

THE RUGMAKER
of MAZAR-E-SHARIF

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Najaf Mazari & Robert Hillman

*But the real and lasting victories
are those of peace, and not of war.*

Emerson



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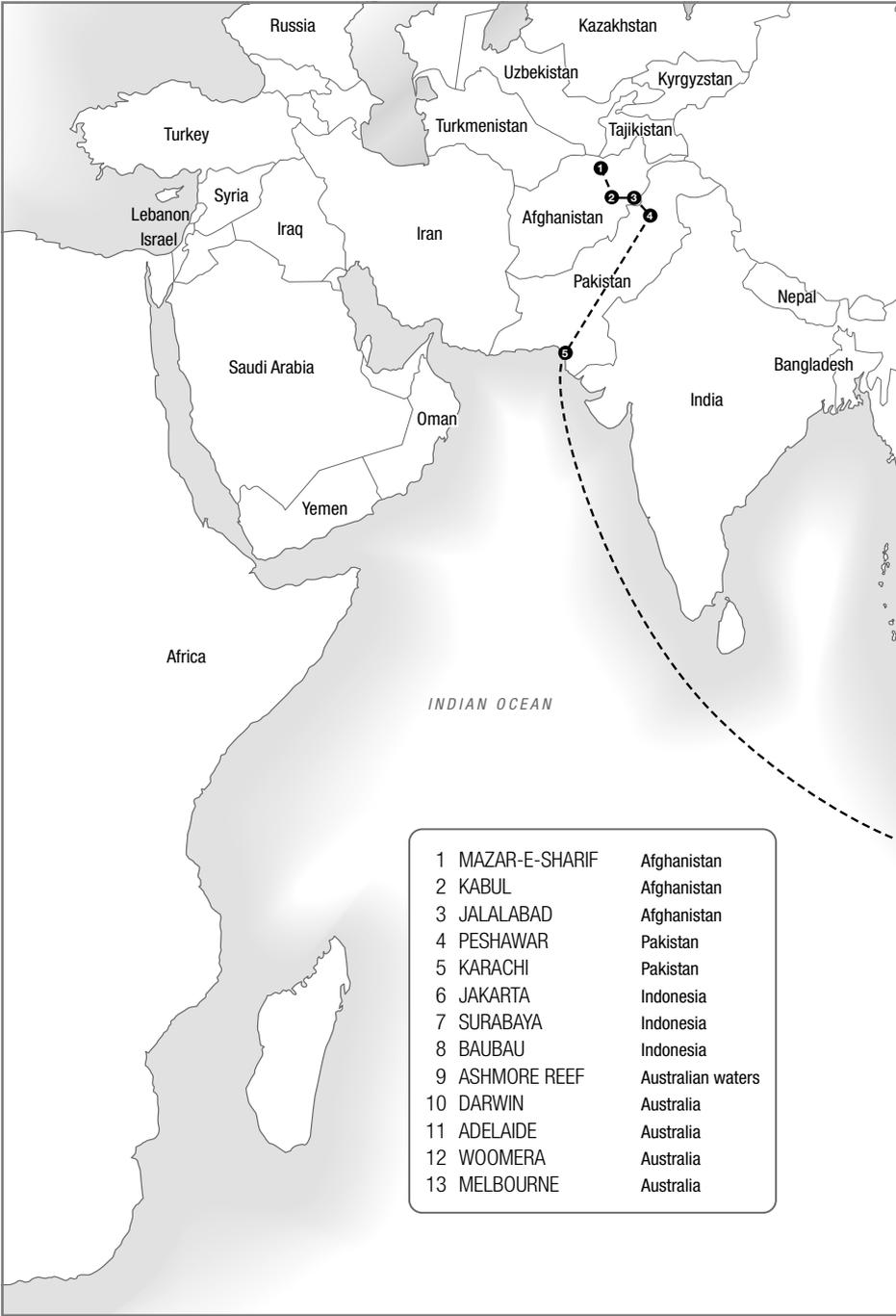


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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to all those people
of Afghanistan who have lost so much
in wars – their houses, their limbs and
their lives – and to all people working for
peace throughout the world.*

NAJAF'S JOURNEY





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DISCLAIMER

The story told here is factual. Every care has been taken to verify names, dates and details throughout this book, but as much is reliant on memory, some unintentional errors may have occurred. On occasions, real names have been replaced with substitute names to protect people who remain in danger of recrimination. The behaviour and speech of each person in the book is accurate, regardless of any prudent disguise.

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1

Singing in the Wilderness



I DID NOT KNOW that I could feel this much sorrow without a body to bury. How heartsick can I become before I break down and weep in front of everyone? I wander about the camp with the blanket from my bed around my shoulders, searching for a spot where I can't be seen and can't be heard. And where would that be? I have been in the camp for three months. If such a spot exists, wouldn't I have discovered it before this day?

The camp is Woomera, or really my small part of Woomera, a section called November. I share November with hundreds of people from lands I have never visited, lands that are as mysterious to me as my own homeland of Afghanistan is to the guards who keep watch on us day and night.

We who are watched and guarded, we who are questioned, probed, doubted—we are all illegals. We have come to Australia without invitation. We have jumped the queue. I had not heard

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an expression like that before I came to Australia—‘jumping the queue’. It belongs to communities that place a very high value on orderliness, on due process. It’s a good thing, of course, to value orderliness. The community of Afghanistan is only orderly now and again. But it was never my intention to jump this strange queue of which I had never heard. I don’t think any of us here ever thought of stealing our way to the head of a long line of people patiently waiting to cross a border into Australia. Most of us would never have qualified for a place in the long line to start with. All I wanted to do was to stand up on the soil of a land where rockets did not land on my house in the middle of the night and hold my arms wide and say, ‘Here I am. My name is Najaf Mazari. Do you have a use for me in this country?’

