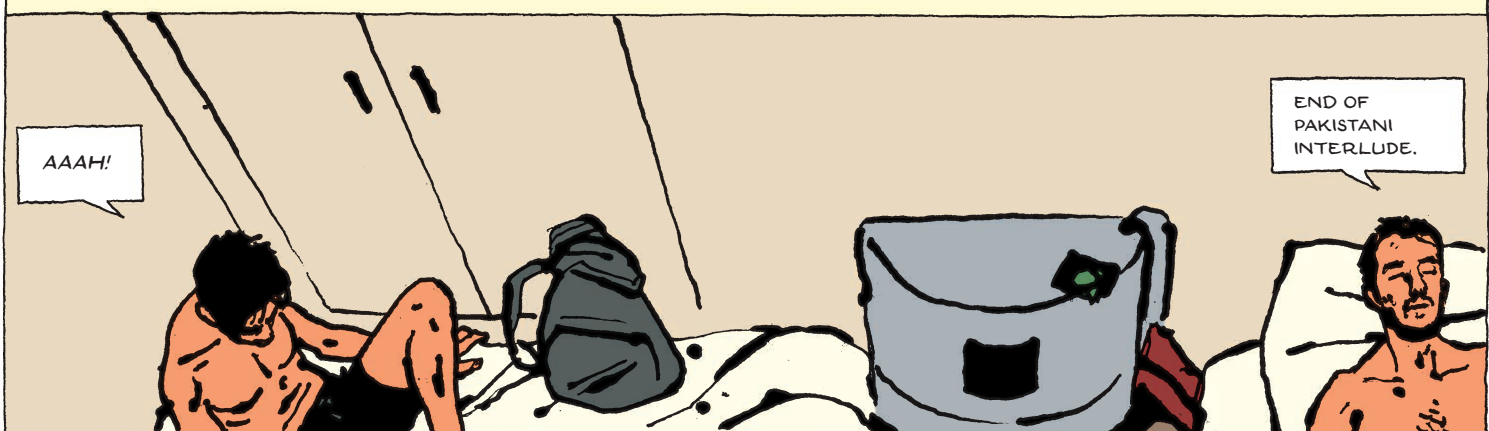
CUTTING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS AND GOING AROUND SENTRY POSTS WILL TAKE US THREE WEEKS, IF ALL GOES WELL.



WILL I BE UP TO IT?



ALLAH BLESS DIESEL GENERATORS.



GOING THROUGH PESHAWAR, I REALIZE THAT THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN IS GLOBAL, BECAUSE THE ENTIRE WORLD IS HERE.



FIRST OF ALL, IT'S TEEMING WITH AFGHANS. A RICKSHAW DRIVEN BY AN AFGHAN AND LOADED DOWN WITH FIVE OTHER AFGHANS PROVIDES A PRETTY GOOD SUMMARY OF THE SITUATION: PESHAWAR IS OVERFLOWING WITH AFGHANS.



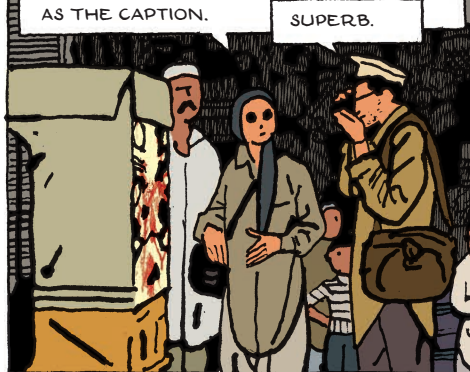
THERE ARE REFUGEES ALL OVER THE PLACE. THEY LIVE IN HUGE CAMPS SURROUNDING THE CITY. THEY DO EVERY IMAGINABLE JOB.



DID HE PAINT HIS RICKSHAW HIMSELF?

I'LL ASK HIM.

NO, HE SAYS A FRIEND OF HIS PAINTED IT. HE'S A TAJIK, SO HE ORDERED A PORTRAIT OF MASSOUD WITH "THE LION OF PANJSHIR VALLEY" AS THE CAPTION.



SUPERB.

THE HEAD OF MASSOUD HAS BEEN STUCK ON THE BODY OF RAMBO, WITH A HUGE MACHINE GUN AND BLOOD ALL OVER THE PLACE.



VERONIQUE, FROM REUTERS:



AT FIRST, YOU ALWAYS GIVE THEM TOO MUCH.

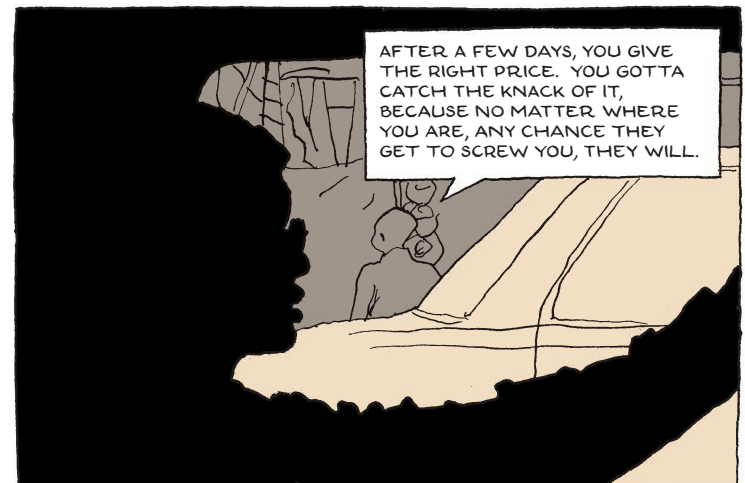


YOU HAVE A GOOD TRIP AND YOU PULL OUT FIVE BILLS, THE GUY'S HAPPY, HE BEAMS A BIG SMILE, TAKES THE CASH AND SPLITS. YOU PAID TOO MUCH.

THE NEXT TIME, YOU ASSESS THINGS MORE CAREFULLY: ONE BILL. AGAIN, THE GUY'S HAPPY, DOESN'T HAGGLE. CHANCES ARE YOU OVERPAID AGAIN.



AFTER A FEW DAYS, YOU GIVE THE RIGHT PRICE. YOU GOTTA CATCH THE KNACK OF IT, BECAUSE NO MATTER WHERE YOU ARE, ANY CHANCE THEY GET TO SCREW YOU, THEY WILL.



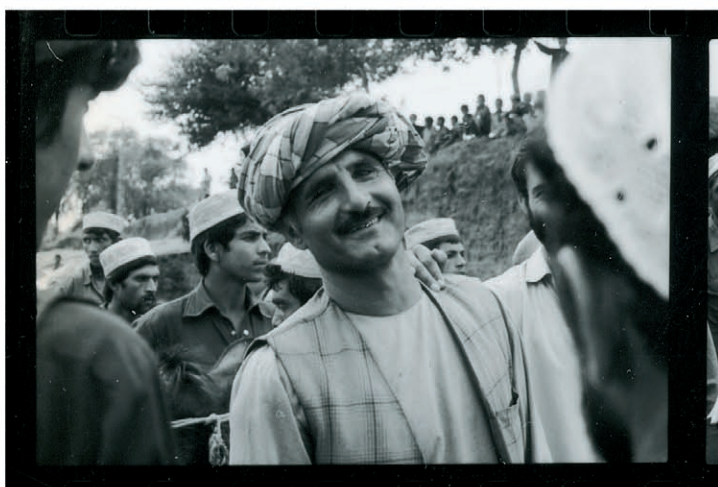
THE HORSE AND DONKEY MARKETS ARE INSIDE THE REFUGEE CAMPS.



WE CHOOSE THE ANIMALS THAT WE'LL BE TAKING ALONG: ABOUT A HUNDRED DONKEYS AND TWENTY HORSES.

MSF HAS SOME TRUSTED AFGHAN OVERSEERS.

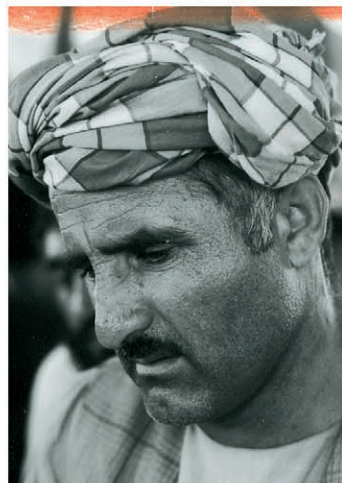
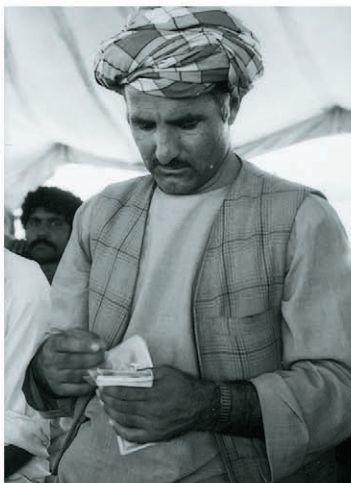
THIS GUY, FOR EXAMPLE, IS ONE OF THEM—A REALLY BURLY MAN, A PALAWAN. THE STRENGTH OF THESE GUYS IS UNBELIEVABLE. SO IS THE RESPECT THEY ENJOY IN AFGHANISTAN.



THEY ARE OFTEN PLAYERS OF BUZKASHI, THE NATIONAL SPORT. IT'S PLAYED ON HORSEBACK. THE PLAYERS FIGHT OVER A DECAPITATED CALF WEIGHING 80 TO 100 POUNDS, WHICH THEY HOLD UP AT ARM'S LENGTH.

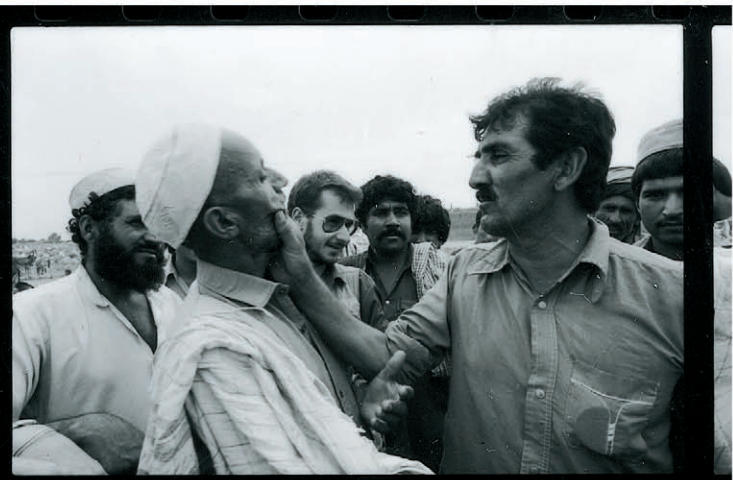


AND SPEAKING OF THOSE ARMS, THEY DON'T NARROW AT THE WRIST AT ALL. THEY'RE TREE TRUNKS.



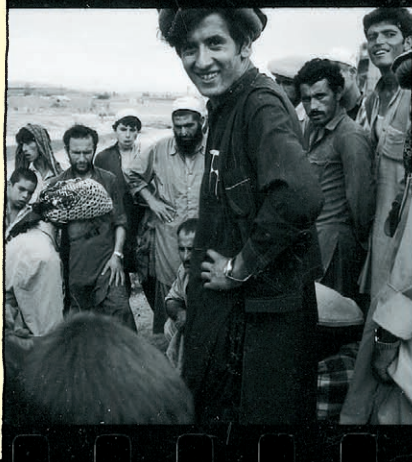
I WATCH NEGOTIATIONS. THE SELLER AND BUYER GRAB EACH OTHER'S HANDS. A SORT OF UMPIRE PRESIDES OVER THE EXCHANGES. TO KEEP THE NEGOTIATION SECRET, THE MEN SOMETIMES COVER THEIR HANDS WITH A CLOTH. THEN THEY TALK BY MOVEMENTS AND PRESSURE OF THE FINGERS. ONE MAN'S FINGERS OFFER SUMS, THE OTHER MAN'S FINGERS ACCEPT OR REFUSE THEM. IT'S A CODE AMONG THEM, A LANGUAGE, WITH LOOKS AND FACIAL EXPRESSIONS ADDING A FURTHER LAYER. AT TIMES, YOU SEE ONE OF THEM TEAR AWAY HIS HAND BECAUSE THE PROPOSAL THAT WAS JUST MADE IS INTOLERABLE. FIELD DAY FOR A PHOTOGRAPHER.







JULIETTE INTRODUCES ME TO THIS BOY. HE IS THE SON OF THE WAKIL, A SORT OF REPRESENTATIVE OF BADAKHSHAN, THE REGION WHERE WE'RE GOING.



HE'S JUST A KID, BUT SINCE HIS FATHER IS A BIGWIG, HE ALREADY HAS THE RANK OF COMMANDER.

ESSALAAM.

SALAMA-LEYKOOM.



OUR CARAVAN WILL BE DIPLOMATICALLY CORRECT, WITH PEOPLE FROM THE TWO VALLEYS WHERE WE ARE GOING, YAF TAL AND TESHKAN. THIS IS ABDUL JABAR, FROM TESHKAN.

ESSALAAM.

SALAMA-LEYKOOM.



AND NAJMUDIN, FROM YAF TAL. THEY ARE THE TWO GROUP LEADERS. I EXPECTED THEM TO CRUSH MY HAND, BUT NO, THEY MERELY TOUCH IT.

ESSALAAM.

SALAMA-LEYKOOM.



ARE YOU PLEASED WITH YOUR PURCHASES?

YES, I THINK WE'LL HAVE SOME GOOD ANIMALS.



BUT BUYING THEM'S NOT ENOUGH. WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE SURE THAT THE ANIMALS WE BOUGHT ARE THE ONES THAT GET BROUGHT TO THE BORDER. WE'LL KEEP OUR EYES PEELED.



AND WE'LL ALSO HAVE TO CHECK THAT WE CAN RIDE THEM. SO DO ME A FAVOR AND GET ON THIS ONE.

RIGHT NOW?

RIGHT NOW.

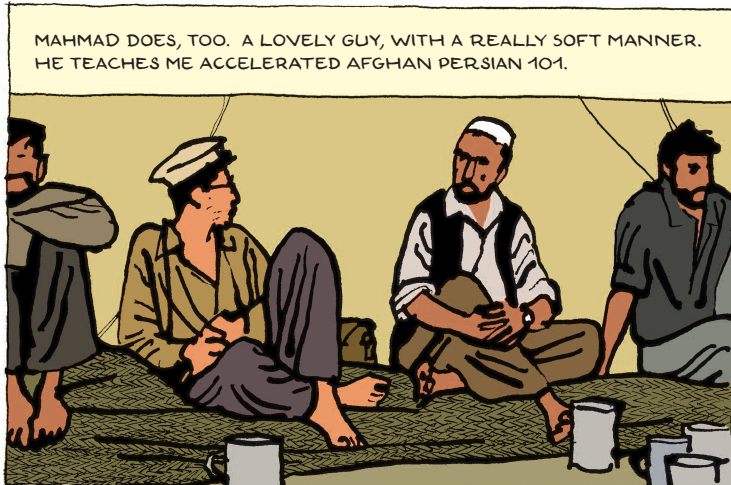
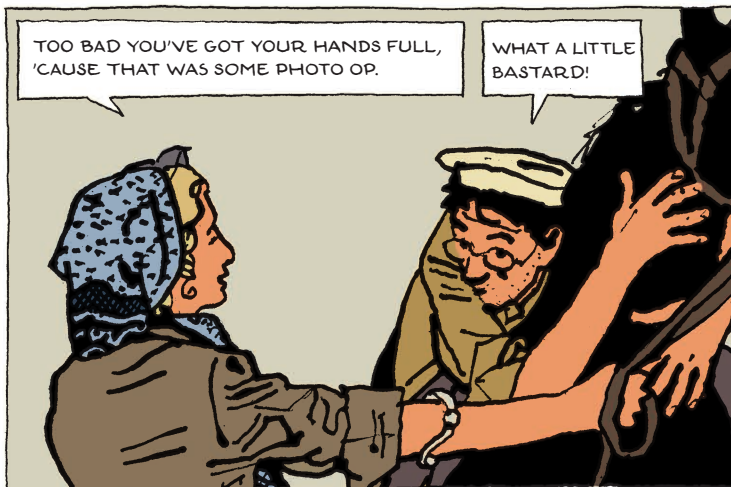


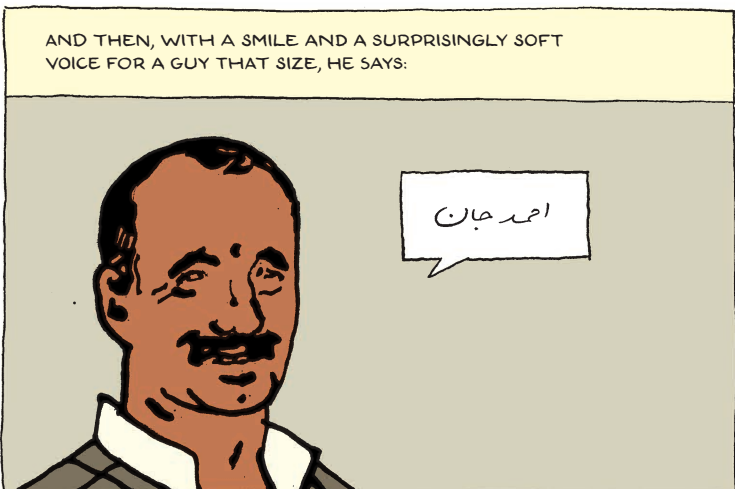
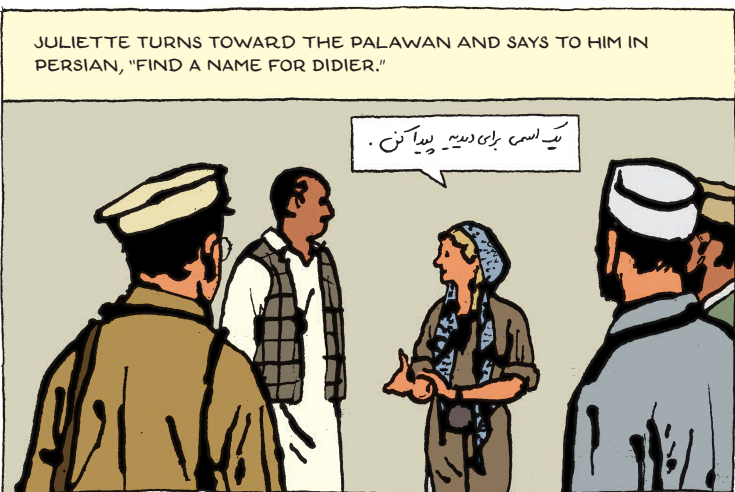
HE'S A NICE LITTLE HORSE, BUT NERVOUS. HE DOESN'T OBEY AT ALL.

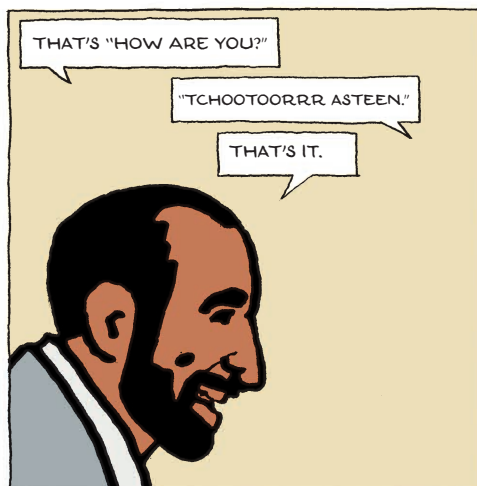
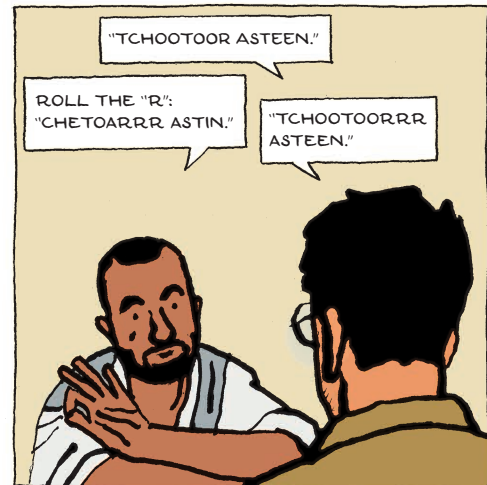
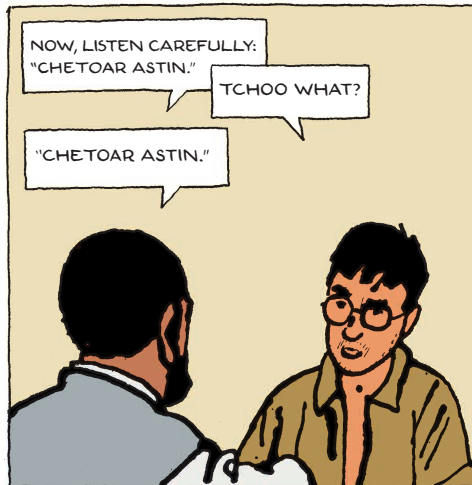
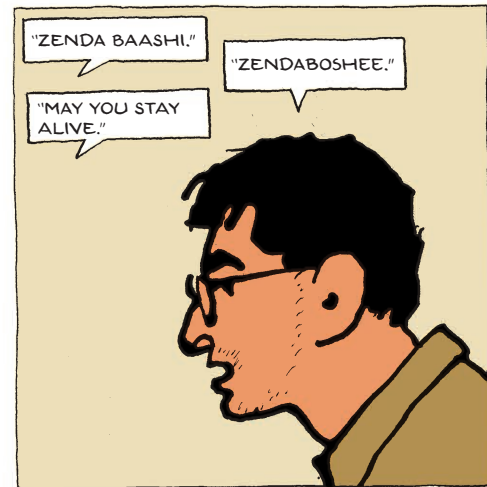
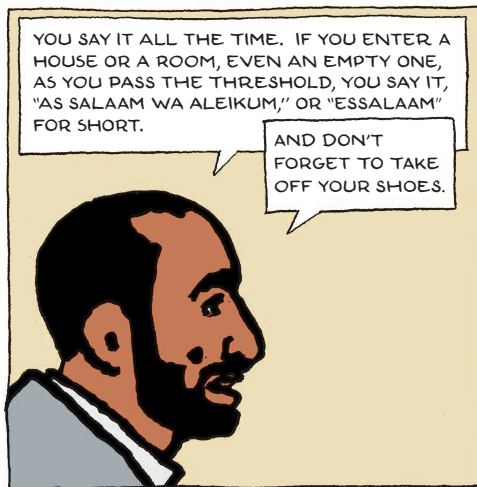
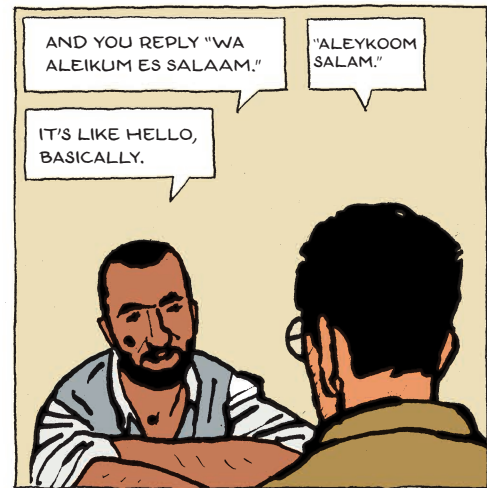
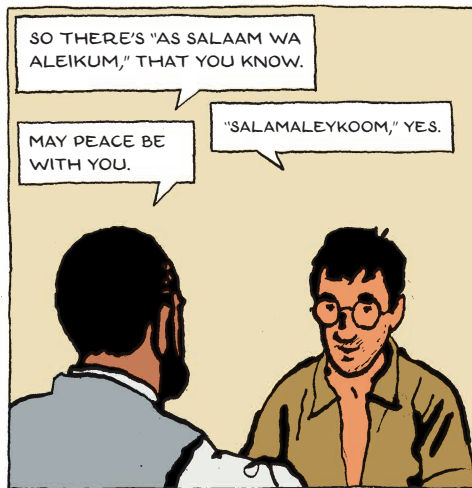
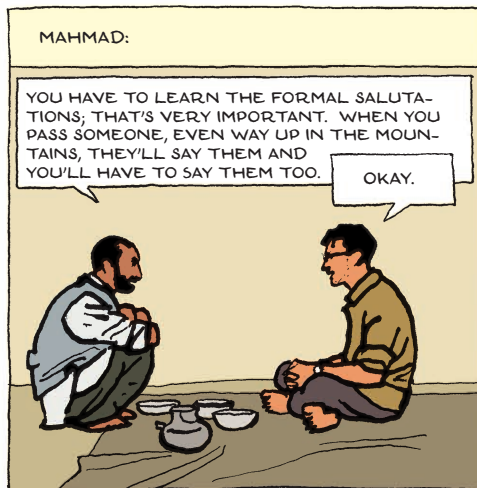


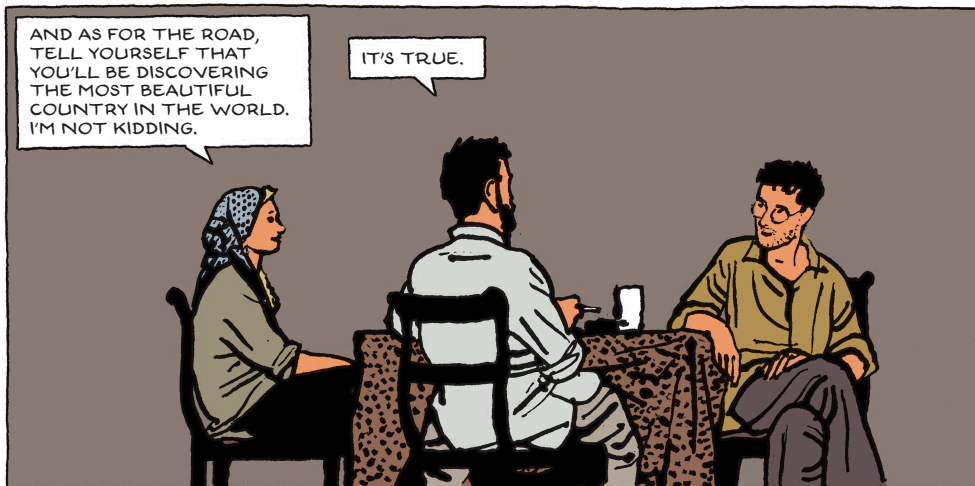
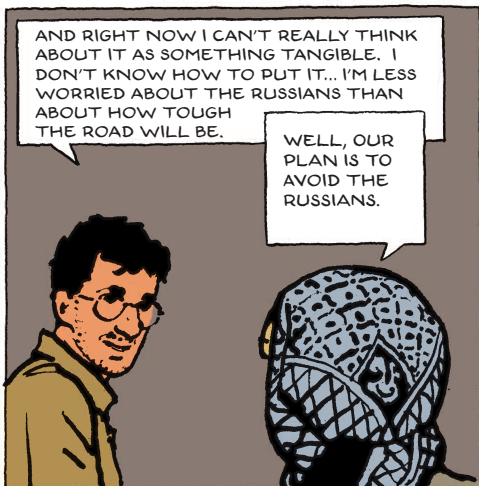
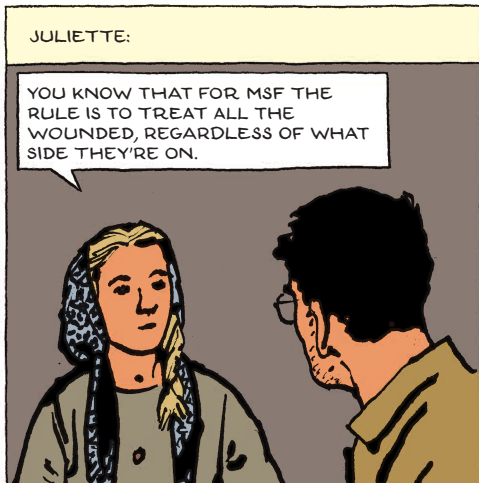
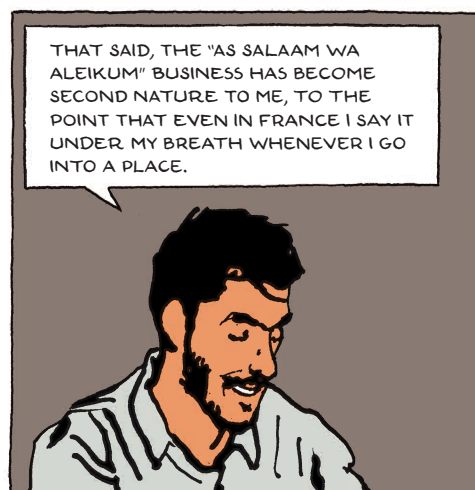
HE DOESN'T WANT TO GO WHERE I WANT HIM TO.

