

# THE QUARRY

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## My Father's Eyes

*Look at your eyes. They are small,  
But they see enormous things.*  
Rumi, *'The Book of Love'*

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'Is that your gun?'

'Yeah, it's for... just in case.' My dad stands with a group of men, all carrying AK47's. 'Haven't you seen these photos?' he asks me.

'I don't think so.'

I wonder if that's his fault or mine. As a Petroleum Engineer my dad spent much of my childhood in remote and often dangerous parts of the world, returning to our family home periodically with artefacts and stories. A lot of conversations took place over distorted telephone lines from our suburban Canberra home to Nigeria, Papua New

Guinea, or Uzbekistan. He was a walking atlas of strange and interesting facts. I haven't seen most of the photos or heard half of the stories, but today he's sitting in my Bondi flat, crunching on salted crisps, while he flicks through photos of his last visit to Afghanistan, three years ago.

It took a book launch to pique my interest in Afghanistan again. Somewhere along the line I'd switched off. I mostly avoided articles in the newspapers with headlines about the 'War on Terror', soldiers dying, death and destruction, blah, blah, blah, it's so much doom and gloom, so I usually turned the pages to something lighter like horoscopes or entertainment. Mac Serge Tucker launched his book *Fighter Pilot* during a cruise around Sydney Harbour. My dad had been invited along and asked me to join him. I didn't really know why he was going, but we don't spend much time together and 'who knows, the glitterati might be there,' he'd said in his much-faded 'Souf-end' English accent. Plus it was a cruise with free champagne and canapés. On reflection, by the 'glitterati' I guess he meant the guy dressed up like Elvis or the Air Force men in Hawaiian shirts with cowboy spurs on their boots.

After we'd been cruising for a while the author stood up to get on with the formalities of the evening.

'I'd love to write a book about what Afghanistan is really like, but no-one would read it, so I wrote this one instead.' We all laughed appropriately, knowing it was probably true. The book is his story; an ex-RAAF, fighter pilots 'mis-adventures' in war zones. With the mention of Afghanistan the men around me seemed to shift and I found myself looking at them, wondering what memories and associations the country held for them as Air Force men. Then the author introduced my dad. He was there to run the auction and collect donations for *Mahboba's Promise*, a charity looking after orphans and widows in Afghanistan. He'd done a few different trips to Afghanistan in the last ten years and he'd also lost his dad at the age of three in the Second World War. I guess that's what had taken him to work with the charity. He walked across to Serge, took the microphone and held up a framed photo of two young Afghan girls: messed up hair, dusty skin, big smiles, staring straight at the camera. It was a beautiful yet simple photo.

'I'm a hard-nosed oil man and this photo brings a tear to my eye.'

I looked around the room to gauge other people's reactions. I was shocked. It seemed to be such a revealing comment. I'd never heard him speak that way and certainly not in a room full of men. It was strange to hear him describe himself as hard-nosed. I guess he was, but *he'd* never said that before. I've probably spent a lot of time trying to figure him out. He is a sporadic man- here one minute, gone the next and then arriving again, like a hurricane. Mostly hugs come with a slap on the back or a pat on the head. We've tried to talk in the past, with varying levels of success and there have been times when I've been surprised and moved by his response. But, there's also been a lot of conversations that have escalated into arguments never to be resolved. So, mostly we talk about politics instead of personal issues and even though we have different political views, somehow that keeps the peace. Anyway, he remains a mystery to me, a lot of the time.

'So who's going to open the bidding?'

So here we are, in Bondi, crunching on crisps. His photos show the landscape of Afghanistan, hostile and desolate. The earth is a mass of ripples and crinkles, across huge mountain ranges. There is the desert, broken buildings, and rusted Russian tanks littering the streets. Then there are photos with bright, vivid colours, of mountain streams, huge gorges, and snow-capped mountains. The scenes are picturesque and haunting. The cliffs and passes remind me of *Lord of the Rings*. There is such contrast between the landscapes. This place is at once diverse, desolate, lush, hostile, and home to many different tribes.

'These are the Hindu Kush mountain ranges. They connect to the Himalayas.' The peaks reach up to 7000 metres. They run for 900km between central Afghanistan and northern Pakistan and span 250km of deep caverns, passes and gorges. Later I learn that *Hindu Kush* literally means 'to kill the Hindu'. They were named after the devastating journey Indian slaves used to have to take.

'How safe is it?' I ask him.

'It's not.'

It may seem like a stupid question and of course I've read the travel warnings and seen the news, but I'm not looking for an official statement. I want to know what it's *really* like.

As a child, every now and then, on the way to school or sport or getting dinner, mum would say '*When I was in Afghanistan....*' and then lead into some exotic story. Our house held trinkets, books and carpets from the Middle East, veiling the place in mystery and romance like an old Hollywood film. She was a young woman on the 'hippy-trail', who travelled Afghanistan in the 1960's before the Russian invasion. She was inspired by novels like James A Michener's *Caravans* and Herbert Muller's *The Loom of History*. I ask my mum about her memories of Afghanistan;

'We'd read all about Afghanistan and the area and we were coming overland from London. We took trains across the Persian desert and then a local bus across the border. Mosques were aqua and turquoise; spices were interesting, the markets, dusty roads, people laden up carrying things or with horses and carts in the streets. The people were very friendly. We were a bit of a novelty I think,' she smiles to herself.