As I wander between buildings, I catch sight of the desert beyond the wire fences. I come from a land of deserts, but this desert is not the same as those of Afghanistan. It is difficult to say in what way it is different, but it is. If I were to fall asleep in the desert of Afghanistan without a soul in sight and somehow wake in the desert of Woomera, I would know in an instant that I was in a strange place. It is not only my eyes that would tell me, but my skin. The touch of the air itself would whisper it to me. My skin has lived all but six months of its 30 years inside a few square kilometres of Afghanistan.

I find a solitary place at last. I am in an alley, concrete beneath my feet. Before me stand tall steel bars dividing the compound—in which I am free to walk—from a building housing an office of the Department of Immigration. I have been in that office, but only once. I sat in a chair at a metal desk. An official of the Immigration Department took a seat behind the desk. An interpreter sat to my right. The official spread papers and

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documents on the surface of the table. Some of the documents were mine, but they did not include a birth certificate. I have never had a birth certificate. Back in Mazar-e-Sharif, I have a taskera, which is more like a family history going back for ages. But no birth certificate. Very few Afghans can produce such a document. What a country I come from! Strangers to the idea of queue-jumping, and on top of that, babies are born without anything in writing to prove that they exist!

I sit with my back against the wall of a building on my side of the bars and close my ears and eyes to all sounds and sights except for those inside my head. This is July, bitterly cold here in Australia, hot in northern Afghanistan. I see a sky full of stars—northern hemisphere stars. I see a moon above the dark outline of mountain peaks. I see a woman—my mother—setting plates on a cloth. I see the face of my older brother, Abdul Ali, and I see his stern gaze fixed on another face. The other face is mine, a much younger face than the one I wear now. I see a field of grass as high as a man's knees, dotted with wildflowers of red and yellow. Now the sky I see is blue and the face I am staring at is that of my sister, Latifeh. She's smiling, not just at me but at everything. I hear voices calling from a distance across a field. I hear the barking of our family dog, also a long way off. In this mood that combines despair and rapture, I begin to sing.

The song that finds its way to my lips is one that is sung at New Year by the Hazara of Afghanistan. New Year in the Afghan calendar falls in March when there is a hint of the coming spring in the air. Hamal is the first month in our new year, a word that can also mean 'pregnant'. Flowers are beginning to bloom at that time, bright red flowers with delicate petals. The song is usually sung by shepherds. I am not a shepherd but a rugmaker;

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I have never sung it before in my life, although I have listened to it many times. I lift my head and send the words of the song into the air of Woomera. Perhaps this is the first time that these words and this tune have been heard in this land, unless some earlier Afghan attempted it. Afghans came to Australia many years ago; they came here to work—more than 100 years ago, so I have heard.

So I sing. The words tell a story of youthful love and desire, and the mood is that of longing. I don't think of anything as I sing, but the words feel sweet on my lips, like the juice of some over-ripe fruit. It is a pleasure to use my native tongue in this way, exploring the shadows of language. There is very little poetry to enjoy during a normal day in camp.

*Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!*

*Go, tell my beloved, "Your lover has come;
Oh beautiful narcissus, your suitor has come."*

*Go, tell my beloved, "Good news, your beloved has returned;
Your faithful lover has arrived."*

*Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!*

*Come, oh my sweetheart, I am mad with love for you.
I am destroyed, longing for your ruby red lips.*

*I don't kiss the rim of the wine goblet;
I am in anguish and I am heartsick for you.*

*Come and let us go to Mazar, dear Mullah Mohammad,
To see the field of tulips. Oh, my sweetheart!*

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Before I have finished the song, I become aware of a group of immigration officers watching and listening from the balcony of the building beyond the steel bars. They must have heard my song from their office, then stepped out onto the balcony to search out the source. A glance tells me that they are listening with pleasure. There are smiles on their faces. Naturally, I stop singing when I notice them. It is not because of embarrassment that I stop, although that is partly true; it is because the song is a private matter between me and the heartsickness that drove me to seek out solitude.

The interpreter who was in the office with me for my interview some months back is amongst the officers listening from the balcony. He calls down to me, 'Sing it again! It's beautiful!'

But I shake my head. 'I can't,' I say, in Dari.

The officers ask him to ask me again, but again I shake my head and this time make a brief explanation in Dari.

'I am not a singer.'

Once this is interpreted, some of the officers nod, understanding my reluctance to continue; others make a gesture with their hands and shoulders as if to say, 'Such a pity.'

The officers and the interpreter drift back into their office. I gather my blanket around my shoulders and shuffle back to the dormitory. On the way, it strikes me that all the words I had employed in my long interview with the immigration officer and everything I have said to the officers and guards since, have not made a fraction of the impact on them as my song. For a few minutes, I was not merely one of hundreds of down-at-heel nuisances from some hellhole in Central Asia, but a man with something to offer, a song to sing and maybe a tale to tell that might be worth listening to; a tale that might even be true.

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I have not lost the burden of my sorrow by the time I reach the dormitory, but its weight is a little more endurable. Maybe these Australians will let me become a complete man again. Maybe they will let me use my brains and muscles and heart and soul in some worthwhile way. What do I know of life? I know that life is work. I know that a man rolls up his sleeves and labours. I know that he must preserve his dreams.

For the first time in months, I can hope. And it's good to feel hope come to life again in my heart. I think of the red flowers around the mosque at Mazar-e-Sharif. I think of how they bloom each year, no matter how many rockets explode over them.