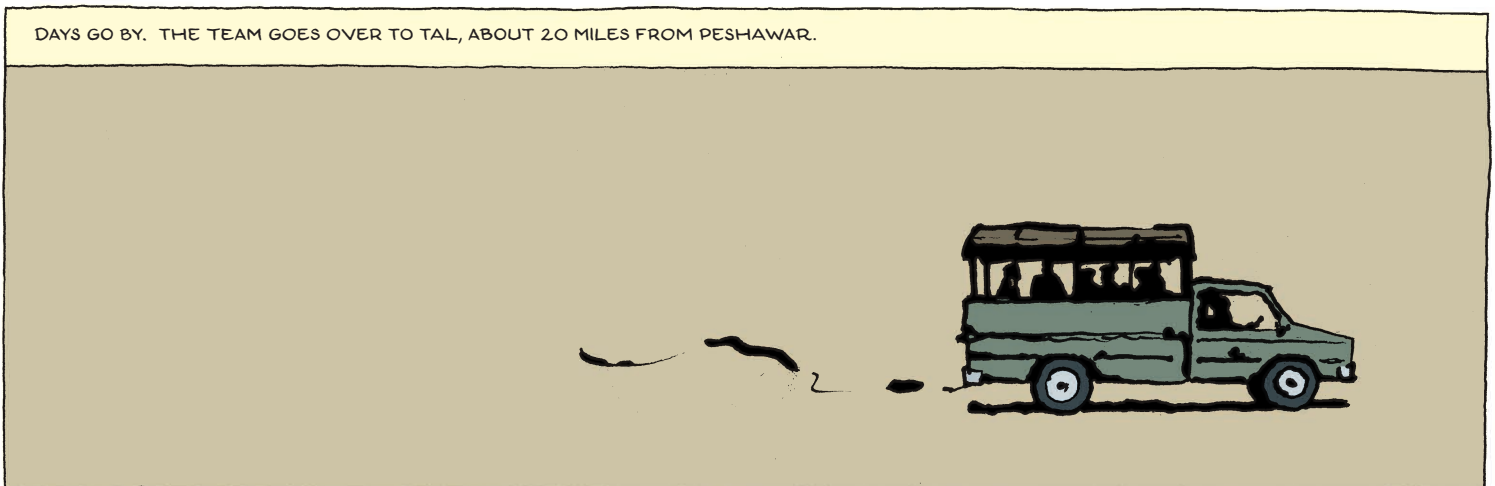
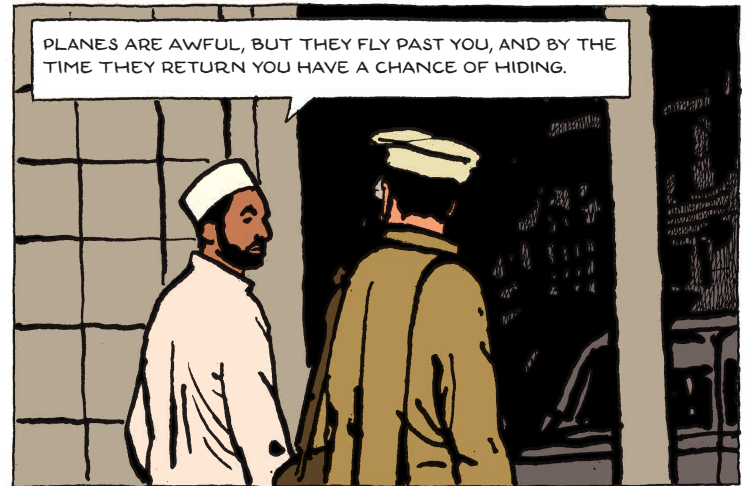


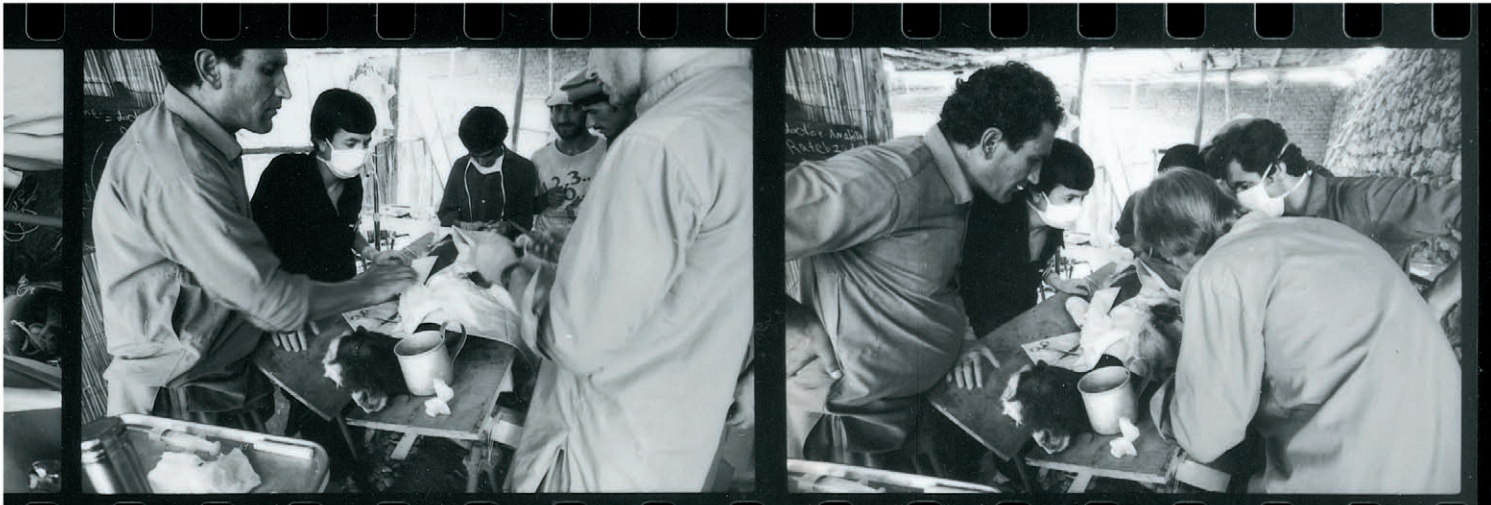




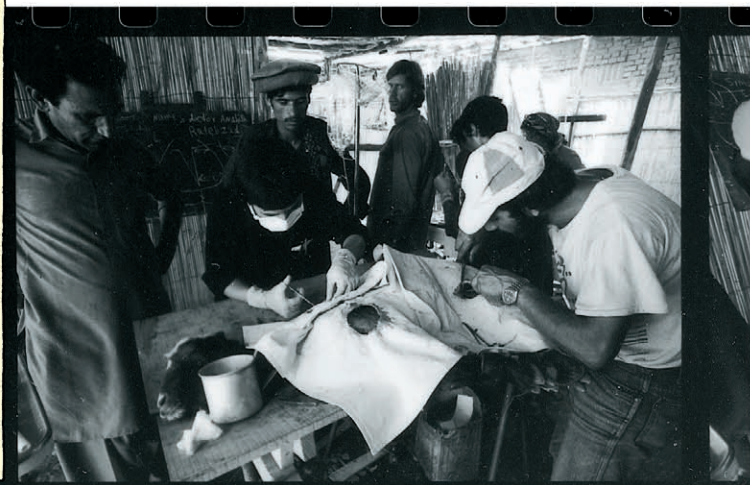








AFGHAN TRAINEE NURSES ARE BEING TAUGHT SURGERY, BY PRACTICING ON GOATS.



BACK TO PESHAWAR.



I SAID THE CITY IS TEEMING WITH AFGHANS. IT'S ALSO TEEMING WITH ADVENTURERS, MERCENARIES, POTHEADS, AND FUNDAMENTALISTS COMING TO PICK UP SOME TRAINING IN WAR.



I MEET A LOT OF WEIRD CHARACTERS THAT LEAVE YOU SCRATCHING YOUR HEAD. FOR EXAMPLE, THIS GUY, A PATHOLOGICAL LIAR WHO SHOWS UP FOR DINNER ONE EVENING AT THE MSF HOUSE.



HE'S YOUNG, WITH A MARINE-TYPE CREW CUT, AND IS WITH ANOTHER KID WHO IS COMPLETELY DEVOTED TO HIM (I'M TOLD HE GETS A NEW ONE FOR EACH TRIP).



HE FIRST INTRODUCES HIMSELF AS A PHOTOGRAPHER, BUT PRETTY QUICKLY EXPLAINS THAT WHAT HE'S AFTER IS PICKING UP A GUN AND GETTING TO SEE SOME ACTION.



THE BIG THING IS HATRED OF COMMUNISM. IT ATTRACTS MILITARY TRAINERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD. THEY COME TO TRAIN THE AFGHANS AND WHOEVER WANTS TO FIGHT THE RUSSIANS — SAUDIS, SUDANESE, ALGERIANS, AND SO ON.

RÉGIS:

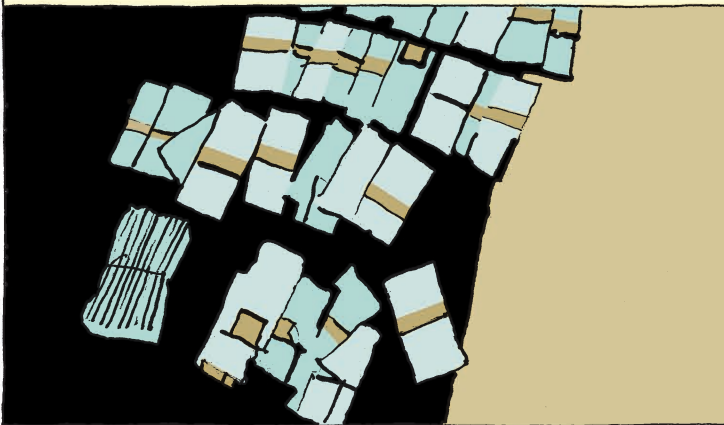
I HEAR THERE'S EVEN A JAPANESE GUY WHO'S BUSY TEACHING MARTIAL ARTS TO THE MUJ'.



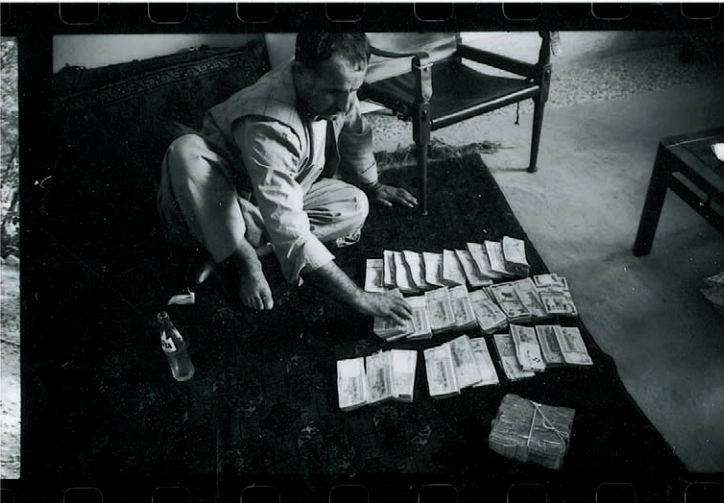
DOZENS OF SO-CALLED NGOS USE THE COVER OF HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES TO PURSUE ESPIONAGE, WAR, OR DIPLOMACY. SOME HAVE A PRETTY SIMPLISTIC VIEW OF THINGS: THEIR JOB CONSISTS OF LOADING BAGS FULL OF BANKNOTES ONTO DONKEYS, CROSSING INTO AFGHANISTAN, AND DISTRIBUTING THE MONEY IN VILLAGES. A PRETTY CRUDE FORM OF ASSISTANCE.



THERE'S PLENTY OF MONEY SLOSHING AROUND IN PESHAWAR.



THAT'S OUR MONEY, THE CASH FOR THE EXPEDITION. ENOUGH FOR EVERYONE TO LIVE ON FOR THREE MONTHS IN AFGHANISTAN. OUR PALAWAN COUNTS IT UP. THEN, LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE, IT GETS WRAPPED IN PLASTIC AND, ON THE DAY WE START OUT, SHARED OUT AMONG US.



IT'S ALL A JUMBLE OF THINGS THAT I SEE, HEAR, FEEL, GUESS AT, BUT HAVE TROUBLE ANALYZING. I'M NOT DETACHED ENOUGH, AND MY KNOWLEDGE OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICS IS TOO LIMITED. I WALK AROUND, TAKE MY PICTURES, WAIT FOR THE DAY OF DEPARTURE. I FIND IT INTERESTING TO BE IN THE THICK OF THIS GIANT MESS OF A BAZAAR.



THERE'S ONE PLACE THAT SUMS UP THE SITUATION PRETTY WELL: THE AMERICAN CLUB. JOHN BRINGS US THERE ONE EVENING.



IT'S A BEAUTIFUL, WELL GUARDED HOUSE WITH A BEAUTIFUL GARDEN, IN A BEAUTIFUL NEIGHBORHOOD.



TO GET IN, YOU HAVE TO BE AMERICAN OR ACCOMPANIED BY AN AMERICAN. THE RESTAURANT IS DOWNSTAIRS.



WHEN WE FEEL LIKE EATING WESTERN FOOD, WE'LL GO TO THE AMERICAN CLUB. SINCE MY ARRIVAL, I'VE EATEN AFGHAN, PAKISTANI, EVEN A BIT OF CHINESE. THAT EVENING, IT'S AMERICAN PIZZA, STEAK WITH FRIES, AND SO ON. EVERYTHING IS IMPORTED.



BUT SINCE THIS IS AN ISLAMIC COUNTRY, PEOPLE COME MOSTLY FOR THE BOOZE. AND THAT'S SERVED UPSTAIRS, AT THE BAR.

AT THE RESTAURANT, YOU CAN INVITE MUSLIMS. SO, THEORETICALLY, THEY DON'T SERVE ALCOHOL.



BUT AN AFGHAN PROBABLY WON'T WANT ANYONE TO KNOW HE'S BEEN INVITED TO THE AMERICAN CLUB, BECAUSE RIGHT AWAY THERE'LL BE RUMORS THAT HE'S GETTING PLASTERED.



WE HEAD UPSTAIRS.



AND, YES, UP THERE IS A REAL, LARGE BAR, ABSOLUTELY PACKED WITH PEOPLE. IT HAS BEER, WHISKY, SODA, DART GAMES. A PRICED PLACE.



WE ELBOW OUR WAY TO A SPOT AND ORDER.



NOBODY INTRODUCES THEMSELVES WITH "HI, I'M SO-AND-SO, CIA" OR "HI, I'M SUCH-AND-SUCH, KGB," BUT IT'S OBVIOUS THAT THE PLACE IS CRAWLING WITH SPIES.



SO I CAN'T HELP WONDERING IF EVEN JOHN, WHO IS GOING FROM GROUP TO GROUP GREETING EVERYONE, ISN'T ALSO DOING A BIT OF INTELLIGENCE WORK ON THE SIDE.



ANYWAY, THERE'S ENOUGH MATERIAL HERE FOR TEN LE CARRÉ NOVELS.

RÉGIS:

THIS MISSION WE'RE ABOUT TO GO ON, I ALREADY DID IT TWO YEARS AGO.



AND I KNOW PERFECTLY WELL WHY I'M GOING BACK. I'M GOING BACK BECAUSE I'LL BE PRACTICING SURGERY IN A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE. AND I FIND THAT DEEPLY FULFILLING.



SO FULFILLING THAT IT'S UNLIKELY I'LL EVER GO BACK TO A CUSHY ANESTHESIOLOGIST'S JOB AT A FANCY HOSPITAL IN BORDEAUX.



SO, I DON'T KNOW... WHEN I STOP WORKING FOR MSF, MAYBE I'LL GO FOR SOMETHING TOTALLY DIFFERENT.

LIKE WHAT?



LIKE GOING BACK TO SCHOOL TO LEARN ANOTHER TRADE. I'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO MAKE WINE, FOR INSTANCE.

BUT THAT'S CUSHY, TOO.

OH NO, I DON'T THINK SO. NOT AT ALL.



LATER IN THE EVENING I MEET A SHORT, WIRY MAN IN HIS SIXTIES, WITH A SEVERE LOOK ON HIS FACE. I FIND HIM INTRIGUING. WE TALK.



A STRONG GERMANIC ACCENT. HIS MANNER IS ICE-COLD BUT, WEIRDLY ENOUGH, WE CLICK.

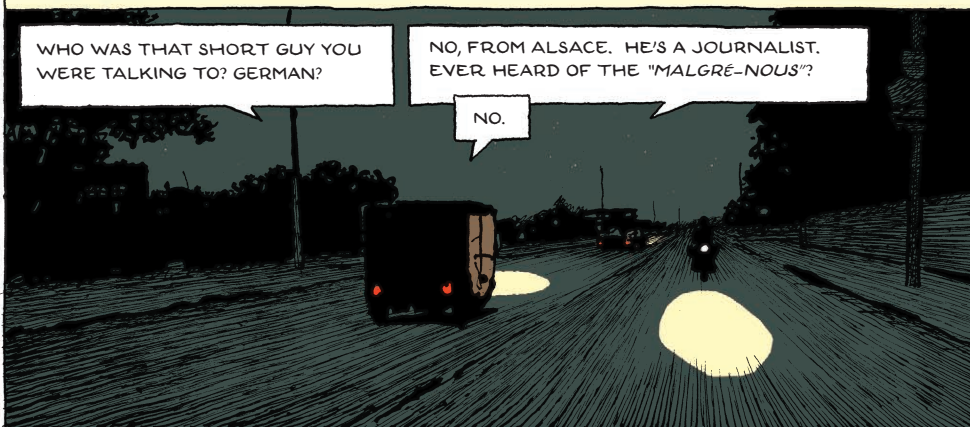


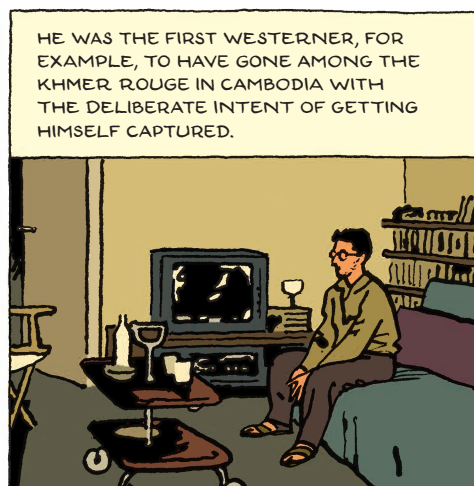
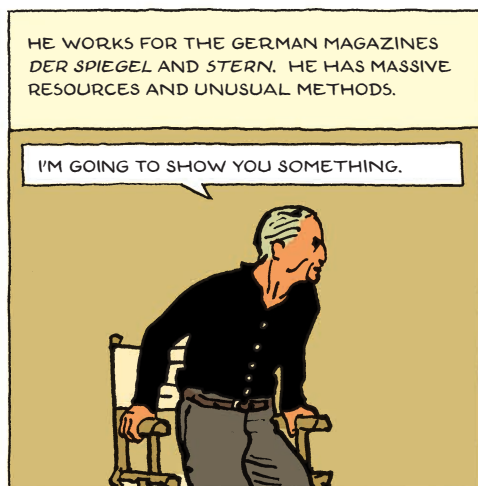
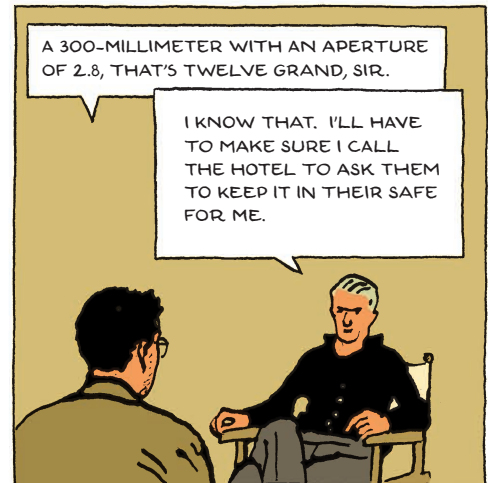
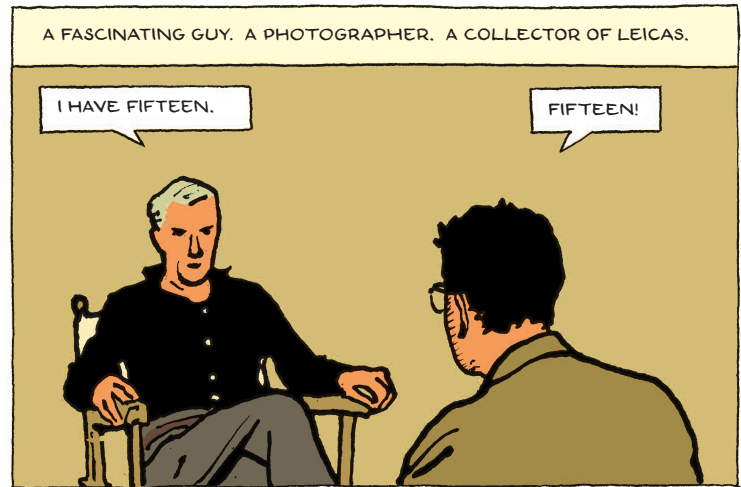
IN THE RICKSHAW HEADING BACK:

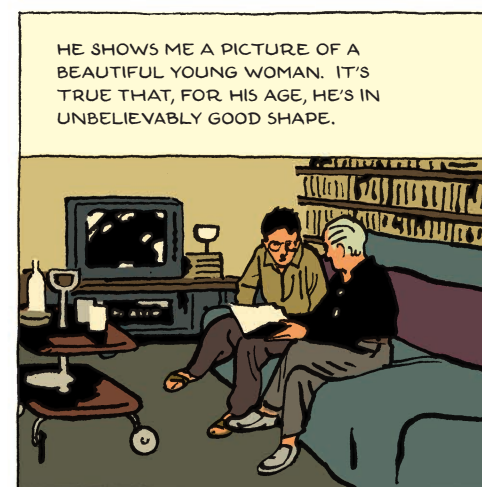
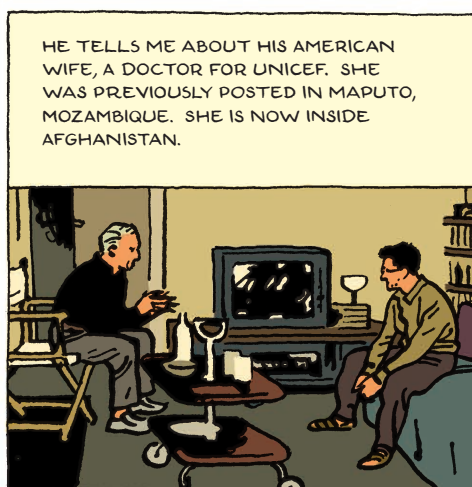
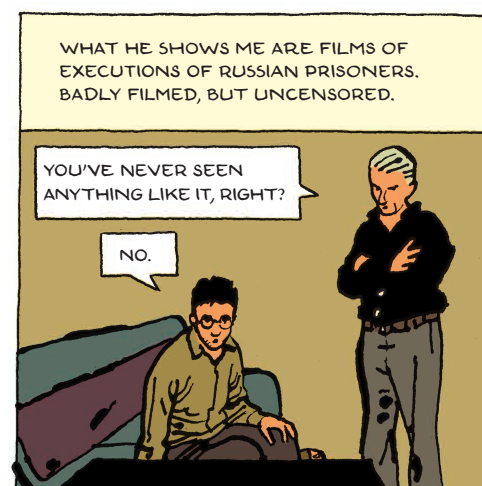
WHO WAS THAT SHORT GUY YOU WERE TALKING TO? GERMAN?

NO, FROM ALSACE. HE'S A JOURNALIST. EVER HEARD OF THE "MALGRÉ-NOUS"?

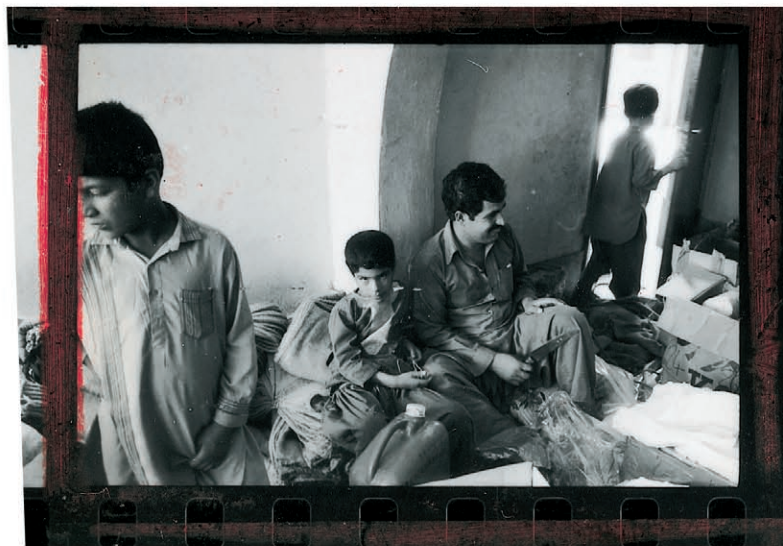
NO.

