

PREFACE

I THINK THE colors I saw in my two years in Afghanistan don't exist anywhere else in the world. I saw sunsets that could have come from Photoshop, suns that weren't red, moons that weren't yellow, skies of the clearest blue. But, above all, I saw stars so close they could have been part of the landscape.

I inhaled a scent of apricots like that of my childhood memories, but the balsam, poplar, and sulfur sand were new to me.

I saw men dressed like figures in a Nativity tableau, and women in chadors chatting on cell phones, and a three-year-old girl who seemed content to be barefoot in the snow.

I ate at a tavern where the cold froze the water in our glasses. In another, the waiters spun into trances to the sound of Sufi music on the radio.

I watched convoys of international forces terrorize the city's streets, heedless of old men on their bicycles and the children popping out of every nook and cranny.

I saw a fighting dog with a human foot between its jaws and a gang of screaming kids trying to drag the foot from the dog as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I flew on all sorts of military aircraft, some as high as four-story buildings, and on combat helicopters where I discovered that motion sickness is worse than seasickness.

I found the highest concentration of white Toyota Corollas per square mile. A golf course without a single blade of grass. The world's only art school without paints or brushes.

I understood why the Afghans always defeated the British and why even the Russians, in the end, were forced to retreat, and over time I became pessimistic.

I saw military commanders at work who were so ballsy that I immediately agreed with those who write that war is too serious a business to leave it entirely in their hands.

I met international operators who thought they knew everything, when they knew nothing, and diplomats I wouldn't trust to run a restaurant, let alone the foreign policy of a nation.

I understood that wars can be random, unavoidable, necessary, that they can drag on for reasons other than those for which they began, but that they're never right even when it seems that they are.

I met the world's most elegant head of state, and I watched warlords rubbing their feet and scratching their ears with ballpoint pens as they sat on parliamentary benches.

Now I can tell the sound of a rocket-propelled grenade from a mortar; I can figure out if an explosion occurred less than half a mile away; and watching how the smoke rises, I can tell if it was a car bomb or a landmine.

I watched just how much human beings can endure, like trained animals. For example, I once saw a father sitting in a bunker in the middle of the night, dressed in a helmet and flowery boxers, sipping cardamom tea as he spoke on a cell phone to someone on the other side of the world, studying his tapered hands from time to time, as if he were checking out a manicure—but for the rest, it seemed nothing was up.

In a mountain village, I met a nomad swathed in a blanket, crouched on a kind of column capital, just as I'd read in a book.

I thought that if someone like Robert Byron came here now, he'd certainly have written some caustic comments on the international community's "counterinsurgency" and "comprehensive approach."

Now I know the meaning of "clear, hold, and build," and why the military just doesn't get along with humanitarian workers.

I know the difference between tribal and global, planetary jihad and minor local conflicts, Taliban and all other insurgents. I learned that postmodern wars are no longer won or lost.

I came to appreciate that for Afghans the fact that a woman wears a burqa is irrelevant, because they recognize her by her ankles.

I learned what it means when two men walk hand in hand, and that the sexual revolution reached into the heart of Asia long before it arrived in the West.

I read the ancient poems of Rumi and the modern verses of Sayd Bahodine Majrouh; I visited the Herat Ansari tomb and listened to stories about the worship of fire and of goats. I discovered that the East is more mysterious than we might think, and that cultural globalization doesn't exist, which reassures me deeply. I spoke with many Afghans who mistrust Westerners and many of the latter who nevertheless trust Afghans.

With my own ears I heard a U.S. officer ask a superior what time he had to be at the 8:30 briefing, and I argued endlessly, usually to no avail, with the international military at the gate who insisted on searching Afghan government officials whenever they came to the base for meetings.

At times I could have screamed, but I never lost my patience or showed exasperation in front of colleagues and staff, even when I saw things I found absolutely unbearable. Only when suicide bombers blew themselves up at the gate of our base, one hundred yards from my home, killing seven people and injuring my press officer, did I tremble imperceptibly.

I met people I'll never forget, with whom I shared incredible moments. I cared deeply for the colleagues, staff, civilians, and soldiers I came to know, particularly Hamid and Jawid, the Afghan boys who kept house and cooked for me. From the very beginning I developed total admiration for the carabinieri of the Tuscania Regiment, who kept me safe: their manner of construing service and sacrifice would be worthy of a book in itself.