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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Confessions from Correspondentland:**

The Dangers and Delights of Life as a Foreign Correspondent

Written by Nick Bryant

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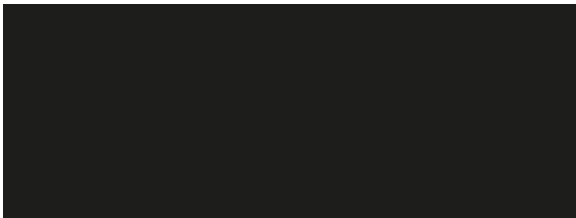
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## Introduction

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The laundry list at the Kabul Intercontinental spoke of the sudden changes that had overtaken my life: shirts, \$1; trousers, \$3; commando suits, \$15. In the lobby down below, chipboard hoardings covered a row of shattered windows, destroyed the week before when Taliban insurgents launched a rocket attack that showered glass on new arrivals checking in at reception and knocked diners in the restaurant off their chairs. Prostrate at my feet was our translator, a Kandahari man with rotting teeth, two wives, extravagantly applied black eyeliner and a vaguely flirtatious stare, who was kneeling towards Mecca in readiness for sundown prayers. Just over the way was a huge white marquee, a gift from Germany, where it had previously been used to host Rhineland beer festivals. Now, two years on from the attacks of 9/11, it played host to tribal leaders, returned refugees and even women's rights activists who had gathered for a *loya jirga*, a grand council, convened to pave the way for elections now that the Taliban had fled the capital. Outside the window, howling manically, was a pack of feral dogs tearing apart a defenceless goat, which was usefully metaphoric for the power struggles about to be unleashed next door.

Cast in the role of founding fathers was a disreputable

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collection of unreformed warlords, who arrived at the opening ceremony of the *loya jirga* in brand-new SUVs, with smoke-glassed windows and Kalashnikov-toting bodyguards at front and rear. Slaloming through the thigh-high concrete blast walls past policemen wearing heavy, Stalin-style overcoats and soldiers sitting atop rusting Soviet-era tanks, the length of their motorcades was a measure of their power.

Following in their wake came a mud-splattered white minibus carrying a children's choir dressed in traditional costumes representing every ethnic tribe. Picked as much for their cuteness as for their musicianship, these infants had spent weeks rehearsing a special Afghan peace song. Presumably, the American and United Nations image-makers who had choreographed this pageant intended the cameras to focus on these beatific youngsters. Alas, when the choir drew up to the convention site, the children had to sprint from their minibus to the safety of the marquee with the scrambling urgency of pupils escaping a Columbine-style shooting, such was the fear that Taliban snipers could take potshots from the mountains high above. Since the grammar of television news demands that reports begin with an exclamation mark, the pictures were irresistible and ideal for an opening montage of shots.

Kabul felt different. Momentous. Thrilling. After spending much of the previous five years perched inside a backless tent on a rooftop high above the White House, providing a galloping commentary on the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, I had made it back to that kingdom of the journalistic mind that perhaps we should call 'Correspondentland'. That place of boundless adventure, breathless reportage and ill-fitting flak jackets, of khaki waistcoats with a ridiculous surfeit of pockets, often exaggerated tales of derring-do and occasional moments of

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extreme personal recklessness, which we preferred to call bravery.

In Washington, my colleagues in the West Wing press pack were a clean-cut bunch with near-perfect teeth, hurricane-proof hair and the kind of smiles that did not quite say 'Have a nice day' but were buoyant nonetheless. In Kabul, the conflict-frazzled journalists looked like extras from the set of an Indiana Jones remake after months of on-location filming. That simple difference in clothing spoke of the frontier I had crossed: I had gone from being a suits correspondent to rejoining the fraternity of boots.

Travelling the world with the White House press corps, we used to grumble that the seats in business class on the press charter did not fully recline, or that the souvenir stands outside our hotel filing centres had only a narrow range of carved African tribal decorations (Abuja), babushka dolls (Moscow) or Imodium (Delhi). Here at Hotel Kabul, however, the phrase 'occupational hazards' truly meant just that, from the plug-less heaters in our ice-cold rooms, which could only be activated by jamming two frayed wires into a live power socket, to the outdoor pool, which was shamrock green. As for the chipboard hoardings in the foyer, they were a complete conversational taboo. Even to mention them was a sign that you did not belong, and no one would admit to that.