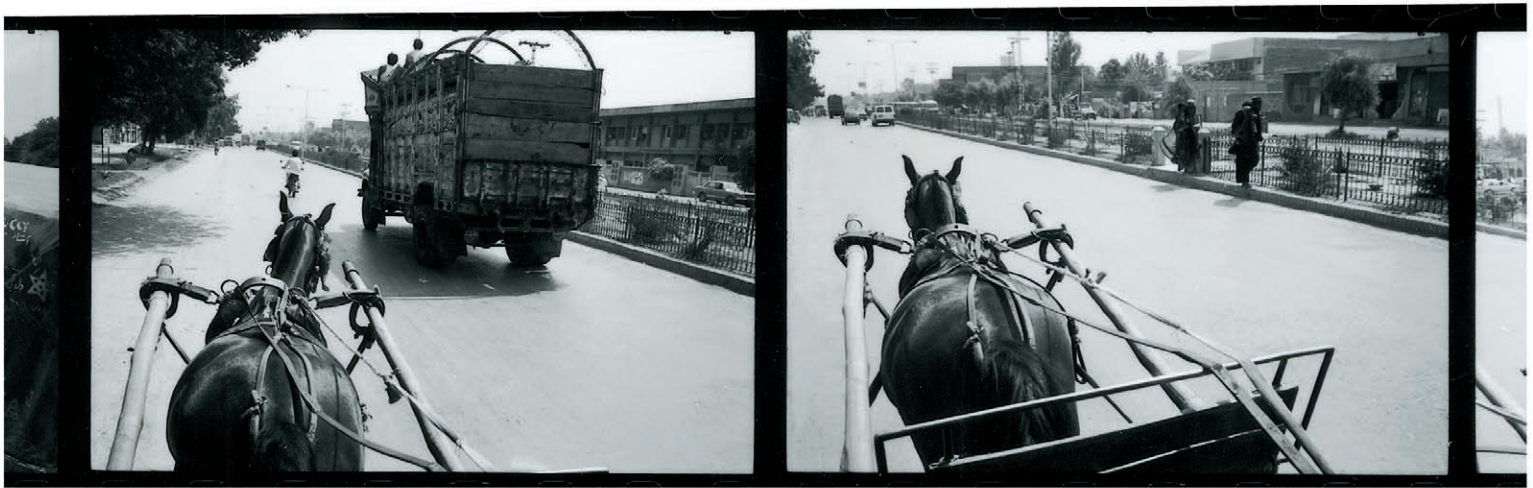


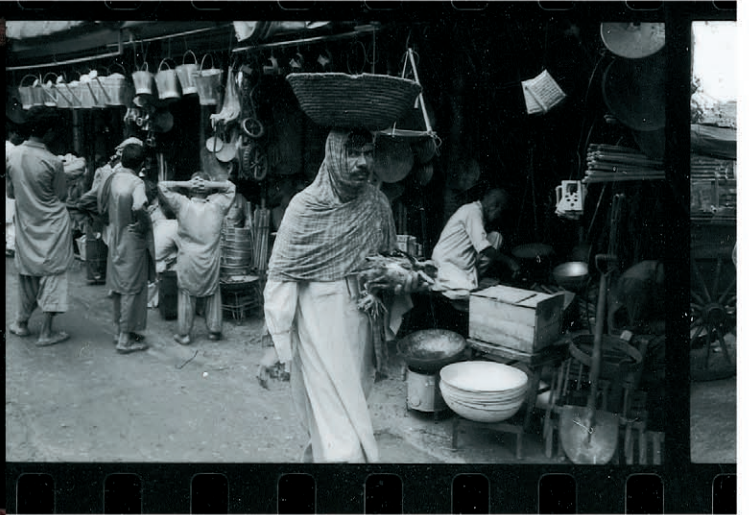




THE MONTH OF AUGUST IS DRAWING TO A CLOSE. I CONTINUE TAKING MY WANDERER'S PICTURES, HAPHAZARD PICTURES, MORE OR LESS AIMLESSLY—PESHAWAR IN AUGUST.







AND THEN IT'S TIME TO LEAVE.

FIRST, THE CARAVAN IS ASSEMBLED, WITH ABOUT A HUNDRED DONKEYS, SOME TWENTY HORSES, AND ROUGHLY A HUNDRED MEN, INCLUDING SOME FORTY ARMED FIGHTERS.

I'LL EXPLAIN THE SYSTEM OF CARAVANS:

THEY DELIVER WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN AND RETURN EMPTY TO PAKISTAN TO PICK UP MORE WEAPONS, CONTINUOUSLY, AS LONG AS THE TRACKS ARE USABLE.

OUR CARAVAN WILL BE AMONG THE FIRST MAJOR ONES TO LEAVE, IN AUGUST, AND ONE OF THE LAST TO RETURN, IN NOVEMBER, BEFORE THE WINTER—WHICH MOST OF THE CARAVANS WILL SPEND IN PESHAWAR, WHERE TEMPERATURES ARE Milder THAN IN THE MOUNTAINS.

AS SOON AS THE SNOW MELTS AND THE MOUNTAIN PASSES CAN BE CROSSED, THE CARAVANS WILL SET OUT AGAIN.

BECAUSE THE ROADS ARE CONTROLLED BY THE RUSSIANS, THE JOURNEY IS ALL OFF-ROAD.

ALL THIS ORGANIZATION IS MANAGED BY PESHAWAR'S AFGHAN COMMUNITY, UNDER THE BENEVOLENT GAZE OF THE PAKISTANI AUTHORITIES.

PAKISTAN, AS THE REAR BASE OF THE RESISTANCE, TURNS A BLIND EYE TO THE CONSTANT TO-AND-FRO OF THE CARAVANS.

WESTERNERS, THOUGH, AREN'T SUPPOSED TO GO THROUGH—BUT THE NET ISN'T VERY TIGHT, SO, SHORT OF FLINGING YOURSELF INTO CUSTOMS AGENTS' ARMS, YOU CAN GET THROUGH WITHOUT TOO MUCH TROUBLE.

OBTAINING, IF THEY CATCH YOU THEY'LL THROW YOU IN JAIL.

HAPPENED TO FRIENDS OF MINE: A WEEK IN JAIL.

NOT THE END OF THE WORLD, BUT STILL NOT VERY PLEASANT, AND, ABOVE ALL, A WASTE OF TIME AND MONEY (YOU HAVE TO GREASE PALMS TO GET OUT).

IDEALLY, MSF WOULD'VE WANTED TO SET UP ONLY UNARMED CARAVANS, BUT THE ONLY VIABLE SOLUTION, TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM RACKETEERS AND KIDNAPPERS, AND ALSO FROM SOVIET ARMY HELICOPTERS, IS TO JOIN THE ARMS CARAVANS.

SO WE HAVE A PRETTY SUBSTANTIAL ESCORT: FORTY AK-47S AGAINST WOULD-BE THIEVES, AND TWO OR THREE SHOULDER-FIRED MISSILES AGAINST THE HELICOPTERS.

BUT THE BOTTOM LINE IS THAT WE HAVE TO CROSS THE BORDER IN SEPARATE GROUPS—THE AFGHANS UNOFFICIALLY AND US, THE MSF PEOPLE, ILLEGALLY.

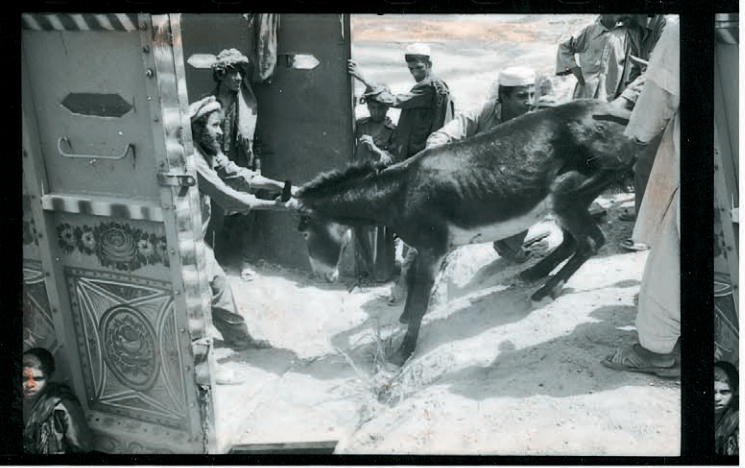
WE'LL MEET UP ON THE OTHER SIDE, IN AFGHANISTAN, AT AN AGREED LOCATION.



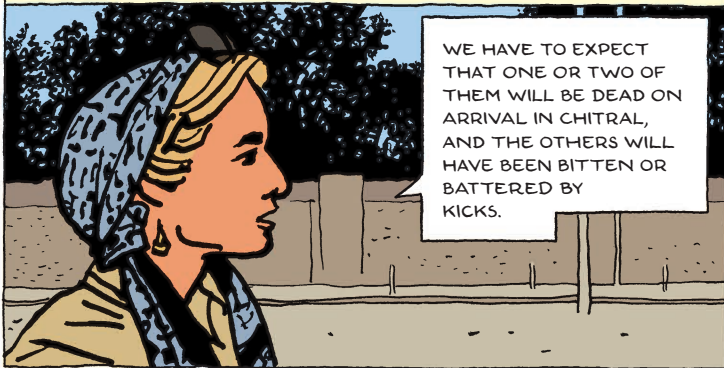
I WATCH THE TRUCKS BEING LOADED. WE ARE HEADING TO CHITRAL, UP NORTH—IT'S PRONOUNCED "TCHATROL." FIRST COME THE EQUIPMENT AND PROVISIONS. WE BUILT UP A MASSIVE STOCK OF DRIED FRUIT IN THE PREVIOUS DAYS.



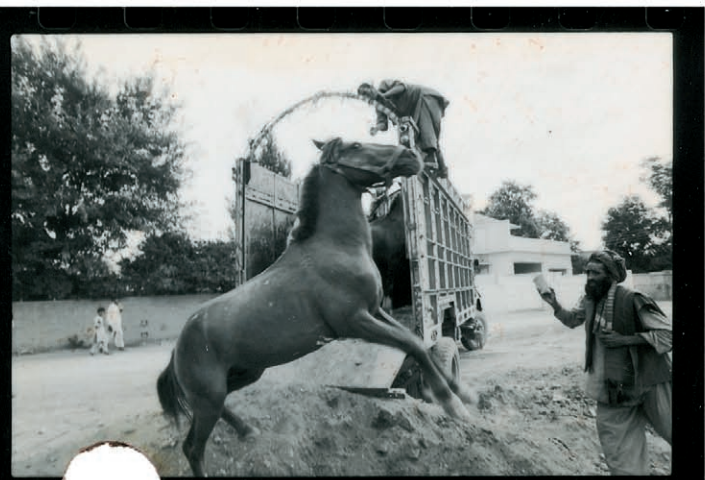
THEN COME THE DONKEYS, WHO ARE BRUTALLY SHOVED IN BY PUSHING THEM FROM THE BACK AND PULLING THEM BY THE EARS.

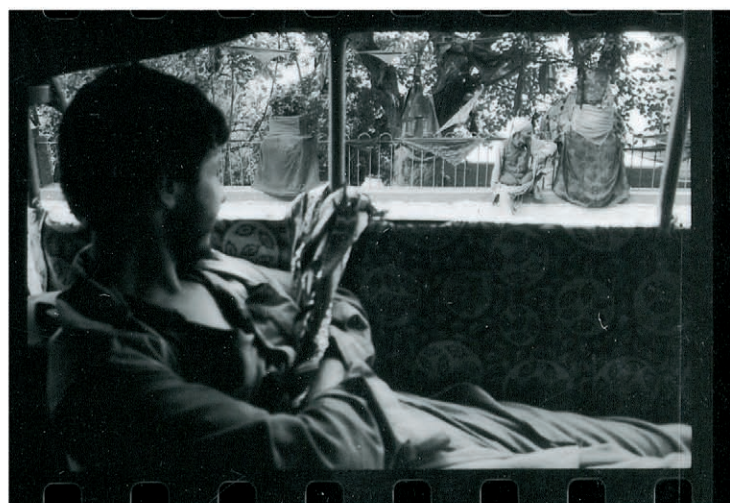
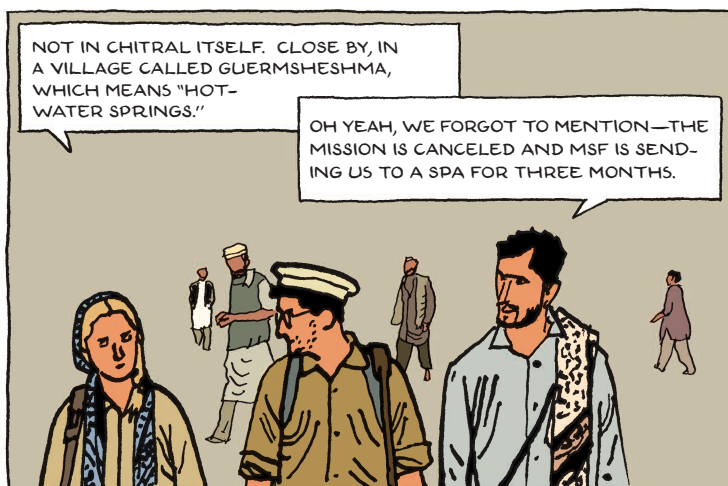
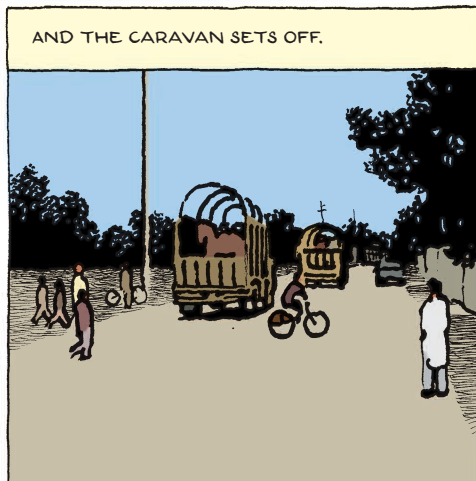


LAST COME THE HORSES, IN STAGGERED ROWS. THOSE ARE REAL STALLIONS, NOT GELDINGS, AND THEY EXPRESS THEIR DISAPPROVAL VIOLENTLY.



WE HAVE TO EXPECT THAT ONE OR TWO OF THEM WILL BE DEAD ON ARRIVAL IN CHITRAL, AND THE OTHERS WILL HAVE BEEN BITTEN OR BATTERED BY KICKS.





IN GUERMSHESMA WE ARE PUT UP IN A VERY NICE ABANDONED HOUSE WITH AN INDOOR POOL OF NATURAL SPRING WATER. THAT'S WHERE WE HAVE TO WAIT FOR OUR SMUGGLER, WHO'LL LET US KNOW WHEN IT'S TIME TO CROSS THE BORDER.



THE PLACE IS CAPTIVATING. OF COURSE WE ALL BATHE IN THE POOL. (BY THAT I MEAN ALL WESTERNERS. IT'S OUT OF THE QUESTION FOR MAHMAD AND THE FEW AFGHANS ESCORTING US TO SHARE A BATH WITH US, EVEN THOUGH WE STRICTLY SEPARATE MEN AND WOMEN).



THE WATER IS VERY HOT. BECAUSE THE WEATHER IS COOLER IN GUERMSHESMA THAN IN PESHAWAR, THE SENSATION IS PLEASANT.



WE ALL BUY *CHADRI*, THOSE LONG ROBES WORN BY AFGHAN WOMEN THAT COMPLETELY CONCEAL THE FACE AND BODY. THEY WILL HELP US REACH THE BORDER WITHOUT ATTRACTING ATTENTION.

JULIETTE AND THE NURSES POSE FOR ME IN THEIR *CHADRI*.





I START READING THE STEVENSON BOOK. HE TOO IS BUSY WITH PREPARATIONS.



A NIGHT GOES BY. THEN A DAY. JULIETTE BRUSHES HER HAIR. JOHN TAKES NOTES. WE TALK, WE SLEEP IN THE HOUSE WITH GRAFFITI-FILLED WALLS.



A SECOND NIGHT FALLS. THAT'S WHAT COVERING A STORY IS LIKE: PLENTY OF WAITING.



ALL OF A SUDDEN, THE SMUGGLER IS HERE.

NOW.



I SHOVE MY CAMERAS INTO A MESSENGER BAG, SLING THE BAG ACROSS MY SHOULDER, AND SLIP THE CHADRI OVER IT.



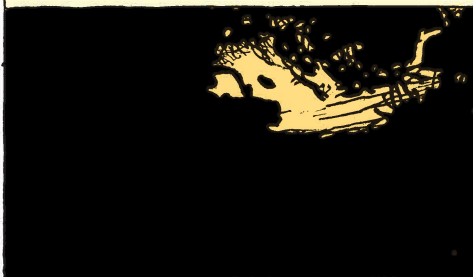
WE FILE INTO AN OLD PICKUP TRUCK WITH A TARP.



I WATCH THE OTHERS THROUGH THE MESH OF THE CHADRI. THEY LOOK LIKE GHOSTS HEADED FOR A SKI VACATION.



THE PICKUP DRIVES THROUGH THE NIGHT. I SAID COVERING A STORY INVOLVES A LOT OF WAITING, BUT WHEN THINGS HAPPEN, THEY HAPPEN VERY FAST AND ONLY ONCE. YOU HAVE TO BE ALERT NOT TO MISS THE BOAT.



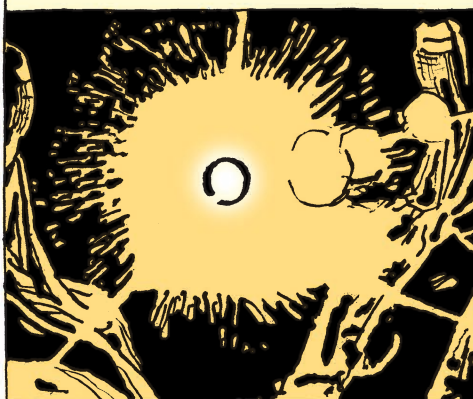
I TRY TO THINK ABOUT STEVENSON'S BOOK. I'M NOT SURE I REMEMBERED TO MARK THE PAGE I WAS ON BEFORE TOSSING IT INTO THE BAG.



SUDDENLY WE STOP. WE HEAR VOICES.



THE DRIVER TALKS, NEGOTIATES. SOMEONE LIFTS THE TARP.



THE TARP FALLS BACK DOWN. WE MOVE ON.



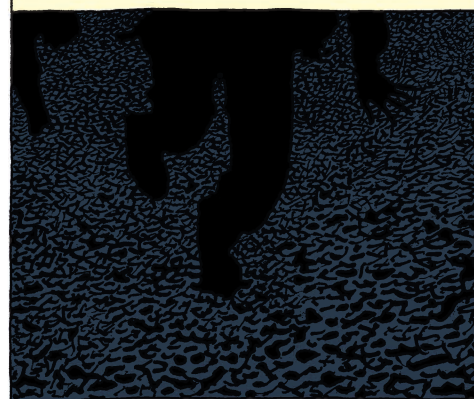
AS WE NEAR THE SPOT, WE REMOVE OUR CHADRI.



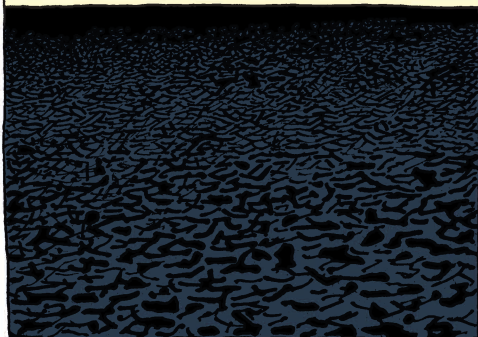
WE ARE DROPPED OFF AT THE EDGE OF A FIELD. FROM THERE ON, WE'LL HAVE TO RUN IN THE DARK.



NOT AN EASY TASK. I HEAR SOMEONE FALL. I NARROWLY MISS FALLING, TOO.



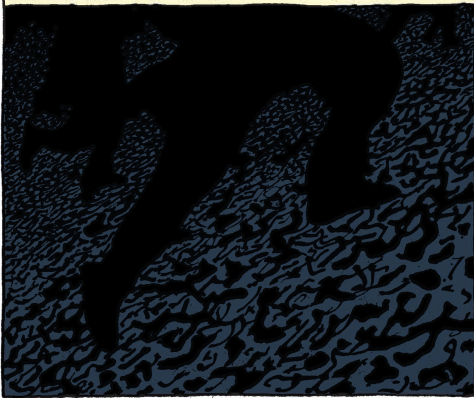
NOTHING IN THIS FIELD OF ROCKS HINTS AT A CHANGE OF NATION. BUT THIS DARKNESS IS NO LONGER PAKISTAN.



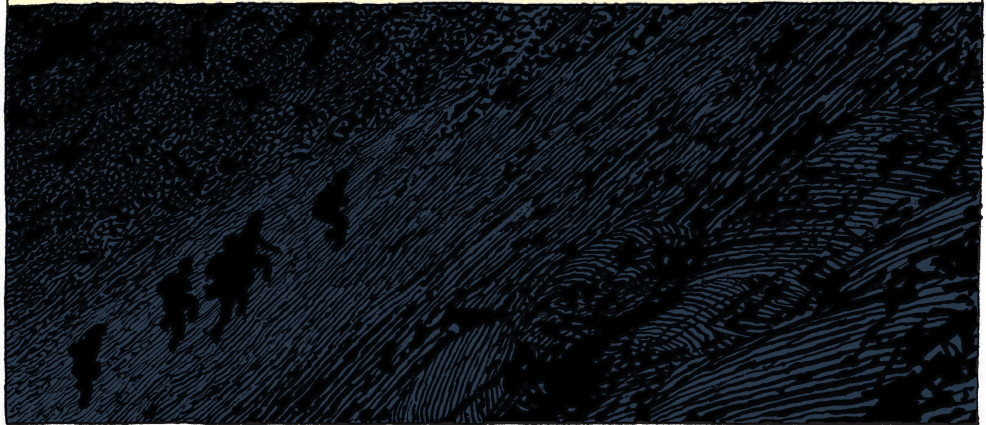
IT'S AFGHANISTAN.



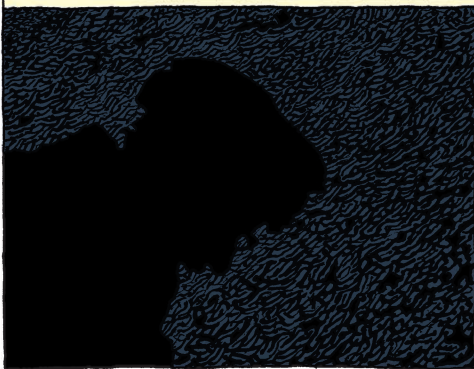
WITHOUT A PAUSE, WE LAUNCH INTO THE ASCENT OF OUR FIRST MOUNTAIN.



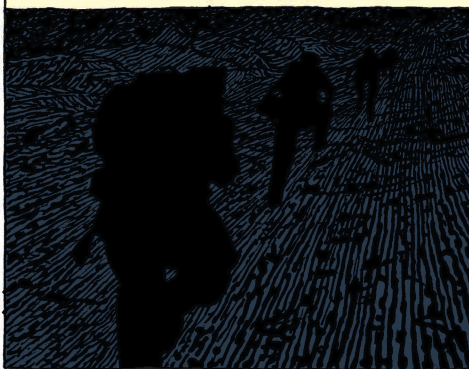
WE ARE ON THE BORDER MOUNTAIN, THE DEWANAH BABA—THE OLD MADMAN'S PASS. SIXTEEN THOUSAND FEET.



I'VE BEEN WARNED IT WOULDN'T BE A PICNIC. AS PROMISED, IT'S REALLY TOUGH.



ALL NIGHT LONG, WE'RE CHARGING UP AN ENDLESS MOUND OF ROCKS WE CAN'T SEE.



AS WE CLIMB THE TRAIL, WE CAN HEAR THE SOUNDS OF PEOPLE AND HORSES, WHO CATCH UP WITH US, ACCOMPANY US FOR A MOMENT, AND OUTPACE US. THERE'S A WHOLE MESS OF TRAFFIC, BUT IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE OUT WHAT IS GOING ON.



WHILE MY MIND INSISTS I'M NOT GOING TO MAKE IT, MY FEET CONTINUE TO STEP FORWARD. IT'S GROWING COLDER. AROUND 5 AM, DAWN BEGINS TO BREAK.



I'M ASTONISHED TO REALIZE THAT WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF OUR CARAVAN. I RECOGNIZE NAJMUDIN, THE CHIEF OF THE YAF TAL GROUP.

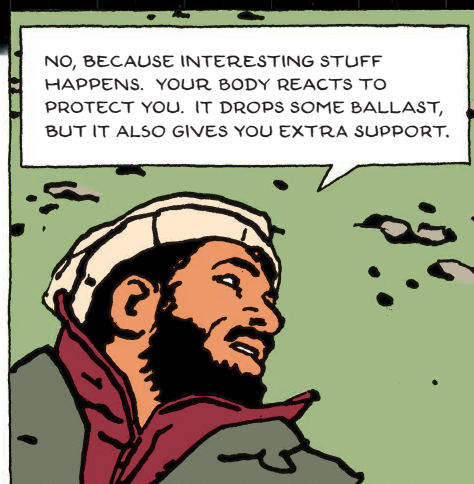
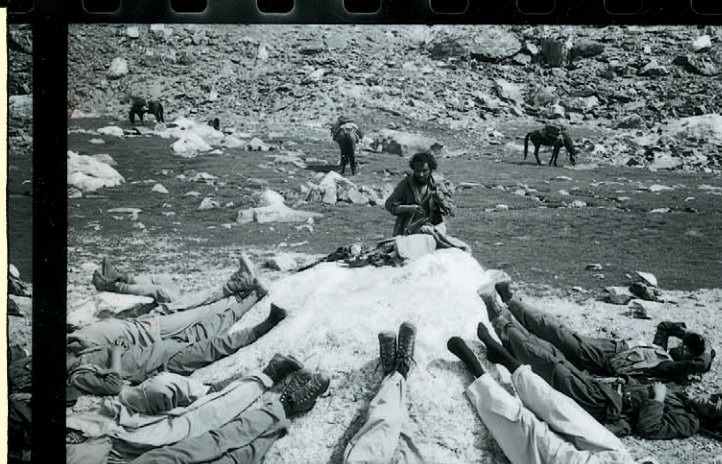
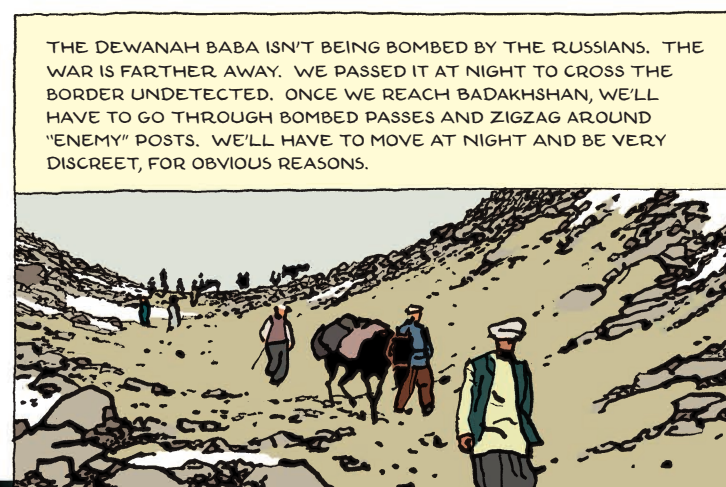


FOR ONE OF THE NURSES IN THE TEAM WHO REALLY ISN'T IN SHAPE, THE GOING IS EVEN HARDER. BUT, COMPARED TO ME, ALL OF THEM HAVE THE ADVANTAGE OF ALREADY HAVING MADE THIS TRIP.