'What was it like travelling as a woman?'

'We never had any trouble. We wore long sleeves and covered up, to not be offensive, as you would anywhere. You have to remember, as a woman, at that time, you weren't really free here or anywhere else. But the dynamics were very different to what they are today.'

Afghanistan is wild. Its environment is bold and dangerous. The need to map and define the country's borders came with the British occupation of India (now Pakistan) and Afghanistan in 1839. In the last 100 years, Afghanistan has been occupied by Britain, Russia and now the US and Allied forces. It shares its borders with six countries; Tajikistan, Pakistan, China, Iran, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Its geographical location has made it a strategic point for many invasions and occupations from the Mongols in the thirteenth century, through to the present. It seems that if you were a military power playing a game of chess, Afghanistan would be the board and the game would be alliances, resources, religion and power.

‘If you want to understand Afghanistan you have to research it beyond 100 years ago, when it was called Ariana and Khorsan,’ Sidiq tells me. He is an Afghan-Australian who came here as a refugee with his family in 1991. We are sitting in the small Sydney-based office of *Mahboba’s Promise*. The charity was set up to look after some of the 60,000 orphaned children and single mothers in Kabul and the surrounding region.

‘We have many tribes and languages in Afghanistan. We have many great scientists, philosophers, and writers, but you don’t hear about these things on the news. It doesn’t make a good story.’

I can’t tell how old Sidiq is. He is a handsome man with dark skin and flecks of grey in his hair and beard. His gentle eyes match his countenance. He still speaks with a heavy accent.

‘Australia is one of the best countries in the world, but you cannot compare Afghanistan and Australia. Afghanistan has been fighting for over 40 years. A lot of things have changed. A lot of people lost their rights. It is very different now’.

Sidiq spends half his time in Australia and half in Afghanistan. The charity runs various services and orphanages. They recently acquired a big building they could use as an orphanage. The site was an old government building and also used as a centre for torture by the Taliban. On the walls in the basement, prisoners recorded some of their experiences. Simple stick figure drawings depicted scenes of torture, electrocution, beatings and sexual abuse. There is no doubt that most of the people brought there would never have returned home. This building holds the memory of those atrocious crimes and abuses in its walls. And yet, what could the charity do but paint over the walls and try to start again? Now they’ve turned it into an orphanage called Hope House where they can shelter and educate some of the homeless children who have lost their parents in war.

‘The people look very harsh from the outside,’ Sidiq tells me, ‘but it is just their lives. When I take people there, they meet a man with a long beard and not a happy face. His face shows the hardship he’s had for so long – but inside he is full of love and talking, he has so much knowledge. These two countries are very different, but their humanity is the same. People develop differently at different parts of the earth, but human beings are the same all over. We all have goodness and badness.’

With racial and religious tension spilling onto the streets in Sydney and across the world I awkwardly ask Sidiq, 'What does it mean to *you* to be a Muslim?'

'It is about inner peace; submitting to God and inner-peace.'

I wonder how Sidiq adapts to the changes of lifestyle between the two countries. I wonder what he has seen, what he has to deal with.

'Do you ever feel you are in danger there? Are you scared to go back?'

'I never used to be scared, but now I am scared to leave my family. I wonder if someone will get some idea about the 'Afghan' family down the road and the screen door will be unlocked and someone will go in and do something to my wife and my kids...'

'You're scared to leave them here, in Sydney?'

'Yes.'

Is it possible he really feels that level of hostility in Sydney?

Back in my flat, Dad and I explore the world eating crisps and looking at photos.

'Look at this one.' He flicks to the next photo of a group of boys in the street.

'We were heading west to check out some old oil wells and we stopped at this little café by the side of the road. It was a café but they didn't have anything there. No wood, no fire, no food. They sent the kids out to get something to light the fire. They came back with a handful of weeds they'd collected from the ground, which was used to boil the water. We asked them why the kids weren't in school. The men said they couldn't afford it. They didn't have enough money and they needed the kids to work. They go out and sell chewing gum and things. God knows who buys the chewing gum; no-one has any money.' In the background a group of girls peer from a doorway, huddled together and barely visible.

I look at my dad as he tells the story. It took me until I was about twenty to realise who I'd inherited my green eyes from. I'd thought it must have been some long lost aunt or something, but it was from my dad. He has green eyes too. I guess I never really noticed. I'd never stopped and looked into his eyes.

I get up to get a book off the shelf.

‘Have you ever read Rumi?’ I ask him.

‘No. I’ve never heard of him.’

‘He was a thirteenth century Persian poet and mystic from Afghanistan.  
This is my favourite book of poetry.’

He flicks through the roughly cut pages.

*You have said what you are.*

*I am what I am.*

*Your actions in my head,*

*My head here in my hands*

*With something circling inside.*

*I have no name*

*For what circles so perfectly.”*

Rumi, ‘*The Book of Love*’

I never would have thought Afghanistan could teach me more about my father. His life has spanned over 70 years; a collection of diverse and rich experiences. Though I’ve missed him, he’s always brought home parts of the world for me, igniting my curiosity and imagination. There are many things I may never know or understand, but perhaps the differences between people aren’t so great after all. Perhaps we just need to take a moment to try and see through someone else’s eyes and to share our differences.