TEETERING WITH FATIGUE AS WE REACH THE PASS, I'M WONDERING WHAT THE HELL I'M DOING THERE. AND AS USUAL, I ANSWER MY QUESTION BY TAKING PICTURES.

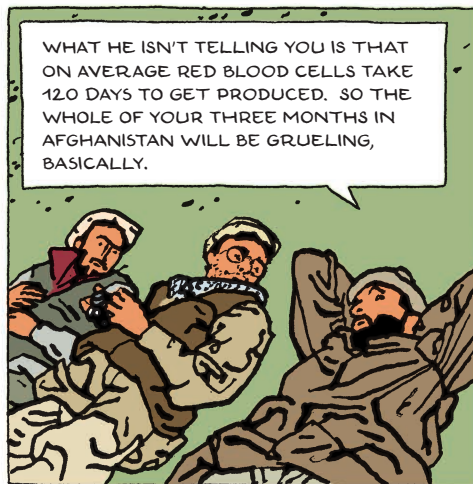






SO, IN FACT, THE MORE TIME GOES BY THE MORE YOU'LL BE ABLE TO WALK AND THE LESS TIRED YOU'LL BE.

REALLY?

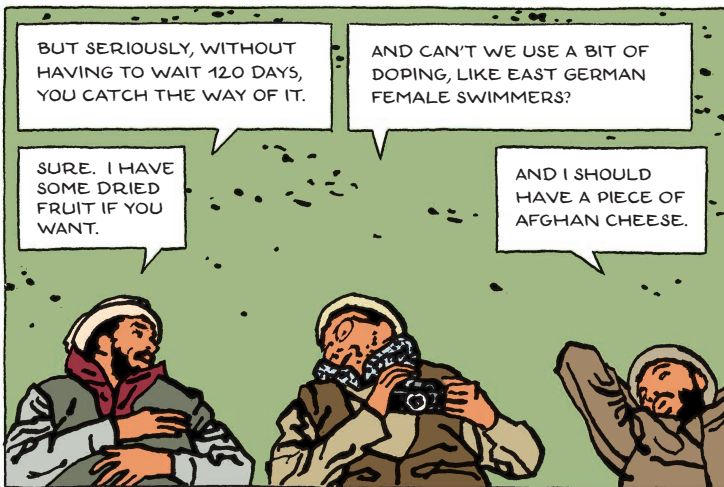


WHAT HE ISN'T TELLING YOU IS THAT ON AVERAGE RED BLOOD CELLS TAKE 120 DAYS TO GET PRODUCED. SO THE WHOLE OF YOUR THREE MONTHS IN AFGHANISTAN WILL BE GRUELING, BASICALLY.



OKAY, BUT ONCE HE'S BACK IN PARIS HE'LL BE ABLE TO CLIMB THE STAIRS TO MONTMARTRE INSTEAD OF TAKING THE FUNICULAR.

VERY FUNNY!

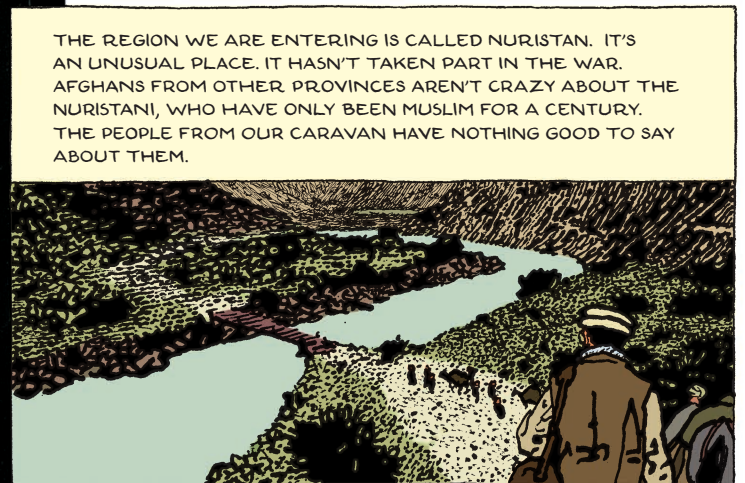


BUT SERIOUSLY, WITHOUT HAVING TO WAIT 120 DAYS, YOU CATCH THE WAY OF IT.

AND CAN'T WE USE A BIT OF DOPING, LIKE EAST GERMAN FEMALE SWIMMERS?

SURE. I HAVE SOME DRIED FRUIT IF YOU WANT.

AND I SHOULD HAVE A PIECE OF AFGHAN CHEESE.



THE REGION WE ARE ENTERING IS CALLED NURISTAN. IT'S AN UNUSUAL PLACE. IT HASN'T TAKEN PART IN THE WAR. AFGHANS FROM OTHER PROVINCES AREN'T CRAZY ABOUT THE NURISTANI, WHO HAVE ONLY BEEN MUSLIM FOR A CENTURY. THE PEOPLE FROM OUR CARAVAN HAVE NOTHING GOOD TO SAY ABOUT THEM.



THEY HAVE A REPUTATION OF BEING BANDITS, OF ATTACKING CARAVANS AND HOLDING TRAVELERS FOR RANSOM.



I CAN'T SAY IF IT'S BECAUSE OF WHAT WE'VE HEARD OR BECAUSE IT'S TRUE, BUT WHEN WE PASS SOME OF THEM, THEY DO LOOK UNSAVORY.



IN AN ARMED CARAVAN LIKE OURS WE'RE OKAY, BUT IF WE'D BEEN AMBLING THROUGH THE PLACE ON OUR OWN, WE'D HAVE BEEN WORRIED.



OUR FIRST REAL STOPOVER, AT THE END OF THE AFTERNOON, IS IN A VILLAGE WITH A FAMILIAR NAME: PESHAWARAK. THERE WE MEET UP WITH THE DONKEYS AND THEIR HANDLERS.



I NOTICE WITH CONCERN THAT MY HIGH-QUALITY WATERPROOF HIKING BOOTS ARE COMING UNSEWN BECAUSE OF ALL THEIR RUBBING AGAINST ROCKS.



JOHN:

HANG ON, I'VE GOT SOMETHING FOR SEWING UP THICK LEATHER.



JOHN TEACHES ME HOW TO USE THIS CONTRAPTION WITH A HANDLE, WHERE THE THREAD IS SLIPPED INSIDE THE NEEDLE. I SEW MY SHOES BACK UP.



WE SLIP INTO THE AFGHAN RHYTHM: BEDTIME AT 7 PM. I SLEEP OUTDOORS, ON A ROOF, TUCKED INTO MY SLEEPING BAG.



IN THE VERY EARLY DAWN, AROUND 4:30 AM, THE DIN OF PRAYERS, ANIMALS, ABLUTIONS IN THE RIVER WAKES ME UP.

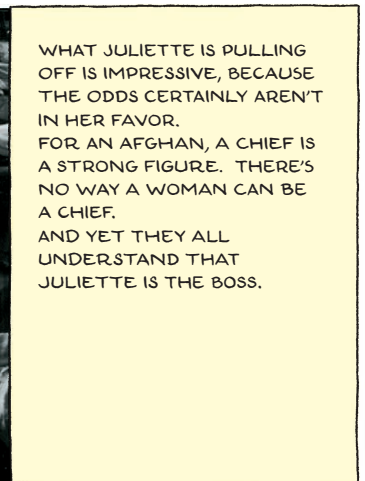
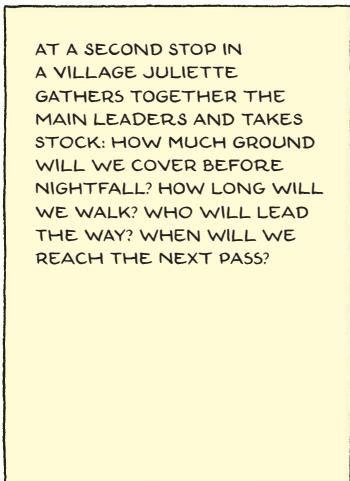
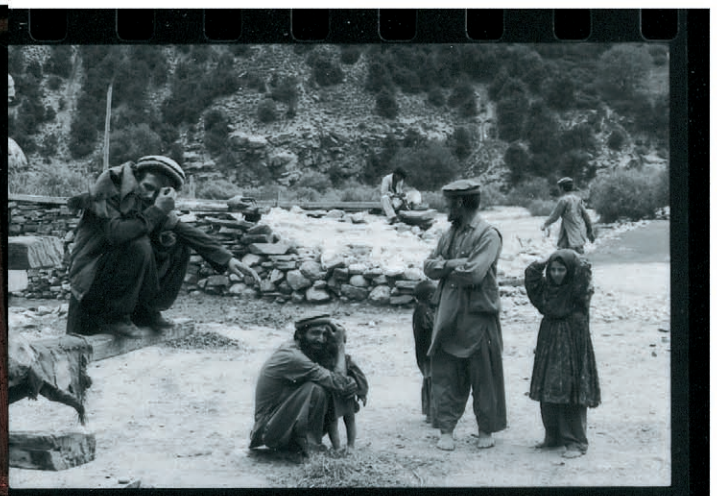
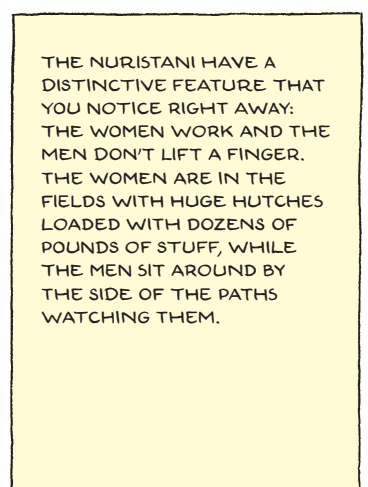
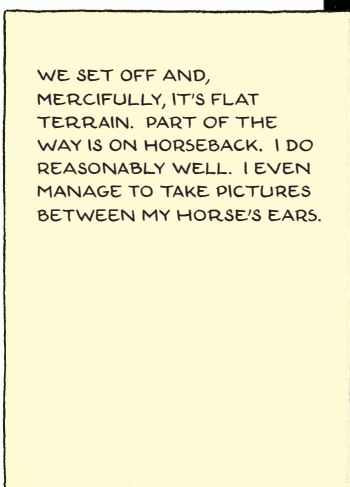


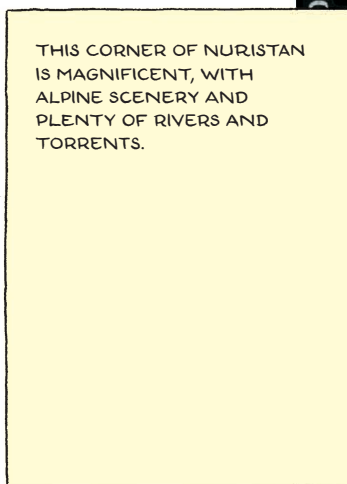
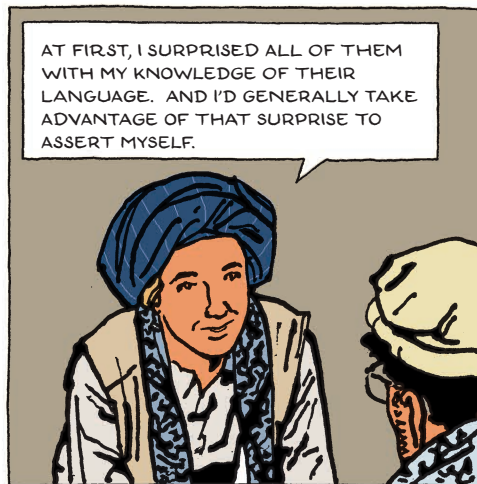
JULIETTE CALMLY BRUSHES HER LONG HAIR BEFORE TYING IT UP AND HIDING IT UNDER HER HAT. A HORSE GROOM FROM OUR ESCORT, WHO HAS NEVER SEEN A WOMAN BRUSH HER HAIR, WATCHES HER SURREPTITIOUSLY. HE'S A COUNTRY GUY. IN RURAL AFGHANISTAN, A MAN WITHOUT MEANS DOESN'T HAVE A WIFE.



IN THE VILLAGE THERE'S A TEAHOUSE, CALLED A CHAYRANA, WHERE WE HAVE A BREAKFAST THAT LIVES UP TO THE REPUTATION OF NURISTAN: NOT GOOD.







WE SPEND THE FOLLOWING NIGHT IN THE OPEN. A FEW GUYS FROM THE ESCORT HAVE MINOR AILMENTS AND WANT CONSULTATIONS. ROBERT AND RÉGIS EXAMINE THEM.



SEEING THAT, ALL THE OTHERS SHOW UP AND GET IN LINE. THEY ASK FOR PILLS THAT THEY STORE CAREFULLY IN THE FOLDS OF THEIR TURBAN OR HAT. I PHOTOGRAPH ALL THAT WITH THE FLASH. I DON'T LIKE THE FLASH.



THE NEXT DAY, AS WE'RE APPROACHING BARG-E-MATAL DAWLAT:

YOU'RE GOING TO MEET AIDER SHAH, THE HEAD HONCHO OF THE AREA.

HE'S A GOOD GUY?



HE'S A SMUGGLER OF PRETTY MUCH ANYTHING THAT CAN BE SMUGGLED, BEGINNING WITH DRUGS, BUT HE PROTECTS US. JULIETTE BUYS OUR SAFETY FROM HIM AND HE ANSWERS FOR OUR HEADS IN THE REGION. OTHERWISE, WE WOULDN'T GET THROUGH.

BECAUSE OF THE BANDITS?



WELL, IT'S COMPLICATED. NURISTAN IS INFILTRATED BY WAHHABI FUNDAMENTALISTS WHO DON'T LIKE TO SEE US AROUND HERE AND WOULDN'T MIND SLITTING OUR THROATS.



SO WE GIVE AIDER SHAH A GOOD BAKSHEESH, HE SLIPS US UNDER HIS LONG BEARD, AND WE CAN GO THROUGH.

YOU'LL SEE, HE HAS AN AMAZING BEARD.



AND WHO ARE THESE WAHHABI FUNDAMENTALISTS?

A BUNCH OF LOSERS.



AIDER SHAH WELCOMES US INTO HIS HOME, SERVING TEA AND BREAD. HE HANDS US A FEW RECOMMENDATION LETTERS THAT WILL FACILITATE OUR PROGRESS THROUGH NURISTAN. THE ATMOSPHERE BETWEEN THE AFGHANS IS CORDIAL, BUT NOT EFFUSIVE.





NAJMUDIN IS IN A CORNER OF THE ROOM, SEATED ON A CHAIR NEXT TO A TABLE. IT'S WORTH NOTING, BECAUSE TABLES AND CHAIRS ARE RARE IN THE VICINITY. HE'S FOLLOWING THE DISCUSSIONS, SEEMING DETACHED. ON HIS HEAD HE'S WEARING A CHAPKA TAKEN FROM THE RUSSIANS. NEXT TO HIM A VASE OF PLASTIC FLOWERS ADDS A POETIC TOUCH TO HIS AK-47.



HE'S HANDSOME, THIS NAJMUDIN. MORE THAN HANDSOME, IMPRESSIVE.



I GO OUT. KIDS ARE DOING HEADSTANDS. THERE'S NO WAR HERE.



A SHORT PRAYER BEFORE LEAVING. I DON'T DARE STAND IN FRONT OF THEM, SO I ALWAYS MAKE SURE I'M TO THE SIDE OR BEHIND THEM. CHILDREN AREN'T SO CONCERNED.



I HAVE A THEORY.

THAT'S NICE. WHAT IS IT?



IT HASN'T BEEN TESTED OUT STATISTICALLY TO BE A HUNDRED PERCENT RELIABLE YET, BUT IT'S GETTING THERE.

GO AHEAD, TELL ME.



THE THEORY IS THAT IN AFGHANISTAN NICE GUYS LOOK LIKE NICE GUYS AND BAD GUYS LOOK LIKE BAD GUYS.

HAHA! YOU'RE ONTO SOMETHING.



TAKE NAJMUDIN, FOR INSTANCE: HANDSOME GUY, A CLEAR LOOK IN HIS EYES, AN OPEN FACE AND A FORTHRIGHT ATTITUDE. YOU CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON HIM.



CONVERSELY, LOOK AT THAT MUJ' FROM YAFTAL THERE, HE REALLY HAS THE FACE OF A CROOK.

YEAH, THAT ONE'S AN ASSHOLE. I DON'T LIKE HIM.



BUT THE TWO AFGHANS WHO BEST ILLUSTRATE THE THEORY ARE YOU AND ME. BECAUSE WE'RE BOTH PHYSICALLY ATTRACTIVE AND MORALLY FLAWLESS.

TRUE. WELL, IN MY CASE, AT LEAST.

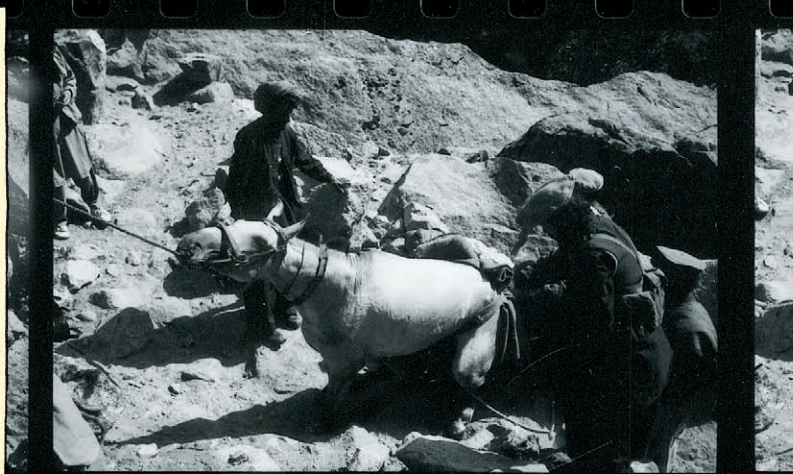




WE PASS A HORSE.
IT'S DYING.



THE ONLY HORSES
AFGHANS HAVE ANY
CONSIDERATION FOR ARE
BUZKASHI HORSES. THOSE
GET PAMPERED.
BUT CARAVAN HORSES GO
THROUGH MARTYRDOM.



THEY'RE OVERLOADED,
YANKED HERE AND THERE,
SUBJECTED TO FREEZING
COLD, AND WOUNDED BY
STONES.





THEY COLLAPSE FROM EXHAUSTION AND GET ABANDONED ON THE SIDE OF THE ROAD. THE TRAILS ARE LITTERED WITH DEAD HORSES AND DONKEYS.



CAN'T WE PUT HIM DOWN?
NO. SUPPOSEDLY, IT'S SO THEY HAVE A CHANCE OF MAKING IT.



BUT THAT ONE'S NEVER GOING TO MAKE IT! IT'S DYING!

I KNOW.



LOOK, THE MUJ' HAVE MARKSMANSHIP CONTESTS SHOOTING AT ROCKS, BUT THEY WON'T FINISH OFF HORSES. THAT'S THE WAY IT IS. YOU WON'T CHANGE IT.



AND I CAN'T STOP EVERY TIME I SEE ONE TO GIVE IT A SHOT OF MORPHINE. BUT IF YOU WANT, YOU CAN ASK TO BORROW AN AK-47 AND STICK A FEW BULLETS INTO HIM.



ME? BUT I'VE NEVER SHOT AT ANYTHING.



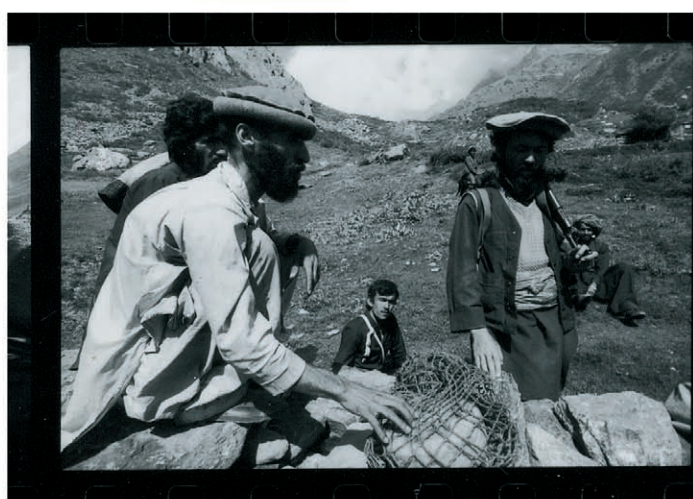
I POINT CAMERAS, NOT GUNS.



FARTHER ON, A NURISTANI SELLS US HIS CHEESE IN A NET. IT'S A COOKED HARD CHEESE.



IT'S FUNNY TO SEE SIDE BY SIDE A GUY FROM NURISTAN AND ONE FROM BADAKHSHAN. THEY'RE REALLY VERY DIFFERENT.



WHO ARE THEY?

NORTHERNERS ESCAPING FROM THE FIGHTING.



THEY'RE GOING TO SEEK REFUGE IN PAKISTAN.

POOR THINGS! THEY STILL HAVE A WAY TO GO.



A NEW PASS RISES UP IN FRONT OF US: THE PAPROK. THERE'S A DONKEY THAT REFUSES TO MOVE. IT TAKES SEVEN GUYS TO CONVINCE HIM OTHERWISE. HE GETS PULLED, PUSHED, BEATEN, AND STUNG.



THE DONKEY HANDLERS YELL.

RRRAK TSSS TSSS
RRRAK TSSS TSSS

YEH!
YEH!



IT'S ANOTHER STEEP CLIMB. ONCE AGAIN, THE SEAMS OF MY BOOTS ARE GETTING WORN DOWN BY THE ROCKS AND COMING UNDONE. I CURSE THEM.



THERE ARE SOME VERY NARROW PASSAGES WITH STEEP DROPS. NOBODY FALLS.



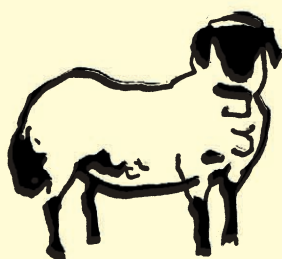
YOU HAVE TO WALK WITH YOUR GAZE LOCKED IN FRONT OF YOUR FEET. AS SOON AS YOU LOOK UP, YOU STUMBLE. IT'S EXHAUSTING.



AS WE CLIMB, WE SEE THE VEGETATION CHANGE AND BECOME SPARSER.



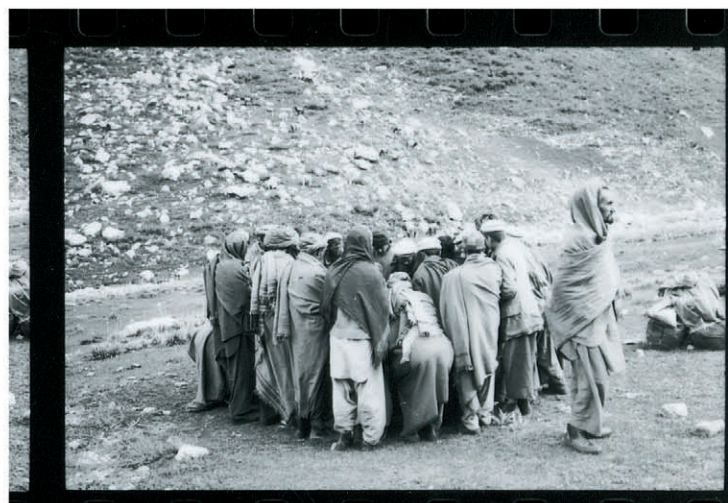
MIDWAY UP THE MOUNTAIN, WE PAUSE. A LAMB PURCHASED IN BARG-E-MATAL WILL PROVIDE US WITH KEBABS.



THE MUJ' ASK ME FOR MY POCKET KNIFE AND GIVE IT BACK TO ME ALL DENTED. I LIKED THAT KNIFE.



WE SETTLE THERE FOR THE NIGHT. I SEW UP MY SHOES AGAIN. ONE OF US (I CAN'T SEE WHO FROM WHERE I AM) TAKES OUT SOME STUFF AND AROUSES THE CURIOSITY OF THE MUJ'.



YOU CAN'T OPEN A BAG WITHOUT HAVING TEN OR TWELVE MUJ' PEEKING INTO IT.

AT BEDTIME, LIKE EVERY NIGHT, THEY PROMISE US THAT THEY'LL BE QUIET THE NEXT MORNING: "WE WON'T WAKE YOU UP."



AT 4 AM ONE OF THEM BELLOWS OUT A CALL TO PRAYER.

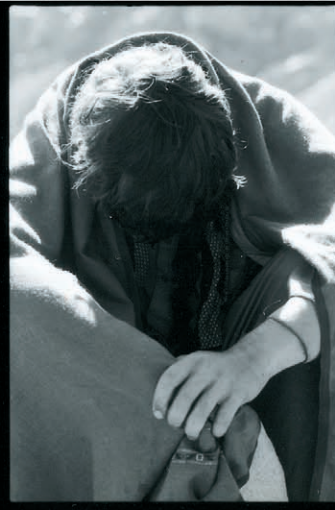


FIFTEEN OF THEM STEP OVER ME TO GO JOIN HIM.



ANOTHER ONE, WHILE SADDLING UP HIS HORSE, DROPS HIS STRAP ON MY FACE AND PART OF HIS LOAD ON MY FEET.





THE PAPROK PASS IS AT THE HEART OF NURISTAN. THE RUSSIANS DON'T RISK COMING NEAR HERE. WE CAN CROSS IT BY DAY WITHOUT FEAR OF GETTING BOMBED.

I HAVEN'T YET TALKED ABOUT A TALL DUTCH DOCTOR NAMED RONALD, AKA NURUDIN, A REAL GIANT. I HAVEN'T MENTIONED HIM BECAUSE HE AND I DON'T TALK MUCH.



THE MUJ' FIND HIS SIZE INTRIGUING. THEY WANT TO KNOW IF HE'S AS STRONG AS HE IS TALL. EVERY EVENING, NAJMUDIN CHALLENGES HIM AT ARM WRESTLING.



EVERY EVENING RONALD LOSES, BECAUSE NO ONE IS STRONGER THAN NAJMUDIN.



BUT EVEN IF NAJMUDIN HAD BEEN A WIMP, RONALD WOULD HAVE BEEN WELL ADVISED TO LET HIM WIN. YOU DON'T WANT TO HUMILIATE A MUJ' ON THE SUBJECT OF PHYSICAL STRENGTH—A FEW WESTERNERS WHO DIDN'T KNOW THAT ENDED UP AT THE BOTTOM OF A CLIFF. I TAKE PICTURES OF BIG RONALD AS HE CROSSES THE PASS, WRAPPED IN HIS PATOO.





THE LIGHT IS VERY CLEAR THAT DAY, AND AN AMAZINGLY CRISP, CLEAN AIR FILLS YOUR LUNGS. EVEN EXHAUSTION AND THE BACKDROP OF WAR CAN'T CANCEL OUT A FEELING OF INTENSE JOY.



SEEING THE SUN, THOSE MOUNTAINS, AND JOHN WITH HIS BACKPACK WALKING WITH A HIKER'S STRIDE, YOU COULD SWEAR THIS IS PEACETIME.



WE PASS A RIVER. NAJMUDIN, AS REGULAR AS A METRONOME, OVERSEES THE DONKEYS' CROSSING.



A BIT FARTHER, THE MUJ
LINE UP FOR THEIR PAY.



JULIETTE HANDLES IT
LIKE A TROOP REVIEW.
THE AFGHAN CURRENCY,
AFGHANIS, CHANGES HANDS.



WE THEN HEAD TOWARD
A SMALL TOWN CALLED
PORUNS.



DID YOU SEE THAT OLD-
TIMER WE JUST PASSED,
WITH THE KID ON HIS
BACK?

YES. I TOOK A
PICTURE OF HIM.

TYPICAL OF
COUNTRIES AT
WAR.



THE GENERATION OF FATHERS GOES
TO FIGHT AND ONLY GRANDFATHERS
AND MOTHERS REMAIN TO TAKE
CARE OF THE YOUNG ONES. AND
SINCE THE WOMEN RARELY LEAVE
THEIR HOME OR VILLAGE, IT'S
THE OLD MEN WHO WALK THEM
AROUND AND TRAVEL WITH THEM.



BY THE WAY, DO YOU KNOW WHAT
THEY'RE CALLED,
THOSE OLD MEN?

NO.

THE BABAS,
MEANING THE
WHITE BEARDS.

AH, YES, I DID
KNOW! AS IN
"DEWANAH
BABA."

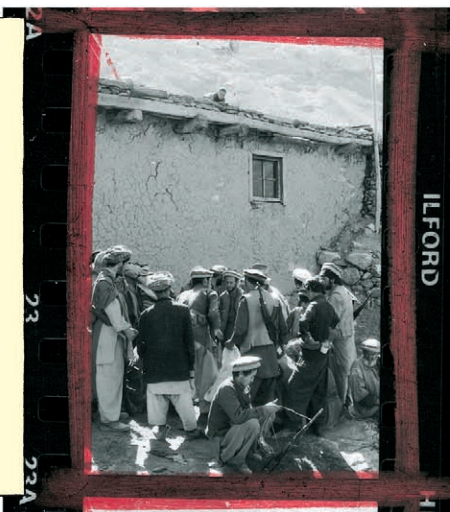


IT'S WEIRD, BUT IF I'M NOT MISTAKEN
THAT SAME WORD, "BABA," THAT THE
AFGHANS USE FOR OLD MEN IS THE ONE
RUSSIANS USE FOR OLD LADIES.

MUST BE
WHAT
CAUSED THE
CONFLICT.



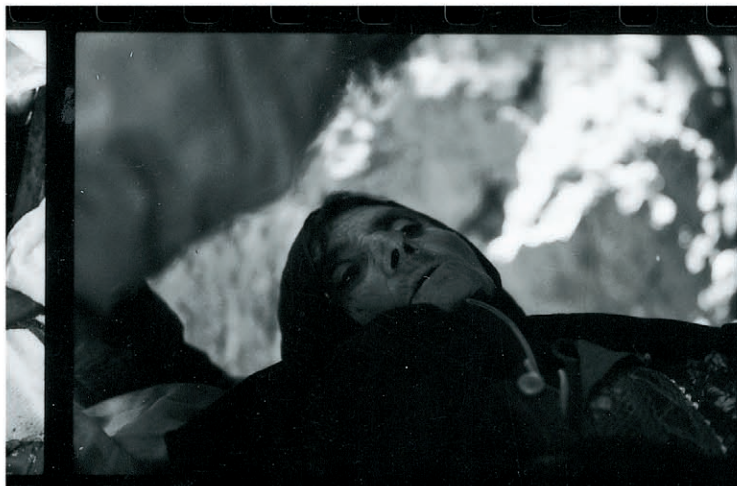
AS SOON AS WE COME INTO PORUNS, WE'RE WELCOMED BY THE LOCALS. AN OLD LADY IS SICK, THEY ASK US TO OPERATE ON HER. WE CLIMB UP ON A TERRACE.



THEY LAY THE OLD LADY DOWN. THE DIAGNOSIS DOESN'T TAKE LONG: HER LEFT FOOT IS DEFORMED BY A CANCEROUS TUMOR.



THE MSF TEAM TURN HER COT INTO AN OPERATING TABLE. RÉGIS ANESTHETIZES HER. THEN, AS HER CHILDREN LOOK ON, SHE IS SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY OPERATED ON.



UP TO NOW, I'VE ONLY OBSERVED CONSULTATIONS. IT'S THE FIRST SURGERY ON THE TRIP. I'M STRUCK BY THE SERIOUSNESS AND CONCENTRATION OF EACH OF THE PARTICIPANTS. GUYS LIKE RÉGIS AND ROBERT, WHO THE REST OF THE TIME ARE A HILARIOUS STAND-UP COMEDY DUET, TAKE ON A LARGER-THAN-LIFE STATURE. I'M DEEPLY IMPRESSED.



THEY KEEP THE OLD LADY UNDER OBSERVATION FOR A FEW HOURS. HER FAMILY IS GIVEN MEDICATION AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR HER TREATMENT.

SYLVIE, DOES THE OLD LADY HAVE A CHANCE OF MAKING IT?

NO, NONE AT ALL.



YOU KNOW, THERE'S A CYNICAL SAYING THAT SURGEONS' PATIENTS DIE CURED. OBVIOUSLY, NOBODY'S INTERESTED IN DYING CURED. BUT DYING TREATED IS SOMETHING ELSE.



SOMETIMES PEOPLE DIE IN OUR HANDS, DURING THE OPERATION, AND THERE'S NOTHING WE CAN DO. BUT THE FAMILY STILL THANKS US.



THEY THANK US BY SAYING: "HE WAS SICK, OR HE WAS WOUNDED, AND YOU TREATED HIM, YOU PREPARED HIM TO MEET ALLAH. THANK YOU."



FOR US, WHO COULDN'T SAVE HIM, THAT'S HARDLY A CONSOLATION. BUT TO THEM IT'S VERY IMPORTANT THAT HE DIED TREATED.



AND YOU KNOW, WHEN YOU GIVE A DEAD CHILD BACK TO ITS MOTHER—THAT'S HAPPENED TO ME—AND, IN RETURN, SHE SLIPS A HANDKERCHIEF WITH A FEW WALNUTS INTO YOUR HAND...



...AND SHE SAYS, "THANK YOU, THANKS TO YOU HE IS READY TO MEET ALLAH"...

MUST BE HEARTBREAKING.

SURE IS.



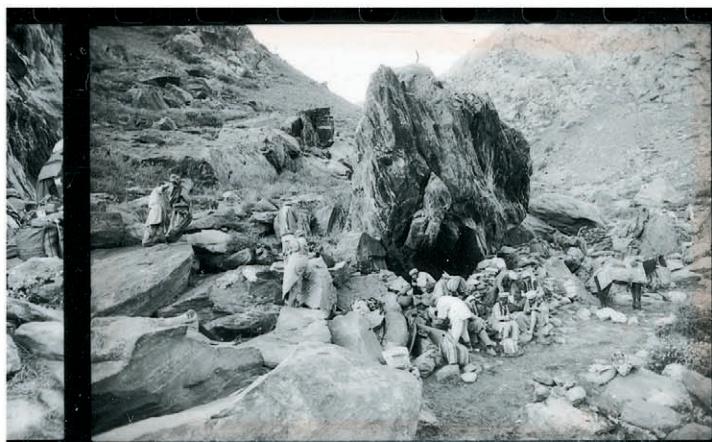
I'VE OFTEN HAD PEOPLE WE'D TREATED SAY TO ME, WITH A VERY SAD LOOK: "IT'S REALLY TOO BAD YOU'RE NOT MUSLIM! WE'LL BE IN DIFFERENT HEAVENS."



AS WE LEAVE PORUNS, THE BABA WE SAW EARLIER HAS BECOME MUCH YOUNGER. HE'S NOW 12 OR 13 YEARS OLD, BUT IS STILL CARRYING THE SAME BABY ON HIS BACK.



WE REACH ANOTHER PASS, THE SIM. UNDER AN OLD ROCK WITH A GAPING MOUTH, WE TAKE A BREAK.



AND YOU, AHMADJAN, DON'T YOU HAVE BLISTERS?

NO. IT'S BAD ENOUGH THAT MY BOOTS KEEP COMING UNSEWN.



WELL, I'LL TRADE YOU MY BLISTERS FOR YOUR SHOES.

THAT REMINDS OF SOMETHING FROM MILITARY SERVICE.



IT WAS IN THE... WHAT WAS IT, AGAIN? THAT LITTLE BOOKLET FOR SOLDIERS... THAT THEY GAVE YOU...

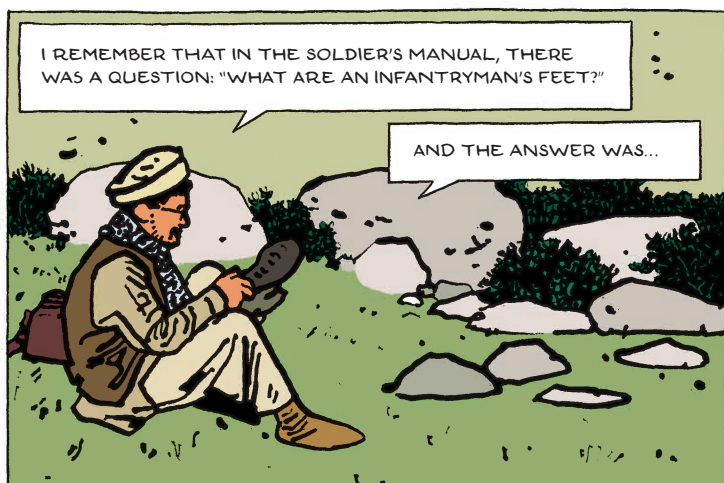
THE MANUAL.

AH, YES, THE SOLDIER'S MANUAL.



I REMEMBER THAT IN THE SOLDIER'S MANUAL, THERE WAS A QUESTION: "WHAT ARE AN INFANTRYMAN'S FEET?"

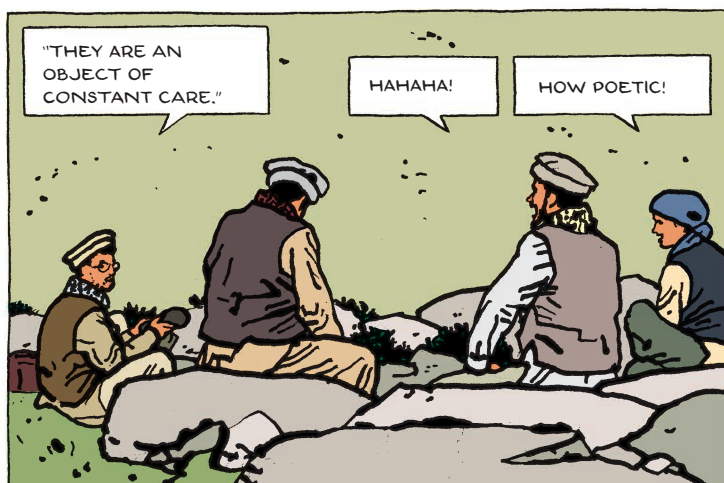
AND THE ANSWER WAS...



"THEY ARE AN OBJECT OF CONSTANT CARE."

HAHAHA!

HOW POETIC!



WE GIVE OURSELVES A TREAT. THE STANDARD RATION OF TEA IS REPLACED BY A GULP OF INSTANT SOUP WITH CROUTONS.



A BIT HIGHER UP, IN A VILLAGE IN RUINS, WE PASS ANOTHER BABA. HE'S WEARING GOGGLES FROM A RUSSIAN HELICOPTER PILOT. I TAKE HIS PORTRAIT.



DOESN'T THE BABA REMIND YOU OF SOMEONE?
YES, BUT I CAN'T PUT MY FINGER ON IT.
POLNAREFF.



YEAH, MICHEL POLNAREFF, THAT POP SINGER WITH THE WILD GLASSES!

C'EST UNE POUPÉE...



QUI FAIT NON, NON, NOOOON, NON...



AT FIRST, I'D DUTIFULLY FILL MY CANTEEN AT EACH BREAK AND I'D LUG IT AROUND FULL. BUT THERE'S SO MUCH RUNNING WATER EVERYWHERE THAT I GIVE IT UP. I OFTEN DRINK DIRECTLY FROM THE RIVER. THE WATER IS VERY PURE.



SINCE I'M TALKING ABOUT DRINKING, LET'S TALK ABOUT PEEING. IN AFGHANISTAN, IT'S OUT OF THE QUESTION TO PEE STANDING UP—ONLY ANIMALS PEE STANDING UP AND SPLATTER THEIR PAWS. WE AREN'T ANIMALS, SO WE SQUAT. SOMEONE WHO PEEES STANDING UP WOULD AT BEST FACE DERISION, AND AT WORST WOULD BE SHUNNED AS WORTHLESS. IN JEANS, OF COURSE, IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO SQUAT, BUT IN AFGHAN GARB, WITH THE VERY WIDE PANTS, YOU MANAGE. YOU SQUAT, THEN YOU LIFT UP AND PUSH ASIDE THE PANTS SO YOU DON'T PEE ALL OVER YOURSELF.



POOP INVOLVES ANOTHER TABOO: UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES CAN YOU WIPE YOUR BEHIND WITH YOUR RIGHT HAND. THE RIGHT HAND IS RESERVED FOR FOOD. I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT I HAVE SOME TROUBLE USING MY LEFT HAND FOR THIS, SO I CHEAT. THERE'S LITTLE OR NO TOILET PAPER, AND IF YOU USE ANY YOU HAVE TO BURY IT. IN WARTIME, THE SOVIETS WHO FIND TOILET PAPER WILL KNOW THAT THERE ARE WESTERNERS IN THE AREA. THERE IS ONE SURPRISING TECHNIQUE USING ROUND ROCKS THAT WORKS PRETTY WELL. AND THE IDEAL SOLUTION STILL IS TO USE WATER.

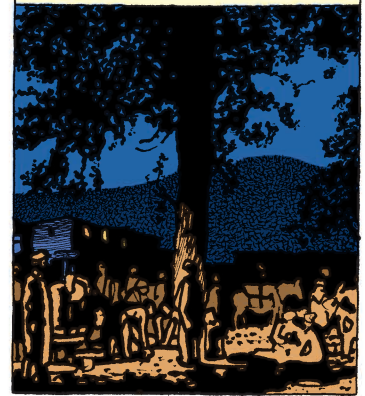




ONCE AGAIN, I SEE THE SUN RISE. TO MAKE UP FOR THE TIME SPENT TREATING PATIENTS IN PORUNS WE WALKED A GOOD PART OF THE NIGHT. WE ARE SO EXHAUSTED WHEN WE STOP FOR A BREAK THAT EVEN THE HORSES HAVE TO LIE DOWN.



THE FOLLOWING NIGHT WE SLEEP IN THE TOWN SQUARE OF KANTIWA.



I MUST SAY THAT ONE OF THE THINGS THAT MAKES MY TREKKING EVEN MORE EXHAUSTING IS THAT I CONSTANTLY CARRY MY MESSENGER BAG ACROSS MY SHOULDERS, WITH MY FOUR CAMERAS AND SOME OF MY FILM. BUT I FEEL SAFER THAT WAY. I'M TOO FRIGHTENED THAT, IF I LEAVE MY EQUIPMENT ON A DONKEY, IT MIGHT DISAPPEAR WITH HIM DOWN A RAVINE. WHEN I SLEEP, I ALWAYS KEEP MY BAG NEAR MY HEAD.



IN THE MORNING, STILL HAZY IN MY SLEEPING BAG, I PEEK OUT AT THE USUAL COMMOTION AROUND ME. A FEW TALL MUJ ARE TALKING THREE FEET AWAY FROM ME.



I KNOW I SHOULD TAKE A PICTURE, BUT I FEEL SO EMPTY.



I FUMBLE IN MY BAG AND WEAKLY PULL OUT THE FIRST CAMERA I FEEL.



BARELY FRAME THE PICTURE.



THERE. SO BE IT.



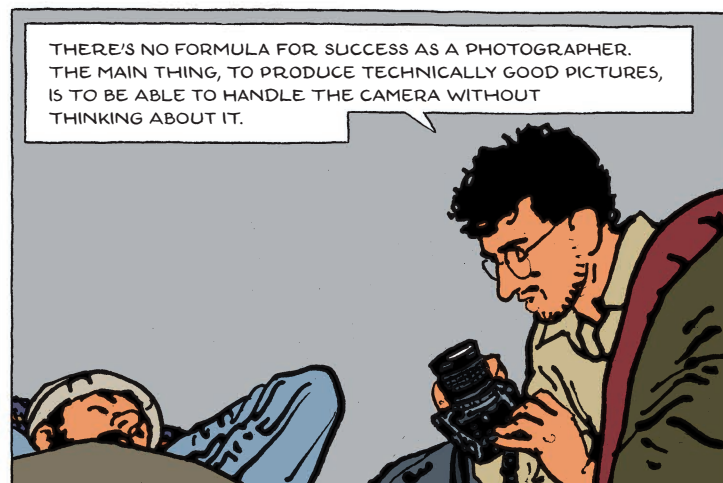
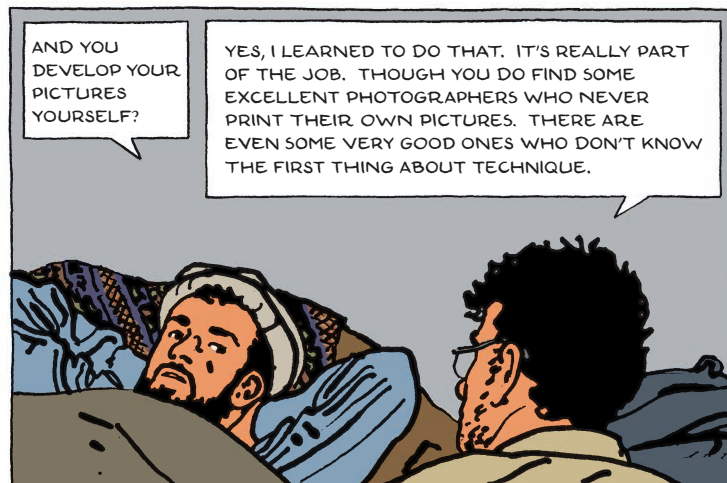
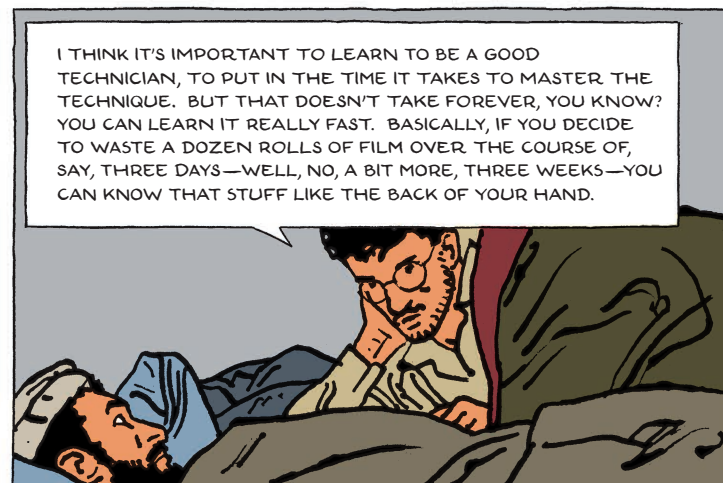
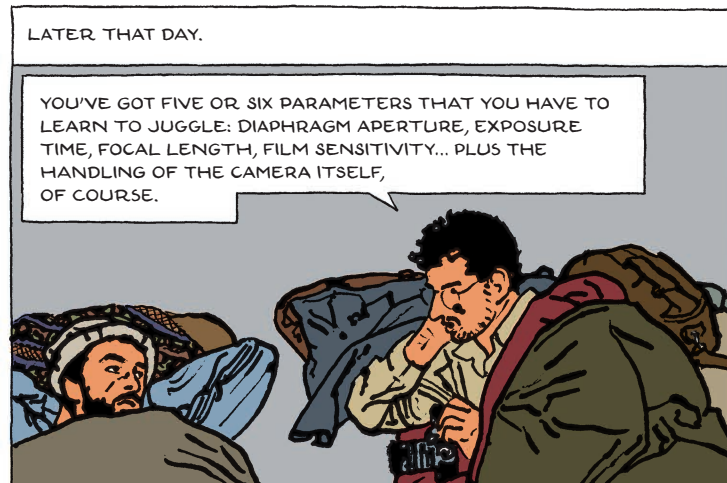
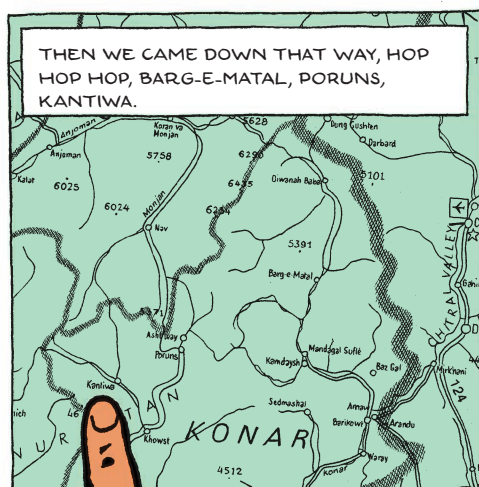
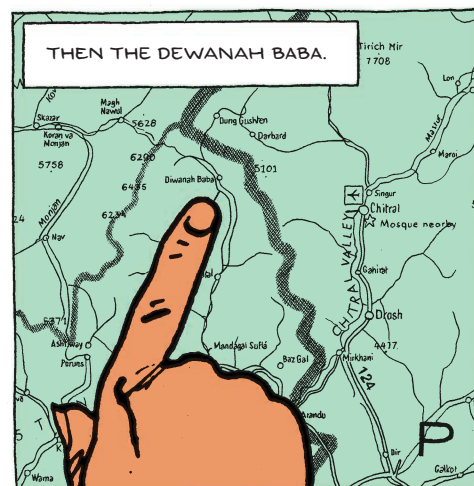
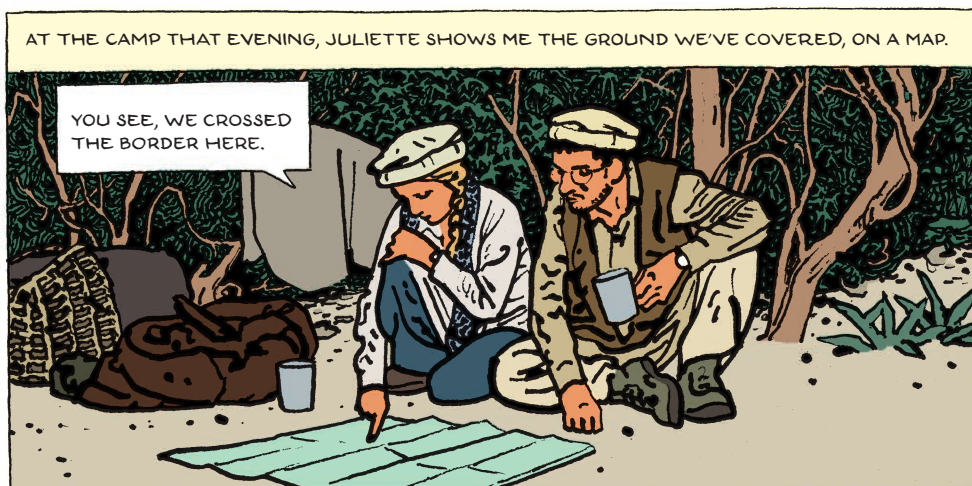


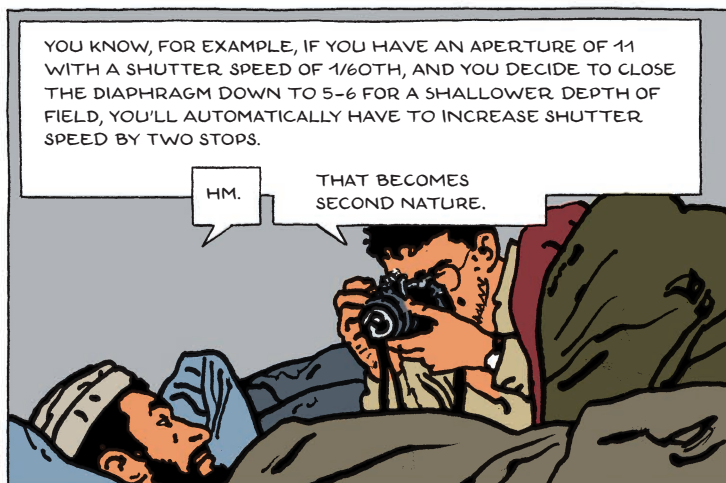
HAVING WOKEN UP, I STROLL AROUND AS THE CARAVAN SHAKES OFF ITS SLUMBER. I'M GLAD TO CATCH A TYPICAL LOCAL GESTURE THAT I LIKE. IT'S SILENT AND IT MEANS, "WHAT DO YOU WANT?" IT COULD BE VAGUELY ITALIAN. I HAVE AN ITALIAN GRANDMOTHER.



MY MISGIVINGS ABOUT LOADING MY BAG ONTO A DONKEY ARE BORNE OUT BY SEVERAL FALLS IN THE COURSE OF THE DAY. ONE OF THEM IS PREVENTED AT THE LAST SECOND BY THE DONKEY HANDLERS. IF THAT DONKEY HAD FALLEN, THAT'S WHERE HE WOULD'VE LANDED, DOWN BELOW.







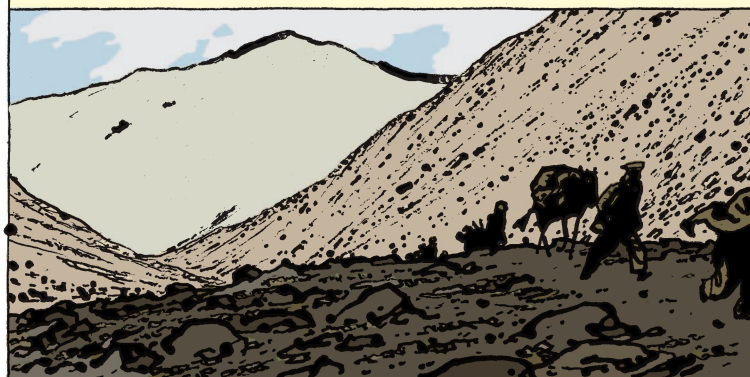
THE NEXT DAY: JULIETTE IS MAKING HERSELF PRETTY FOR THE CLIMB UP THE POJOL.



EVERY TIME I SEE HER BRUSHING HER TEETH I GET PANGS OF CONSCIENCE, BECAUSE I HAVEN'T BRUSHED MINE SINCE PESHAWAR. I'M JUST RINSING MY MOUTH IN THE STREAMS. BUT WITH THE AMOUNT OF DRIED FRUIT WE'RE EATING I KNOW THAT ISN'T SMART.



THE POJOL PASS IS INDEED A TOUGH CLIMB. FORTUNATELY WE CAN CROSS THAT ONE BY DAY, BECAUSE WE'RE STILL IN NURISTAN. THE AIR IS GETTING THIN. YOU FEEL AS IF YOUR TEMPLES ARE BEING SQUEEZED. THE ANIMALS STRUGGLE WITH THEIR LOADS.





THAT HORSE IS MAKING LONG STOPS. HE CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE; HIS EYES SEEM TO BE SAYING, "ENOUGH."



THE ASSHOLE MUJ', THE ONE RÉGIS AND I DON'T LIKE, COMES UP TO HIM, PLACES HIS AK-47 ON TOP OF THE HORSE'S HEAD AND FIRES A VOLLEY OF SHOTS FORWARD BETWEEN HIS EARS.



THE POOR HORSE WHINNIES AND RUNS DESPERATELY FOR FIFTY YARDS BEFORE STOPPING AGAIN, PANTING. AND THE MUJ' STARTS AGAIN, AND KEEPS AT IT ALL THE WAY TO THE TOP.



HE ISN'T THE ONLY ONE DOING THAT. I'VE BEEN TOLD ABOUT THAT PRACTICE. IT'S SICKENING TO SEE. ON THE OTHER HAND, MY WESTERNER'S HOWLS OF INDIGNATION PROBABLY DON'T MEAN MUCH IN A COUNTRY WHERE KIDS ARE GETTING BLOWN UP BY LANDMINES AND PICKING UP BOOBY-TRAPPED DOLLS.

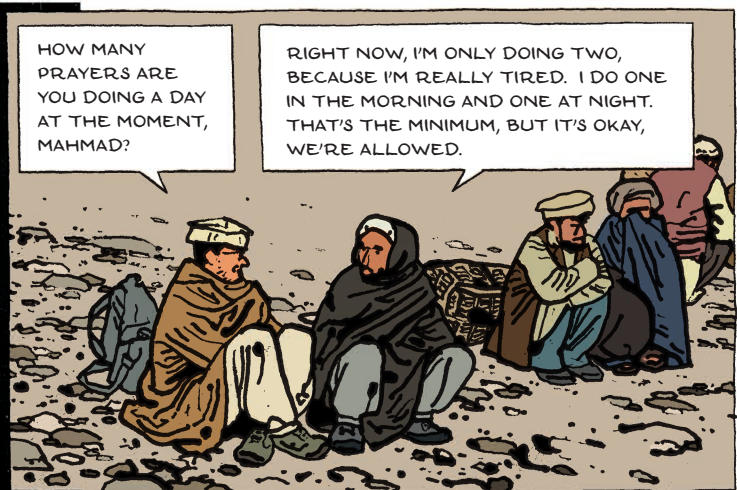


THE SUMMIT. I KNOW I'M REPEATING MYSELF, BUT THIS NAJMUDIN GUY IS INCREDIBLE. WHILE WE DO ONE CLIMB, HE DOES TEN. HE GOES TO RECONNOITER THE PASS, THEN COMES BACK DOWN TO CHECK UP ON THE CARAVAN'S PROGRESS, THEN GOES BACK UP, THEN DOWN AGAIN, NONSTOP. HE'S EVERYWHERE AT ONCE.



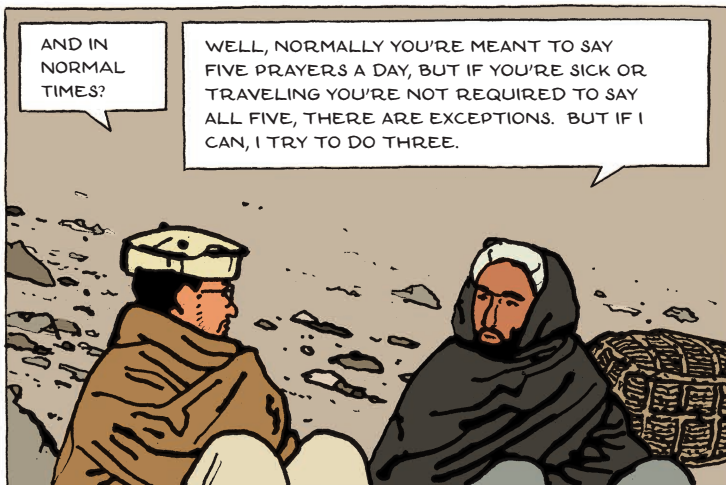
A BIT LOWER DOWN, WE GET SOME REST BY A SMALL LAKE. NOT FOR LONG, BECAUSE IT'S COLD AND WE HAVE TO BE DOWN BEFORE NIGHTFALL. MY MOOD FEELS A BIT SOMBER. I'M SITTING NEXT TO MAHMAD.





HOW MANY PRAYERS ARE YOU DOING A DAY AT THE MOMENT, MAHMAD?

RIGHT NOW, I'M ONLY DOING TWO, BECAUSE I'M REALLY TIRED. I DO ONE IN THE MORNING AND ONE AT NIGHT. THAT'S THE MINIMUM, BUT IT'S OKAY, WE'RE ALLOWED.

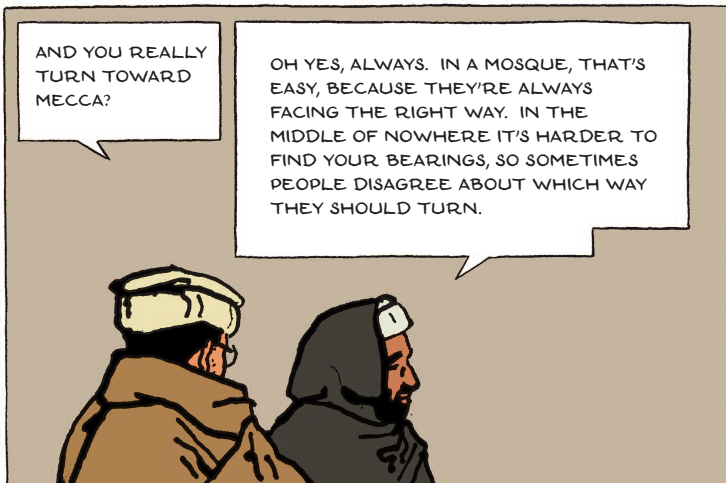


AND IN NORMAL TIMES?

WELL, NORMALLY YOU'RE MEANT TO SAY FIVE PRAYERS A DAY, BUT IF YOU'RE SICK OR TRAVELING YOU'RE NOT REQUIRED TO SAY ALL FIVE, THERE ARE EXCEPTIONS. BUT IF I CAN, I TRY TO DO THREE.

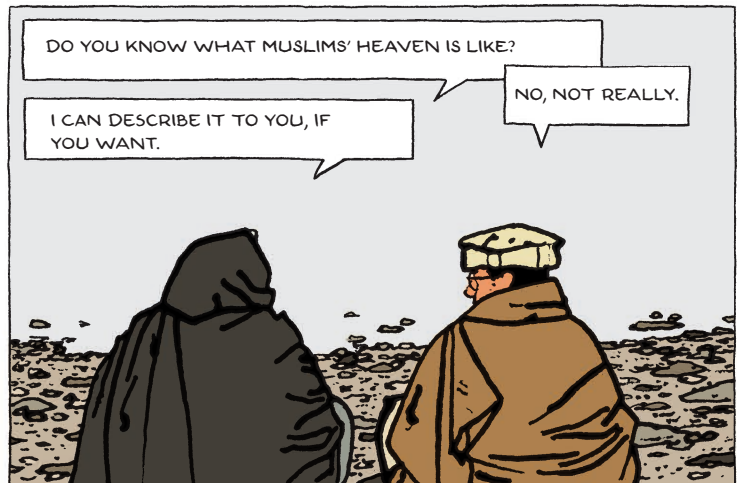


IN ANY CASE, THE TRAVELER'S PRAYER IS ALWAYS SHORTER, BECAUSE WE'RE ALWAYS RUNNING AROUND. BUT, AS YOU SAW, WE FOLLOW THE RITUAL: WE TAKE OFF OUR SHOES; IF WE DON'T HAVE A PRAYER RUG, WE USE A HANDKERCHIEF OR THE SCARF ON OUR HEADS; IF WE CAN'T DO COMPLETE ABLUTIONS, WE AT LEAST WASH OUR HANDS AND FACE. WE ADAPT TO CIRCUMSTANCES, YOU SEE.



AND YOU REALLY TURN TOWARD MECCA?

OH YES, ALWAYS. IN A MOSQUE, THAT'S EASY, BECAUSE THEY'RE ALWAYS FACING THE RIGHT WAY. IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE IT'S HARDER TO FIND YOUR BEARINGS, SO SOMETIMES PEOPLE DISAGREE ABOUT WHICH WAY THEY SHOULD TURN.



DO YOU KNOW WHAT MUSLIMS' HEAVEN IS LIKE?

I CAN DESCRIBE IT TO YOU, IF YOU WANT.

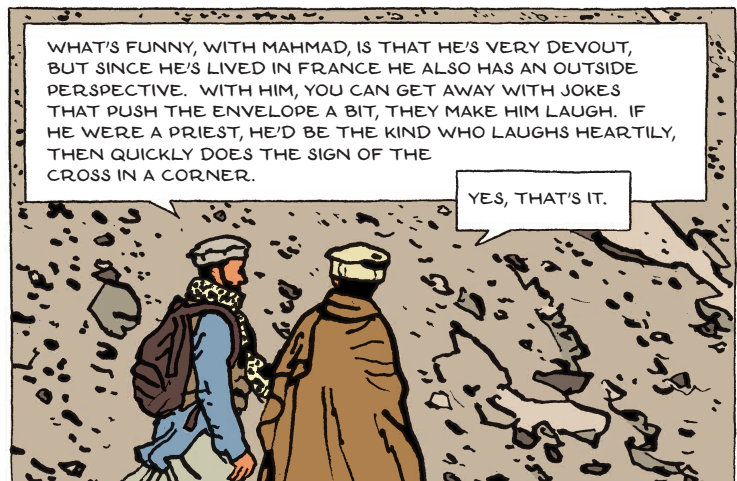
NO, NOT REALLY.



LATER ON.

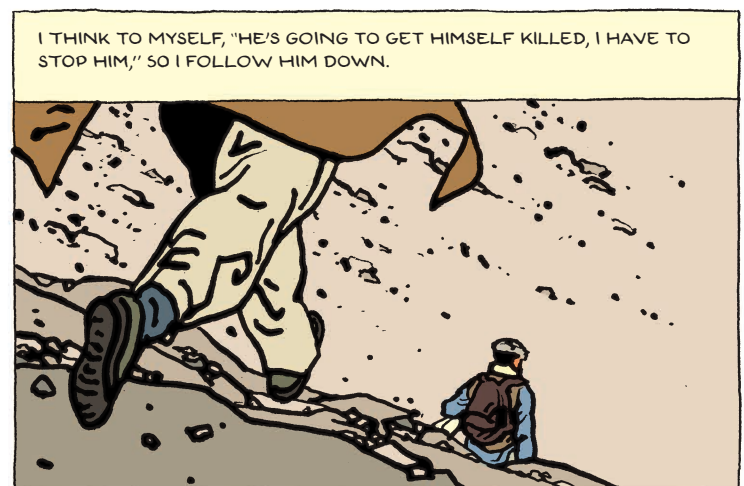
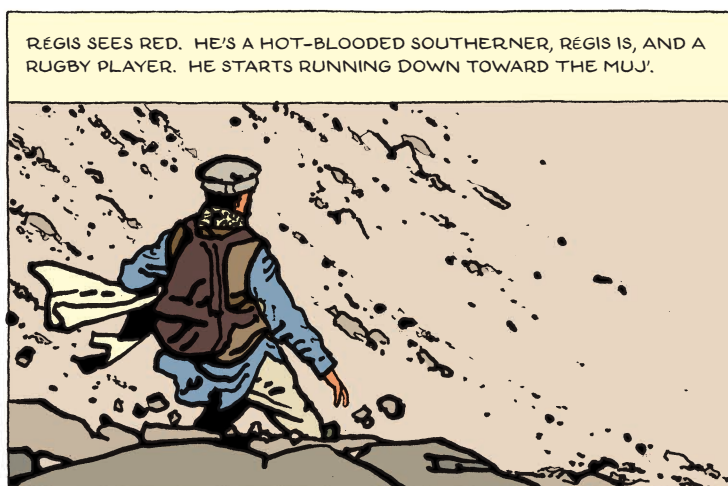
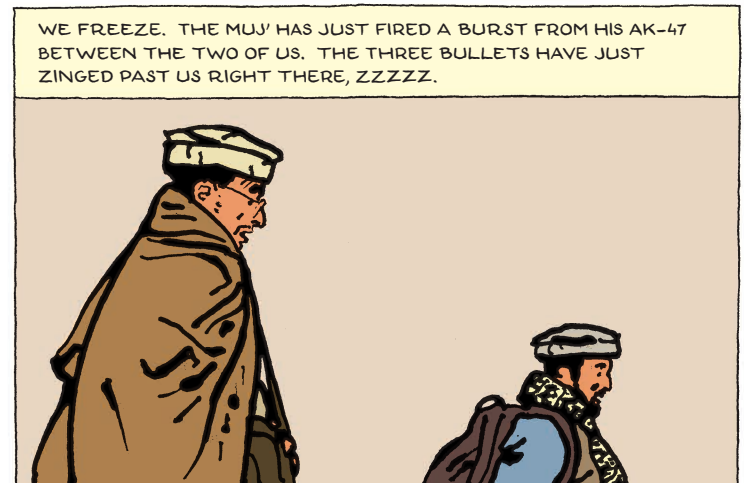
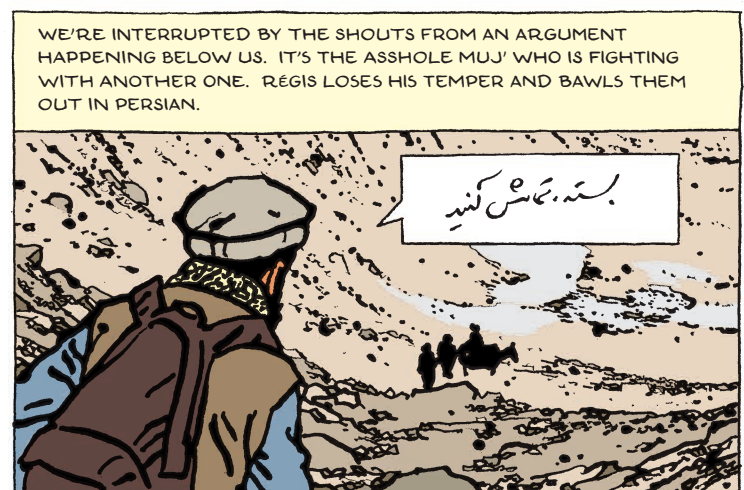
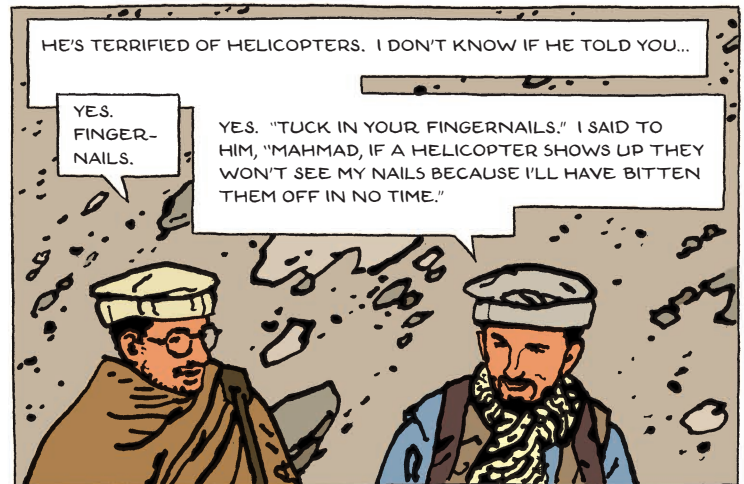
MAHMAD TOLD ME ABOUT PARADISE.

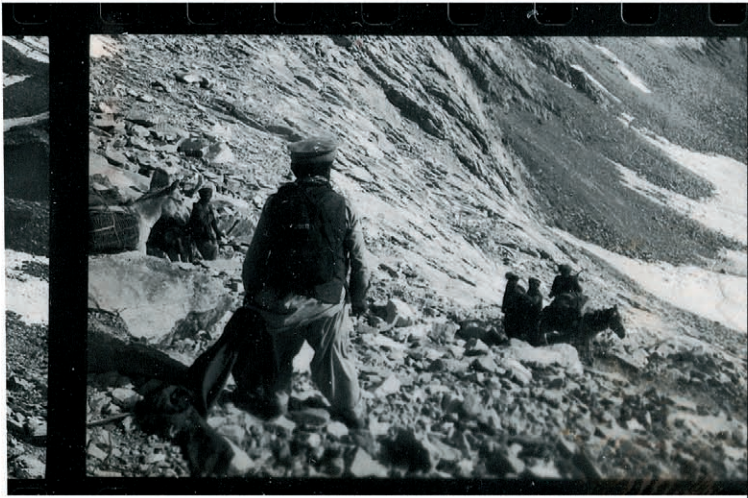
OH YEAH, ME TOO, SEVERAL TIMES. IT'S PRETTY PRECISE, ISN'T IT?



WHAT'S FUNNY, WITH MAHMAD, IS THAT HE'S VERY DEVOUT, BUT SINCE HE'S LIVED IN FRANCE HE ALSO HAS AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE. WITH HIM, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH JOSES THAT PUSH THE ENVELOPE A BIT, THEY MAKE HIM LAUGH. IF HE WERE A PRIEST, HE'D BE THE KIND WHO LAUGHS HEARTILY, THEN QUICKLY DOES THE SIGN OF THE CROSS IN A CORNER.

YES, THAT'S IT.





IN THE MOUNTAINS IT'S NOT A GREAT IDEA TO TRY TO RUN, BACK UP YOUR BUDDY IN A FIGHT, AND TAKE PICTURES AT THE SAME TIME.



DOING THAT PRETTY MUCH SETS YOU UP FOR A FALL.



FORTUNATELY, WHEN I LOOK UP I SEE THAT A FEW OTHER MUJ' HAVE ARRIVED ON THE SCENE AND HAVE TAKEN THE RIFLE AWAY FROM THE ASSHOLE MUJ'.



NAJMUDIN IS CALLED. HE LISTENS TO EVERYONE INVOLVED AND RULES THAT THE ASSHOLE MUJ' WILL GO UNARMED FOR THE REST OF THE TRIP.



MAKES YOU FEEL BETTER, NO?

YES, BUT WE'D BETTER WATCH OUT. IT'S A BIG HUMILIATION FOR THAT GUY TO HAVE HIS RIFLE TAKEN AWAY. HE COULD VERY WELL SEEK REVENGE.





WE HAVE NOW CROSSED THE POJOL PASS AND ARE HEADED TOWARD WHAT MY BUDDIES CALL *LES MONTAGNES RUSSES*—WHICH IN FRENCH MEANS BOTH "THE ROLLERCOASTER" AND "THE RUSSIAN MOUNTAINS"—BECAUSE THE RUSSIANS ARE FLYING OVER AND BOMBING THEM. FOR THE MOMENT, NO RUSSIANS IN SIGHT, JUST A SCARECROW IN A WHEAT FIELD.



IN FRONT OF ME WALKS A CARRIER OF ANTITANK SHELLS. A MAN CAN CARRY A BUNDLE OF A HALF-DOZEN OF THOSE. THE HEAVIER MISSILES ARE CARRIED BY DONKEYS, BUT SOMETIMES ONE OF THE MUJ' WILL CARRY ONE TOO, IN A BAG AND SECURED BY ROPES.



SUCH IS THE LIFE OF A ROCKET-MAN, OR SHELL-MAN: HE'LL GO PICK UP HIS BURDEN IN PAKISTAN, TRUNDLE WITH IT FOR THREE WEEKS UP AND DOWN THE MOUNTAINS, DELIVER IT, AND HEAD OFF TO GET ANOTHER ONE.



I'VE LEARNED TO TAKE CARE OF MY HORSE. WHEN WE STOP, I COVER HIM SO HE WON'T GET COLD. THEN I WAIT A LITTLE BEFORE MAKING HIM DRINK AND EAT. IT'S BETTER NOT TO FEED A HORSE IMMEDIATELY AFTER EXERTION.



THEN HE GETS HIS RATION OF KAH AND JAO—HAY AND OATS.



HE'S EVEN ENTITLED TO A CUDDLE.

DON'T FONDLE HIM TOO MUCH, HE'S NOT USED TO IT.

IT MIGHT KILL HIM.



WHILE THE HORSES MUNCH ON THEIR FODDER, THE MEN CHEW THEIR NASWAR. THEY'LL TAKE OUT A ROUND BOX THAT LOOKS LIKE A PILLBOX, WITH A LID THAT DOUBLES UP AS A POCKET MIRROR.



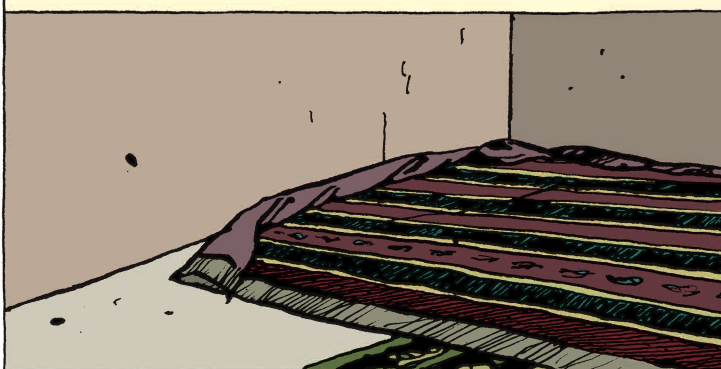
IN THE BOX IS THE NASWAR, A POWDERED MIXTURE OF TOBACCO, LIMESTONE, AND OTHER STUFF. THEY'LL POUR THE POWDER INTO THE PALM OF THEIR HAND, CHOP IT WITH THE LID, AND FLING IT INTO THEIR MOUTH LIKE A HANDFUL OF PISTACHIOS.



THEY'LL KEEP IT STORED AN AVERAGE OF TEN MINUTES, EITHER UNDER THE TONGUE OR BETWEEN LIP AND GUM, THEN SPIT IT OUT.



WHEN CHEWING TOBACCO IN A HOUSE, THE THING TO DO IS LIFT THE CARPET, SPIT ALONG THE WALL, AND PUT THE CARPET BACK ON TOP. A BIT OF ADVICE: BEST NOT TO SLEEP IN THAT CORNER.



NASWAR IS EXTREMELY CORROSIVE. OVER TIME, IT EATS AWAY AT GUMS AND MANY MEN'S MOUTHS ARE DEVASTATED BY IT.



AN INCIDENT HAPPENS: ON A MAKESHIFT BRIDGE, BECAUSE OF A STONE THAT HAS MOVED, A DONKEY GETS A HOOF STUCK IN A HOLE. NAJMUDIN COMES TO THE RESCUE.



HE POSITIONS HIMSELF BEHIND THE DONKEY, GRABS IT BY THE TAIL, LIFTS IT UP—including ITS LOAD—and PUTS IT BACK ON ITS FEET. A SLAP ON THE RUMP AND OFF IT GOES, ALL BACK IN ORDER.



I'M FAR AWAY AND THERE ISN'T ENOUGH LIGHT. I HOPE THAT THE ACTION WILL BE VISIBLE ON THE PHOTOS, OTHERWISE NOBODY WILL BELIEVE ME. NAJMUDIN PUTS THE ROCK BACK IN PLACE AND THE CARAVAN HEADS OFF AGAIN.



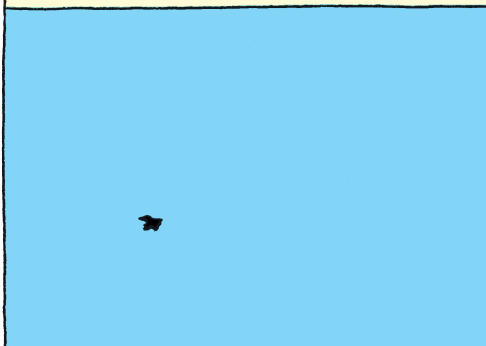
THE DONKEYS DON'T LIKE BRIDGES, BUT I DON'T FIND THEM TOO FRIGHTENING. THEY AREN'T ABOVE PRECIPITOUS DROPS. SURE, IT'S BETTER NOT TO FALL, BUT THEY'RE MANAGEABLE.



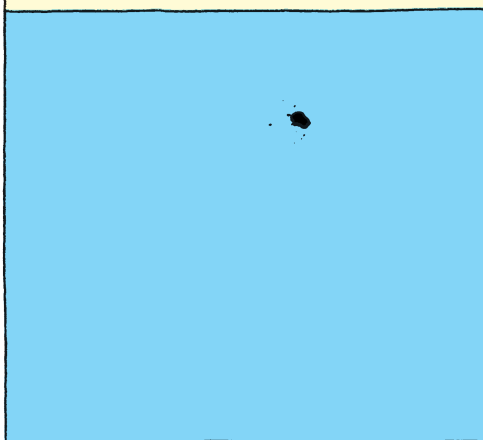
AT THE NEXT REST STOP, JOHN TREATS US TO A DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS.



A FEW MUJ' ARE HOLDING A SHOOTING CONTEST, JUST FOR FUN. A BIRD FLIES BY, NO BIGGER THAN A CHICKADEE. ONE OF THE MUJ' TAKES AIM.



BLAM. A SINGLE SHOT.

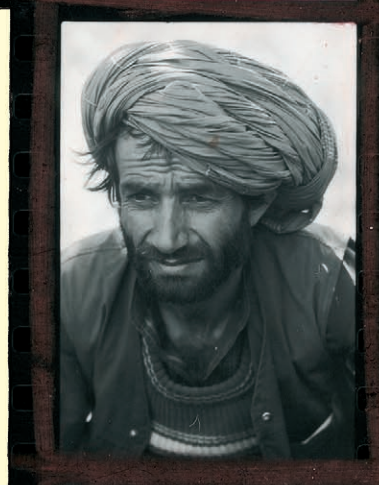
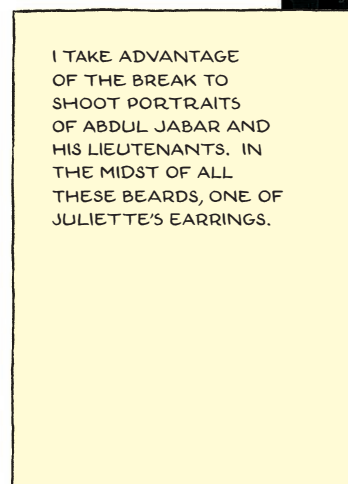
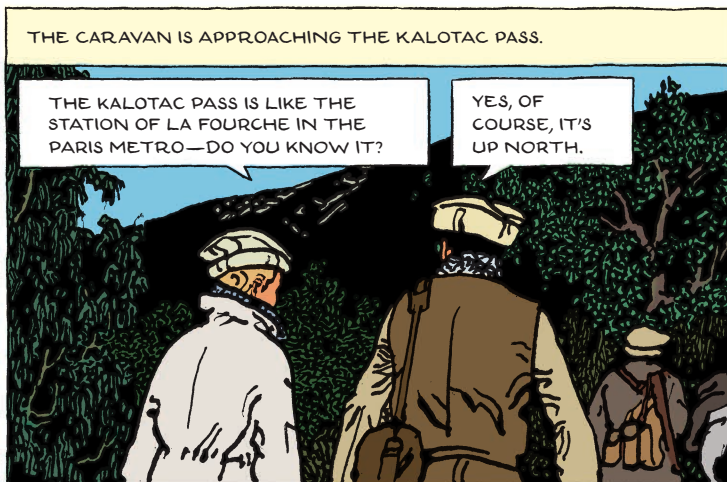


HE BRINGS THE BIRD RIGHT UP TO MY FACE TO SHOW ME THAT THE BULLET HAS ONLY TORN OFF ITS HEAD. THE LITTLE EDIBLE BODY IS INTACT.

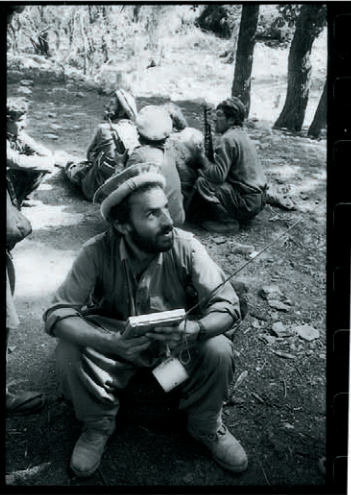


ONCE AGAIN, WE PASS PEOPLE FLEEING. YOU COULD CALL THEM REFUGEES, EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE FAR FROM THEIR PLACE OF REFUGE. THIS GROUP IS FROM KESHM, IN WESTERN BADAQSHAN. THE JOURNEY THEY STILL HAVE TO GO THROUGH IS THE ONE WE'VE JUST COVERED.





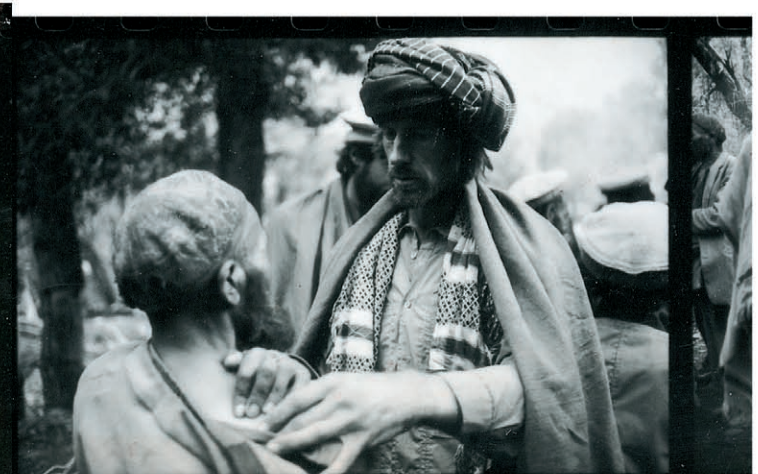
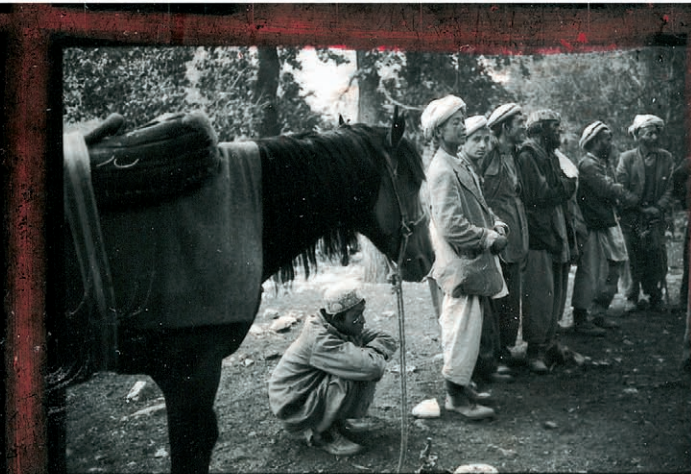
WE TRY TO CATCH RADIO FRANCE INTERNATIONALE ON OUR LITTLE SHORTWAVE RADIOS. SOMETIMES WE MANAGE, SOMETIMES NOT. THIS TIME IT'S NOT.



AT THE END OF THE AFTERNOON, THE MUJ' LISTEN TO THE BBC'S PERSIAN NEWS. LIFE STOPS IN AFGHANISTAN AT THE TIME OF THE BBC'S PERSIAN BROADCASTS.



BEFORE WE SET OFF AGAIN, THOSE WHO REQUEST IT ARE EXAMINED.



AND OFF WE GO, CLIMBING THE KALOTAC.



ILFORD

EVERY NOW AND AGAIN, I THINK ABOUT TINTIN. THOSE STORIES ARE REALLY SOMETHING. I OFTEN HAVE THE IMPRESSION HE'S TRAVELED THROUGH WHERE WE'RE GOING.



WE CROSS THE PASS AT NIGHT. WE STOP ON THE SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN, IN RUINS THAT MORE OR LESS SHELTER US. WE HUDDLE AGAINST THE OLD STONES, AFTER HAVING SHARED A HARD-BOILED EGG AMONG TEN PEOPLE.

BY DAWN WE ALL FEEL AS STIFF WITH COLD AS THE HORSE'S CORPSE WE SAW THE DAY BEFORE.



WE DON'T WANT TO STAY HERE FOREVER, SO WE HAVE TO GET TO THE VILLAGE OF ANJOMAN AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE. WE WALK LIKE SLEEPERS AWAKENED BY AN EARTHQUAKE WHO ONLY HAD TIME TO WRAP THEMSELVES IN A BLANKET. WE KEEP AN EYE ON THE OPAQUE SKY.



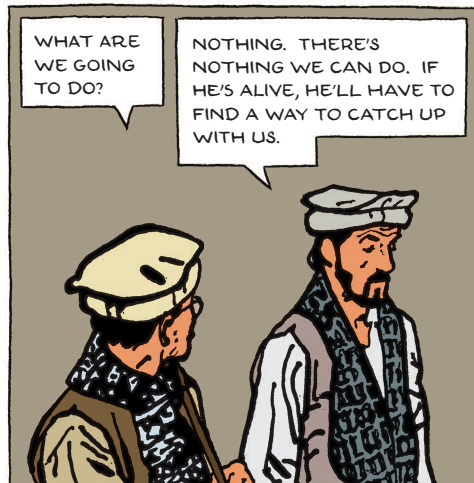
THIS IS A VERY WIDE RIVER THAT ISN'T DEEP BUT HAS A POWERFUL CURRENT. AS THE CARAVAN STARTS CROSSING IT, ANOTHER DONKEY GETS INTO TROUBLE. SOME MUJ' RELIEVE HIM OF HIS PACKSADDLE AND TRY TO LIFT HIM ONTO A ROCK.

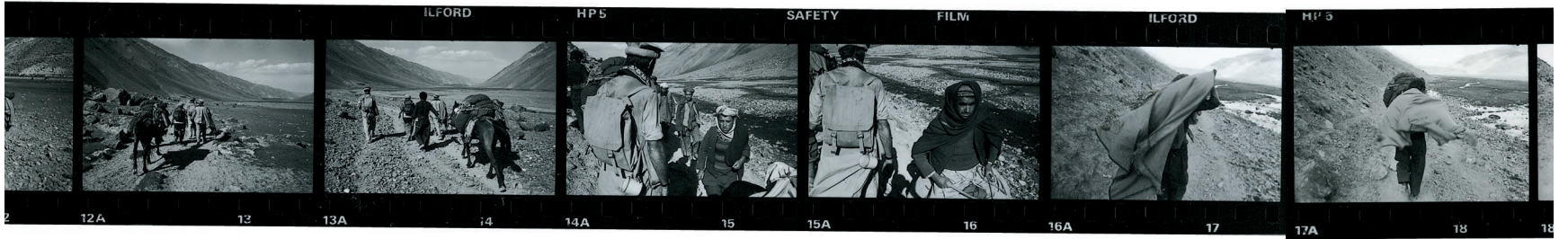


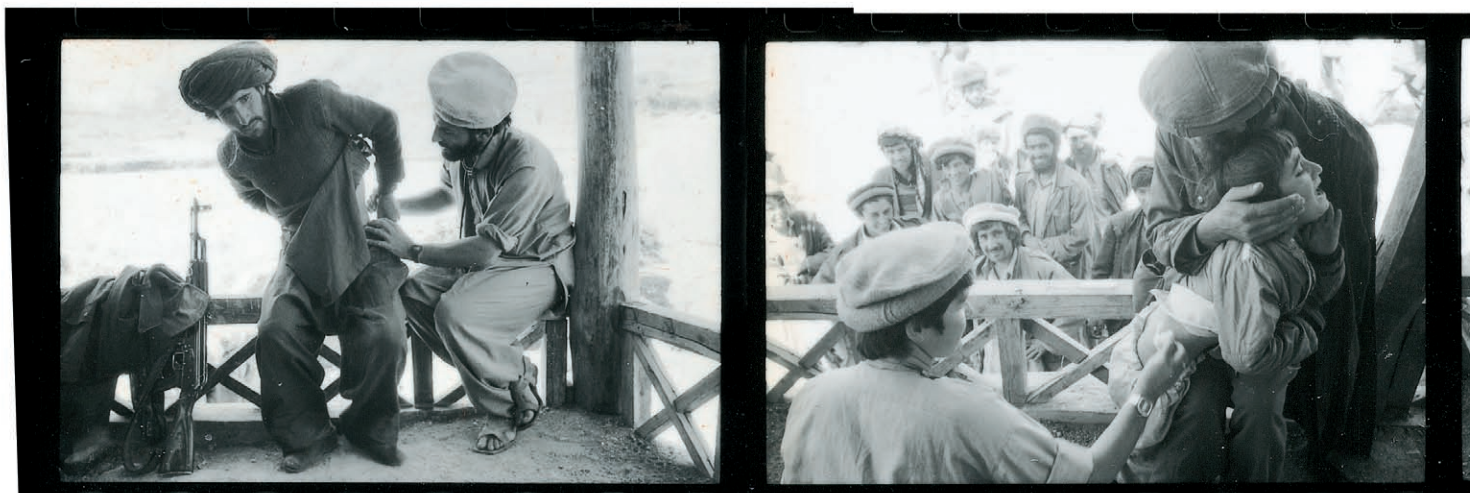
I TAKE A LOT OF PICTURES. AS I'M SHOOTING I START TO FEEL THAT A GOOD PICTURE IS WITHIN MY REACH. IT'S A BIT LIKE FISHING AND FEELING A FISH BITE. I HOLD MY BREATH EACH TIME I PRESS THE BUTTON.



I FEEL THAT, IF I'VE DONE MY JOB CORRECTLY, IT SHOULD BE THERE, AMONG THE LAST FIVE OR SIX SHOTS.







LATER ON, IN THE VILLAGE HALL, WE TALK. I HAVEN'T YET MENTIONED THAT JOHN IS AN OUTSTANDING FISHERMAN. QUITE A SPEAKER, TOO.



WHEN AFGHANISTAN IS NO LONGER A HELL OF WAR, IT'LL BE A HEAVEN FOR ANGLING.

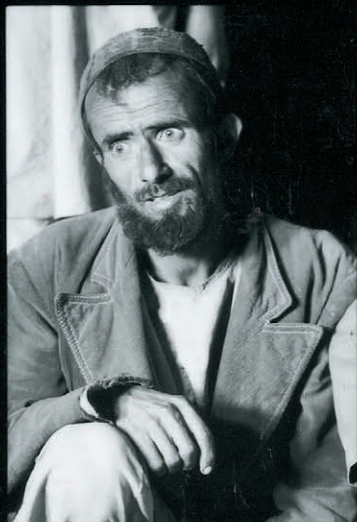
WITH HIS FISHING ROD IN HAND, HE GIVES A DEMONSTRATION, LIKE A STREET PEDDLER.



SUDDENLY, THE DOOR OPENS. MAHMAD THROWS HIMSELF INTO THE ARMS OF THE MAN WHO HAS JUST ENTERED.



IT'S THE GUY WHO WAS FEARED LOST. EVERYONE CROWDS AROUND HIM, PRESSING HIM WITH QUESTIONS. I TAKE PICTURES AS HE TELLS HIS STORY. LAST NIGHT HE FELL BEHIND IN THE DARK. THE HAUNTED LOOK IN HIS EYES GIVES AN IDEA OF WHAT HE HAS BEEN THROUGH: THE TERROR OF BEING LOST, AT NIGHT, IN THE ICY COLD WEATHER; THE TERROR, COME MORNING, OF BEING BOMBED.



HE THOUGHT HE WAS FINISHED. EVERYONE THOUGHT HIM DEAD. HE DOES IN FACT LOOK A BIT LIKE A GHOST. TO HELP HIM RECOVER, HE IS GIVEN PIPING HOT *CHORMAZCHOY*, A REALLY OILY WALNUT TEA, AND SOME BREAD.



CHORCHOY, CHORMAZCHOY: I GOT USED TO THESE SALTED MILK TEAS. I FOUND THEM DISGUSTING AT FIRST, BUT OVERCAME MY AVERSION AND SOON COULDN'T DO WITHOUT THEM. NO SOONER HAVE YOU FINISHED YOUR BOWL THAN YOU'LL BE SERVED SOME MORE.



AT THE NEXT DAY'S BRIEFING WE DISCUSS THE TRICKY CROSSING THAT'S COMING UP: A LARGE UNPROTECTED PLATEAU WHERE CARAVANS ARE OFTEN MACHINE-GUNNED FROM THE AIR. THAT HAPPENED TWO YEARS AGO, THE LAST TIME THE MSF TEAM CAME. A MUJ' DIED, SOMEONE RÉGIS KNEW WELL.



BECAUSE OF THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE WALKING SCHEDULE, THAT PLATEAU HAS TO BE CROSSED IN THE DAYTIME. BEFORE ENTERING IT, WE'LL SPLIT THE GROUP INTO PAIRS, LEAVING A LOT OF SPACE BETWEEN EACH OF THEM TO AVOID OFFERING TOO COMPACT A TARGET.

WE LEAVE ANJOMAN. THE BEAUTY OF THESE LANDSCAPES IS ALL THE MORE POIGNANT AS WE ARE NOW ENTERING COMBAT ZONES.



WE ENTER THE PLATEAU. IT'S TRUE THAT IT'S HUGE AND YOU HAVE NOWHERE TO HIDE. BLESSING OUR LUCK, WE SEE THE SKY IS EMPTY, TOO. THE SMALL GROUPS FORM UP AND START OUT ONE BY ONE.





NOTHING BAD HAPPENS.
WE GET THROUGH. ON
THE OTHER SIDE THERE'S
A RIVER AND THE COVER
OF A FEW TREES. THAT'S
WHERE, TWO YEARS AGO,
THEY BURIED THE MAN
WHO DIDN'T MAKE IT.



SOME MUJ' SQUAT AND
PRAY. REGIS JOINS THEM.
EVERYONE TAKES A
MOMENT OF RESPECTFUL
CONTEMPLATION.



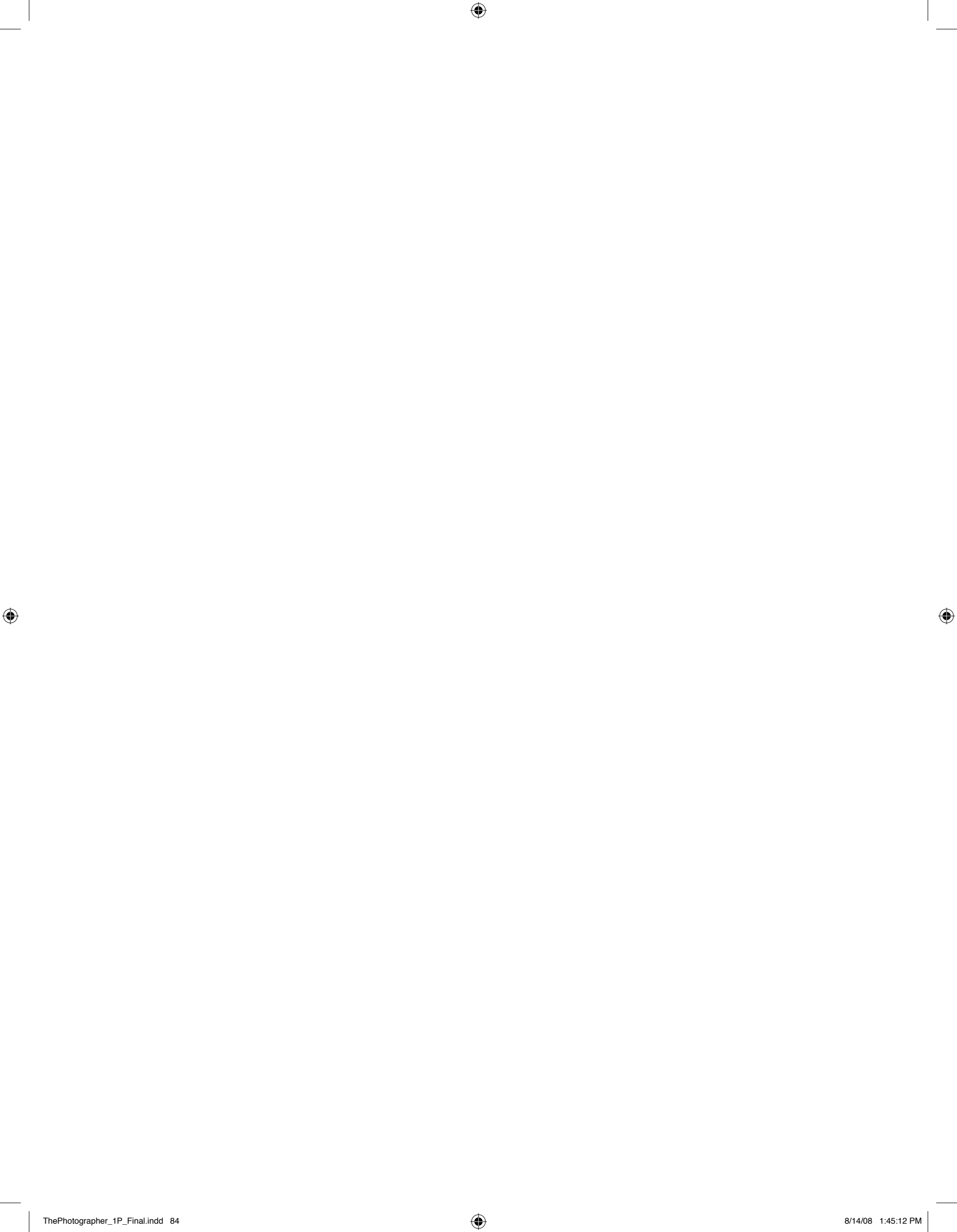






Part 2





HELICOPTER! THE SHOUT MAKES ITS WAY DOWN THE CARAVAN, JUST AHEAD OF THE ENGINE HUM EVERYONE FEARS.



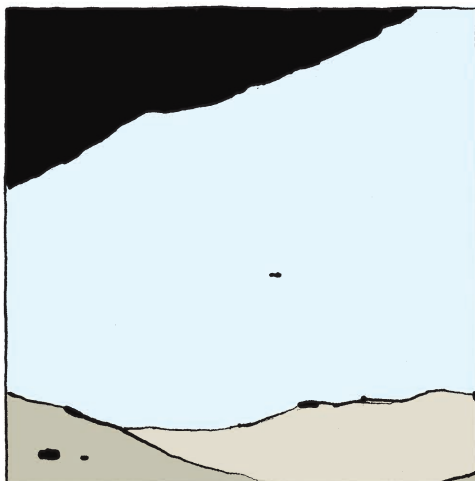
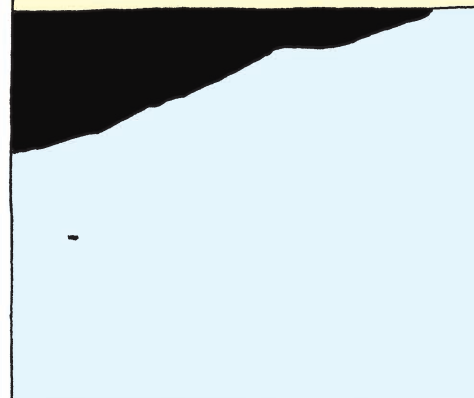
EVERYONE RUNS FOR WHATEVER COVER THEY CAN FIND. LUCKILY, THERE ARE PLENTY OF HIDING PLACES AROUND US.



I HIDE UNDER A ROCK LEDGE AND TRY TO SPOT THE CHOPPER IN THE PORTION OF SKY I CAN SEE.



THERE IT IS, FAR AWAY—BUT NOT AS FAR AS I'D LIKE.



PHEW! GONE.





A SHEPHERD CROSSES A RIVER WITH HIS SHEEP. FOR HIM THE DAY'S JOURNEY IS COMING TO AN END. NOT FOR US.



WE'RE GOING TO WALK THROUGH THE NIGHT, BECAUSE THIS IS THE REGION OF SKAZAR. SKAZAR IS THE MAIN SOVIET BASE IN THE AREA, BARRING THE ROAD INTO BADA KHSHAN. WE ARE GOING TO SKIRT FAIRLY CLOSE TO IT.

THE NIGHT IS ON OUR SIDE: A MOONLESS NIGHT, LIKE IN SUSPENSE NOVELS. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE CAN'T SEE THREE FEET AHEAD. WE'RE TWISTING OUR ANKLES AT EVERY OTHER STEP. AND STOPPING IS OUT OF THE QUESTION.



BY DAYBREAK, I'M EXHAUSTED. ALONG WITH A FEW OTHERS, I BEG FOR A HALT.

CONTINUE IF YOU WANT, I'M STOPPING. I CAN'T TAKE ANY MORE.

ME NEITHER!

BREAK!



WHERE DID THOSE FEW FISH COME FROM? WAS IT JOHN WHO FOUND THE STRENGTH TO CATCH THEM? WE EAT THEM GRILLED ON THE END OF A STICK.



WE MOVE ONTO STEEP AND ROUGH PATHS. I FEEL COMPLETELY OUT OF SYNCH. WHILE CHANGING LENSES, I LOSE THE SUN GUARD FOR MY 105MM. THOSE THINGS ARE EXPENSIVE.



I WAS ALREADY IN A FOUL MOOD, AND THAT MAKES ME FURIOUS AT MYSELF. AND DEPRESSED.





IS THAT FIGHTING
WE'RE HEARING?

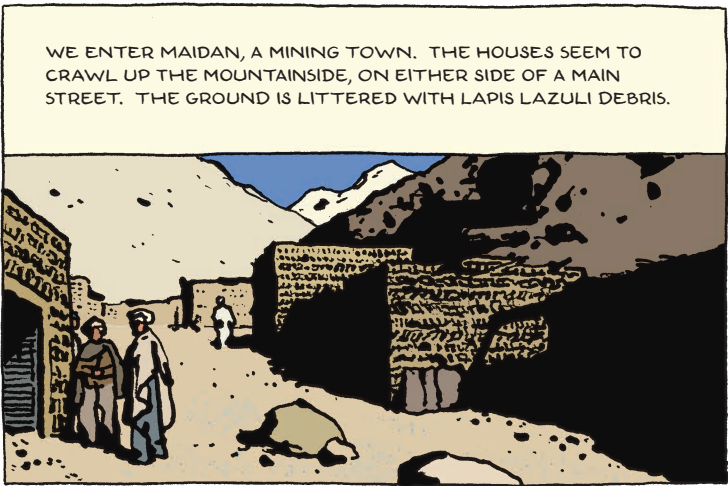
NO, THAT'S
MAIDAN.



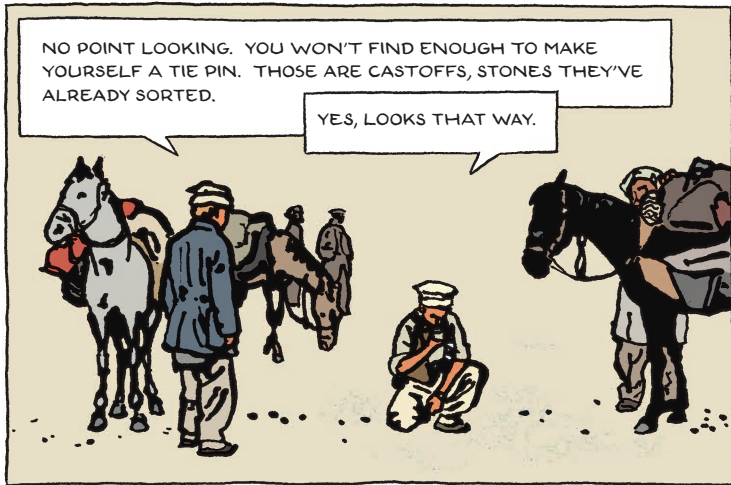
IN MAIDAN THEY HAVE DEPOSITS
OF LAPIS LAZULI.

THOSE BLUE STONES?

YES. THEY'RE BLOWING
UP THE MOUNTAIN WITH
DYNAMITE.

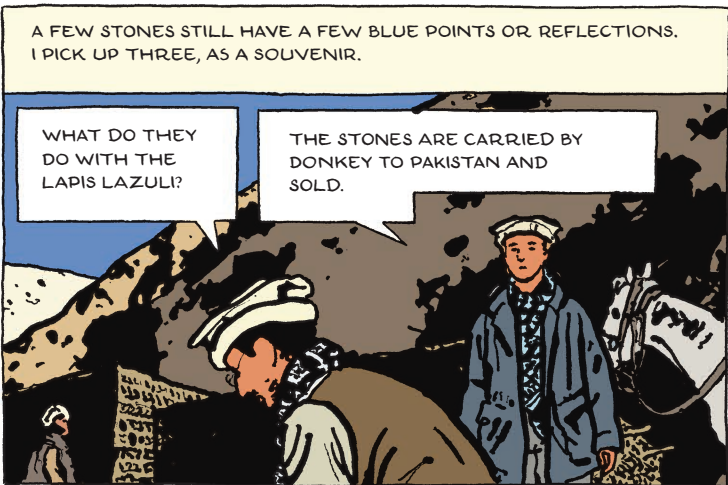


WE ENTER MAIDAN, A MINING TOWN. THE HOUSES SEEM TO
CRAWL UP THE MOUNTAINSIDE, ON EITHER SIDE OF A MAIN
STREET. THE GROUND IS LITTERED WITH LAPIS LAZULI DEBRIS.



NO POINT LOOKING. YOU WON'T FIND ENOUGH TO MAKE
YOURSELF A TIE PIN. THOSE ARE CASTOFFS, STONES THEY'VE
ALREADY SORTED.

YES, LOOKS THAT WAY.



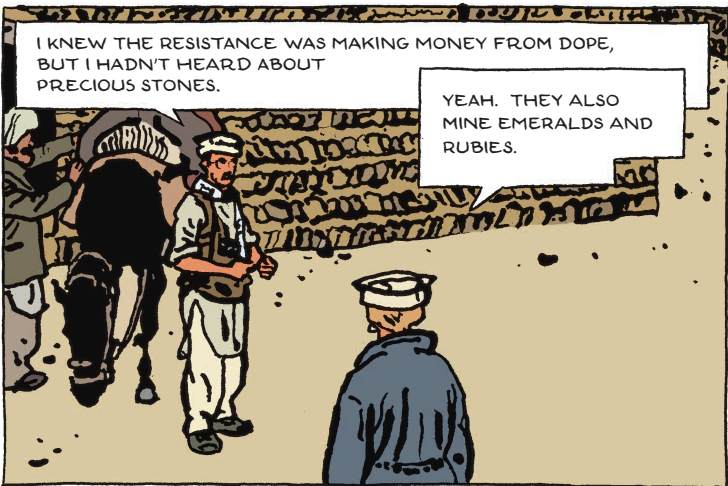
A FEW STONES STILL HAVE A FEW BLUE POINTS OR REFLECTIONS.
I PICK UP THREE, AS A SOUVENIR.

WHAT DO THEY
DO WITH THE
LAPIS LAZULI?

THE STONES ARE CARRIED BY
DONKEY TO PAKISTAN AND
SOLD.



THE MONEY GOES TO THE JAMIAT-E-ISLAMI PARTY, ONE OF THE
SEVEN PARTIES OF THE RESISTANCE. THAT'S THE PARTY OF
MASSOUD AND OF BASSIR, THE COMMANDER
WE'RE GOING TO SEE IN YAFTAL.



I KNEW THE RESISTANCE WAS MAKING MONEY FROM DOPE,
BUT I HADN'T HEARD ABOUT
PRECIOUS STONES.

YEAH. THEY ALSO
MINE EMERALDS AND
RUBIES.

DOES THE DYNAMITING CONTINUE AT NIGHT? I HAVE NO IDEA. I SLEEP. THE FATIGUE IS ACCUMULATING AND I NEVER SEEM TO MANAGE TO REST ENOUGH.



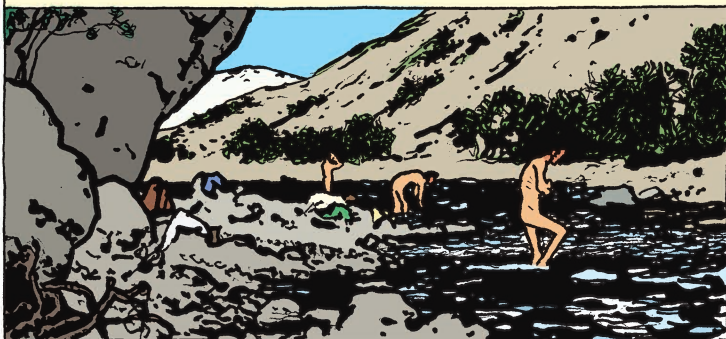
AS SOON AS WE'RE UP, A BIG EVENT: WE DECIDE TO WASH. NOT PIECEMEAL AS USUAL, WE'RE GOING TO HAVE A REAL BATH IN A RIVER.



THERE IS NOTHING HAPPY-GO-LUCKY ABOUT IT. THIS TAKES AS MUCH PLANNING AS A MILITARY OFFENSIVE—AN ARMED ESCORT COMES WITH US, AND GUARDS ARE POSTED AROUND THE TORRENT, WITH THEIR BACKS TURNED AND UNDER ORDERS TO TURN AWAY ANY GAWKERS.



BETWEEN THE DEPLOYMENT OF FORCES AND THE ICE-COLD WATER, THE BATH ISN'T THE MOST CAREFREE EXPERIENCE. PLUS, SEEING MYSELF NAKED FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE GERMSHESMA, I BARELY RECOGNIZE MY BODY.



I'M EMACIATED. BESIDES MY FACE, HANDS, AND WRISTS, WHICH ARE TANNED A DEEP BROWN, EVERYTHING ELSE IS PALLID. YOU CAN SEE EVERY MUSCLE FIBER, LIKE ON AN ANATOMICAL DRAWING.



AS I PUT ON A FRESH SHIRT, THE SMELL OF CLEAN CLOTH JUMPS OUT AT ME.



BEFORE LEAVING THE RIVER, THE MUJ' DECIDE TO FISH IN IT. BUT THEIR TECHNIQUE ISN'T MUCH LIKE JOHN'S. IT OWES MORE TO THE MINERS OF MAIDAN.



BOOM.



THE NUMBER OF DEAD FISH IS BEYOND BELIEF. SEVERAL THOUSAND? THEY PICK UP A DOZEN. WE SET OFF.



ONE LAST PASS SEPARATES US FROM TESHKAN: THE ARASH PASS. APTLY NAMED, SINCE THE WORD MEANS "TO RIP OUT" IN FRENCH. WE COME TO A STREAM THAT WE HAVE TO CROSS BY HOPPING FROM STONE TO STONE. LOOKS EASY ENOUGH.



BUT MY LITTLE RUN OF BAD LUCK CONTINUES. I SLIP AND TAKE A DUNKING. SO DOES MY BIG NIKON F2.



I PULL IT OUT RIGHT AWAY BUT IT'S NICELY SOAKED.



THE DIAGNOSIS: THE FILTER OF THE 20MM AND THE LIGHT METER WERE SHOT.



I FEEL ALL MY NERVOUS FATIGUE RUSH INTO THAT INCIDENT, PRODUCING NO END OF DISCOURAGEMENT. I'M FED UP.



YOU OKAY, DIDIER?

NO.

THE DYING DONKEY THAT WE PASS A BIT FARTHER ALONG DOESN'T EXACTLY CHEER ME UP.



A SHORT WAY FROM THE SUMMIT, WE WALK AMONG HERDS OF SHEEP AND GOATS LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES. IN THAT WAR-RAVAGED REGION, WHERE PEASANTS HAVE BECOME SOLDIERS, THERE AREN'T ENOUGH MEN TO LOOK AFTER THE ANIMALS OR TEND THE FIELDS.



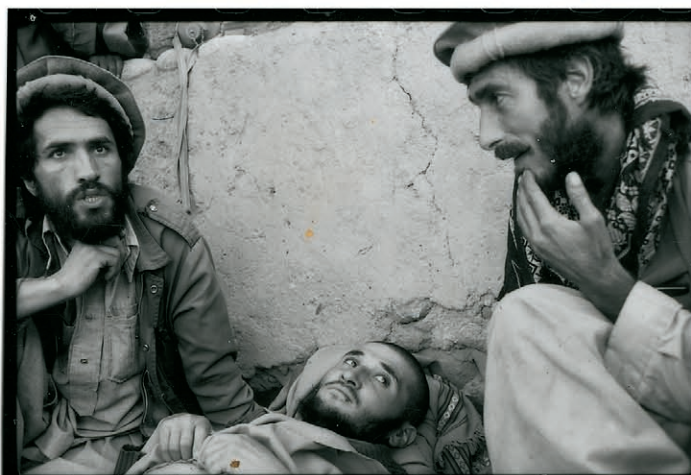
AT THE TOP OF THE PASS I TAKE A FEW GROUP PICTURES WITH MY F2 CAMERA. IT SEEMS TO BE RESPONDING MORE OR LESS NORMALLY. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO EXPECT OF THE FILM.
IT'S SEPTEMBER 4TH, JULIETTE'S BIRTHDAY. I HAVE TO BE SURE TO BRING BACK AT LEAST ONE GOOD SHOT. JOHN LENDS ME HIS CAMERA, WITH COLOR FILM.
THE MUJ' FROM TESHKAN, WHO ARE NEARLY HOME, POSE IN FRONT OF THE ROW OF MSF PEOPLE.
I SAY, "SMILE!"
THOSE WHO UNDERSTAND, SMILE.



ON THE WAY DOWN, IN THE VILLAGE OF RASMI, I TAKE ANOTHER GROUP PHOTO, INDOORS THIS TIME. THE MUJ' DON'T PUT DOWN THEIR WEAPONS, BUT THEY DO PUT THEIR BAGGAGE DOWN. THEY'RE BACK HOME.



DURING THE CONSULTATIONS IN RASMI, I WATCH ROBERT AS HE LISTENS TO THE PATIENTS. HIS FACE SHOWS THE STRAIN OF THE SAME EXHAUSTION I'M FEELING. YET HE KEEPS GOING. IT'S UP TO ME TO DO AS MUCH.



THERE. JUST A COUPLE MORE MILES AND WE REACH THE VALLEY OF TESHKAN, OUR JOURNEY'S FIRST DESTINATION. THE WAKIL, OR REGIONAL REPRESENTATIVE, WHOSE SON I MET IN PESHAWAR, HAS DEPLOYED HIS SECURITY DETAIL IN A GUARD OF HONOR TO WELCOME US.



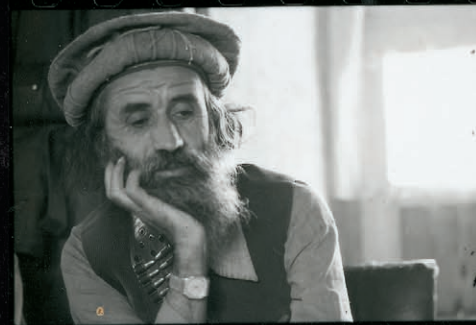
HIS REUNION WITH JULIETTE IS JOYFUL. SHE SHAKES THE WAKIL'S HEALTHY HAND. THE OTHER ONE DIED WHEN A BULLET HIT HIS LEFT ARM.



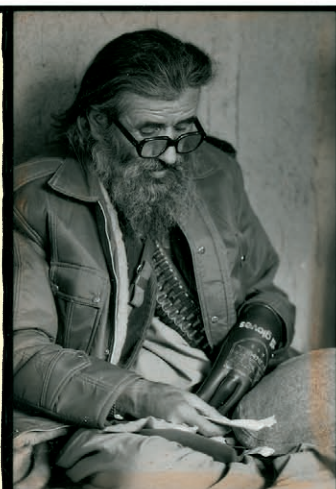
IT'S ALMOST CERTAIN THAT NOTHING CAN BE DONE FOR HIS ARM, BUT SINCE HE'S THE WAKIL, WE'RE GOING TO EXAMINE HIM FOR THREE HOURS, TO MAKE IT VERY CLEAR THAT HE'S THE CHIEF.



INDEED, IN THE WAKIL'S HOUSE, AROUND CUPS OF TEA, ROBERT, RÉGIS, AND JOHN HANDLE HIS ARM WITH A GREAT DEAL OF RESPECT. THERE ARE A THOUSAND EXPLANATIONS, ALL SURROUNDING THE SAME CONCLUSION: THE WAKIL WILL NOT RECOVER THE USE OF HIS LEFT ARM.



DESPITE THE BAD NEWS, HE GIVES US A FEW RECOMMENDATION LETTERS THAT WILL ALLOW THOSE WHO ARE CONTINUING THE JOURNEY TO REACH YAF TAL.



AS WE LEAVE TESHKAN, WE'RE ALSO LEAVING BEHIND SYLVIE, ODILE, MICHEL, AND TALL RONALD, WHO ARE GOING TO RUN A SMALL AND RUDIMENTARY HOSPITAL, LOST AMONG THE FLOWERS. WE'LL PICK UP ODILE, MICHEL, AND RONALD ON THE WAY BACK. SYLVIE WILL SPEND THE ENTIRE WINTER THERE, TILL THE NEXT TEAM ARRIVES.



THE CARAVAN, HAVING SHED HALF ITS MEMBERS, SETS OFF ON THE LAST STRETCH, TESHKAN TO YAF TAL, VIA DARAIM.



WE ENTER DARAIM, WHERE THE GUARD OF HONOR, LESS MARTIAL THAN IN TESHKAN, IS COMPOSED OF BLACK SHEEP.



IT'S A BEAUTIFUL VILLAGE, AND SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN SPARED BY THE WAR. THE COMMANDER WELCOMES US WITH WONDERFUL KINDNESS. ONE THING IS WORRYING HIM: HIS YOUNG SON'S TESTICLES ARE NOT COMING DOWN.



FOR REASONS OF MODESTY, THE BOY IS EXAMINED BEHIND A BLANKET. THE DIAGNOSIS IS NOT ALARMING. BEFORE AND AFTER THE EXAMINATION HIS FATHER IS VERY GENTLE AND CARING.

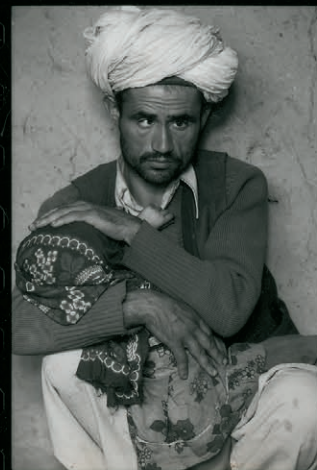


MOST OF THE AFGHAN MEN, INCLUDING THOSE WHO SEEM MOST BRUTAL, BEHAVE LIKE MOTHERS TOWARD THE CHILDREN. THEY DEMONSTRATE THEIR LOVE IN A VERY PHYSICAL AND TENDER WAY. I OFTEN SEE THEM CHECK THAT THEIR KIDS AREN'T COLD, STRAIGHTEN THEIR HATS, AND SO ON.



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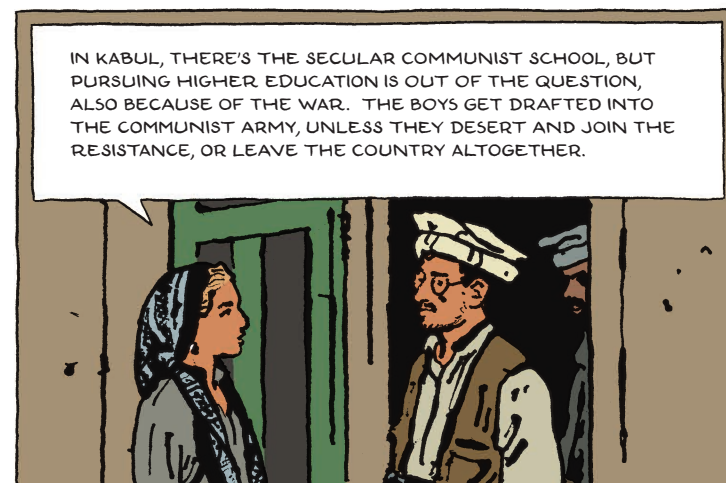
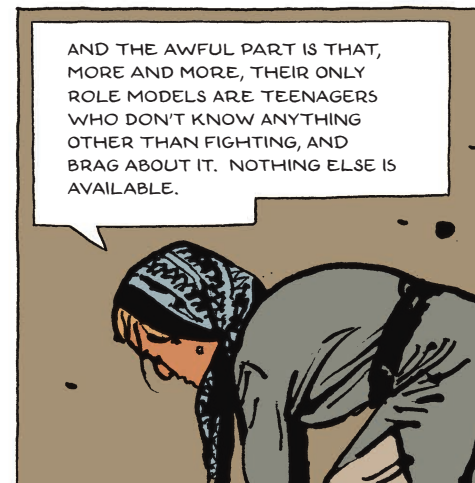
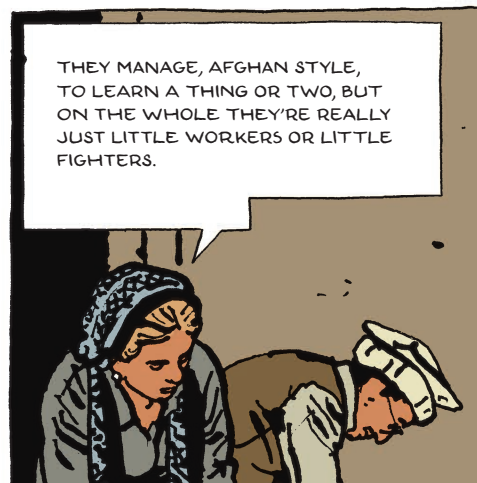
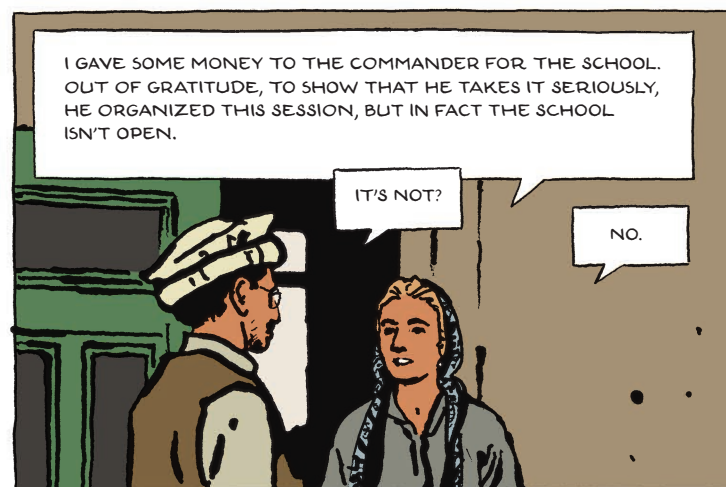
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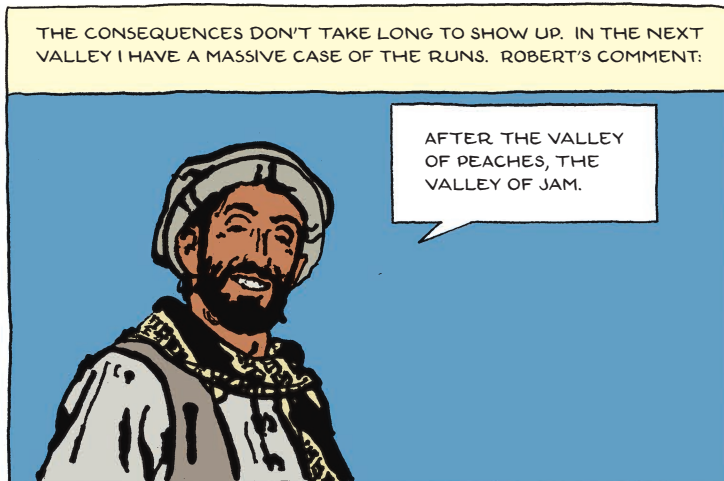
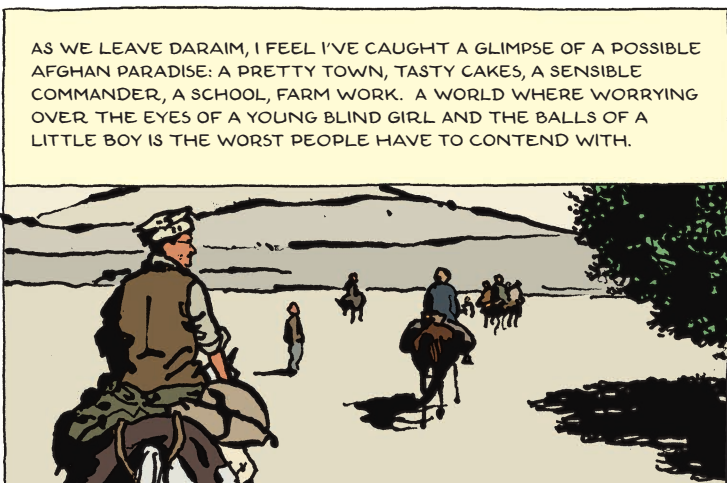
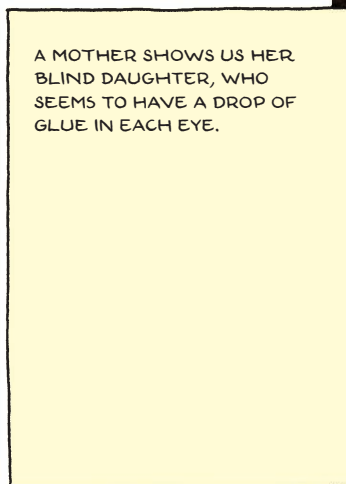
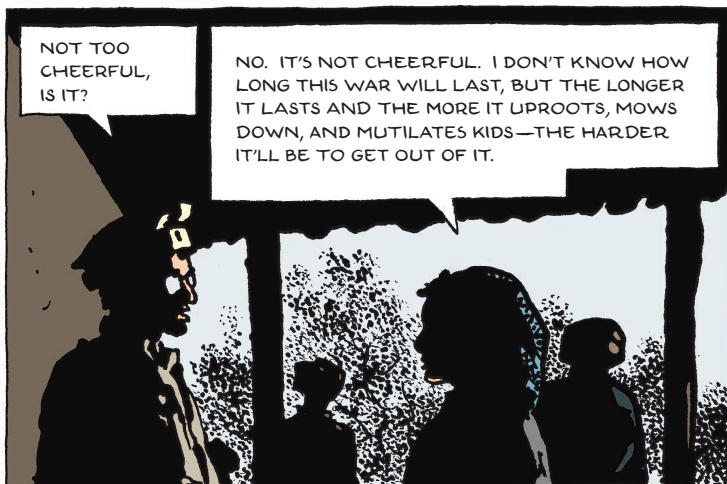
WE GO FROM THE VILLAGE HALL TO THE MOSQUE. A KORANIC CLASS HAS BEEN IMPROVISED FOR US.



SINCE THE BEGINNING OF TIME, EVERY KID WHO IS LEARNING TO READ HAS HAD THE SAME EXPRESSION.







AS THE SUN SETS, WE CROSS A WIDE RIVER ON A FERRY.



ONE LAST MARCH LEADS US TO OUR GOAL, YAF TAL, WHERE WE ARE GREETED, AT THE EDGE OF THE VILLAGE, BY COMMANDER BASSIR KHAN. THE BEST PICTURES OF BASSIR KHAN ARE LOW-ANGLE SHOTS. HE IS A POWERFUL FIGURE, RATHER FRIENDLY AND EXTREMELY WILY.



NAJMU DIN RETURNS TO HIS USUAL PLACE, TO THE LEFT OF HIS CHIEF. HE REPORTS ON HIS MISSION.



NEED I MENTION OUR RELIEF AT HAVING ARRIVED? YET YAF TAL IS NO HAVEN. FARAWAY EXPLOSIONS REMIND US OF THE FIGHTING GOING ON AND OF THE NEED FOR THE TEAM'S WORK. BUT NEVER MIND. ALL I CAN SEE, FOR THE TIME BEING, IS THAT THE FORCED MARCH IS OVER. IT LASTED A MONTH.



RÉGIS FISHES A COPY OF *DOUBLE PAGE*, A FRENCH MAGAZINE, OUT OF HIS SADDLEBAGS. IT CONTAINS SOME SPECTACULAR LARGE-SIZED COLOR PICTURES OF A BUZKASHI GAME, TAKEN BY SABRINA AND ROLAND MICHAUD. THAT'S HIS PRESENT FOR BASSIR. HAPPY AND FLATTERED, THE LOCAL LORD SHOWS IT TO HIS MEN.



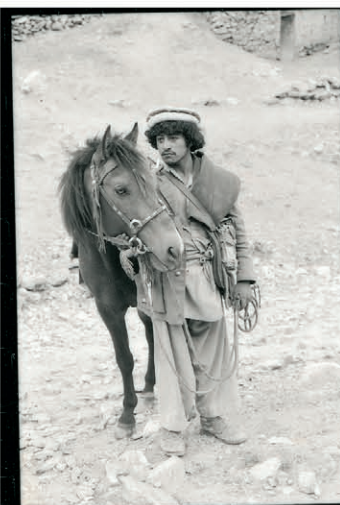
AFTER HAVING WASHED OUR HANDS, WE ARE TREATED TO A FEAST. THERE ARE WONDERFUL BREADS—PLAIN, BRIOCHE-LIKE, DECORATED, WALNUT-FILLED. VEGETABLE DUMPLINGS. AMAZING YOGURTS. MAGNIFICENT FRUIT, WHICH I'M CAREFUL TO ENJOY IN MODERATION. (BY THE WAY, IN AFGHANISTAN, THE GRAPES ARE SEEDLESS.)



WE STUFF OUR FACES. BASSIR TOO. IN THIS COUNTRY OF LEAN MEN, I FIND IT EASIER TO UNDERSTAND WHERE HIS PAUNCH COMES FROM.



BASSIR'S PERSONAL GUARD IS COMPOSED OF VERY YOUNG MEN WHO SHOW OFF THEIR WEAPONS. THAT'S WHAT THEY'RE MOST PROUD OF, HAVING A GUN AND GOING TO WAR. I TURN MYSELF INTO A COURT PHOTOGRAPHER. HERE ARE BASSIR'S HORSE GROOM AND HIS BODYGUARD.



I'VE BEEN HOODWINKED. WE HAVE INDEED REACHED THE VALLEY OF YAF TAL, BUT WE'RE AT THE WRONG END OF IT. TWO MORE DAYS OF WALKING ARE NEEDED TO GET TO ZARAGANDARA, WHERE WE ARE GOING TO LIVE AND WORK.



AROUND THE HOUSES SOME AMPLE COW PATTIES HAVE BEEN PUT OUT TO DRY, AND WILL PROVIDE HEATING FUEL DURING THE COMING WINTER. WE START OUR HIKE IN GORGEOUS WEATHER. WE WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY. EVERYTHING SEEMS SIMPLE.



EVEN THOUGH THE GOING HAS BEEN TOUGH, BUT ALSO BECAUSE OF IT, I'M ALREADY FEELING A GREAT LOVE OF AFGHANISTAN, A GENUINE ATTACHMENT. A DAY LIKE TODAY ADDS TO THAT SENSATION. IT'S GLORIOUS.