At a time when Iraq was in virtual lockdown, with many international journalists wary of leaving their bureaux or hotels out of fear of being kidnapped and then beheaded, Afghanistan was not only a must-see destination on the post-9/11 beat but also a can-see destination. For foreign correspondents, it had long been viewed as a kind of adult theme park, divided, Disney-like, into a hotchpotch of different realms. There was Warlordland: the personal fiefdoms of vying chieftains – hard men with heavily armed private armies, homicidal tendencies and ludicrously gauche

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mansions with pink stucco facades funded from the proceeds of black-tar heroin. Warlordland, as often as not, occupied the same turf as Opiumland, the vast swathes of countryside planted with poppy flowers that continued to be the source of ninety per cent of the world's heroin. Even then, two years after the 'liberation' of Kabul, it was possible to speak of a Talibanland: the pockets of obdurate resistance in the south and east of the country, where black-turban-clad Talibs imposed their murderous reading of sharia law.

More familiar to a recent transplant from Washington was a kind of Main Street, USA, located at Bagram Air Base, a sprawling military complex 40 minutes from Kabul. In observance of the rule that wherever American soldiers tread fast food must quickly follow, there was a Burger King, Pizza Hut, Popeyes Chicken and a number of Seattle-style coffee bars – food and drink intended as much for its comfort as its speed. Just about the only thing that was not super-sized about the American presence was its fighting contingent, for the simple reason that so many soldiers had been diverted to Iraq.

Though the men and women who remained behind sported T-shirts decorated with the slogan 'Get Osama for Mama' – gone now was the Cold War chic of 'Kill a Commie for Mommy' – it was proving infuriatingly difficult to establish the precise whereabouts of Osama bin Laden. He was thought to be somewhere over the Pakistan border in lawless Waziristan, hunkered down in some cave or secret compound, but the search for Saddam Hussein's latest bolt-hole, along with those elusive weapons of mass destruction, had now taken precedence.

Like all good theme parks, this new Afghanistan was based to a large extent on pretence and unreality, and, as was often the

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way in the post-9/11 world, few things were quite as they seemed. Consider the road from Kabul to Kandahar. Long stretches had been recently covered with asphalt in what was now being touted as a monument to post-war reconstruction. Yet when a section of the highway was opened on the eve of the *loya jirga*, VIPs had to be helicoptered to the site of the ceremony because it was too hazardous to drive. The Taliban regularly killed and kidnapped the construction workers who had built it, and now threatened to turn their guns on the visiting dignitaries. That day, the country's interim leader, and future president, Hamid Karzai, who arrived wearing his trademark Karakul hat made from the downy fur of lamb foetuses, performed the ribbon-cutting duties. Yet Karzai only rarely ventured beyond the city limits of the capital, and thus the de facto president of Afghanistan was commonly known as 'the Mayor of Kabul' – a lesser title that tidily captured his powerlessness.

Likewise, the *loya jirga* was presented as a cradle of democracy, even though the presence of so many warlords, and their involvement in the national government, implied that any form of parliamentary government would be dead at birth. With these militia commanders sitting threateningly at the front of the stage, like an identity parade of suspected war criminals, free speech and debate were impaired severely, if not virtually impossible. When a brave young female delegate, an émigré recently returned from the United States, rose to her feet to harangue the warlords for their barbarous ways, she had to be closeted away for weeks at a United Nations compound, Kabul's impromptu version of the witness-protection programme. After that, there were not many dissenting voices, since so few people could muster the courage to speak out. Rendered mute, their reticence offered the most



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eloquent statement on the true state of Afghanistan.

Unspeaking or not, the Afghans themselves were notoriously hard to read. In a country where the life expectancy was then just 42, most of the men looked prematurely old, sometimes by as much as a decade or even more. The ravages of 30 years of almost continual state of war had not so much been written on their faces as carved with a blunt chisel. Some of the most macho militiamen were unabashed paedophiles, who routinely buggered the beardless young dancing boys who dressed in women's clothes with bells strapped to their feet in a custom known as *bacha bazi*.

Still more impenetrable were the country's mothers and daughters. Even in Kabul, a large proportion of them continued to don pale-blue burqas, despite the abolition of the Taliban decrees that threatened public stonings if they appeared outside without them. But how many women continued to wear these sun-bleached gowns out of choice, in observance of their faith, and how many wore them out of compulsion, in fear of their husbands and imams? Only a small number would speak, making it almost impossible to tell. And we urgently needed their testimony to get a handle on Realityland.

Unable to assemble a collage made up of individual stories, we tended to peddle grand narratives instead, with all the exaggerations and simplifications that went with them. At the very moment that nuance and complexity were demanded of reporters covering the post-9/11 world, all too often we succumbed to the Bush administration's insistence on clarity and certainty. Good versus evil; for us or against us; New Europe as opposed to Old Europe; democracy against totalitarianism; modernity against nihilism; and all the Manichean variations. We also adopted its nomenclature. What truly should have been called 'the Bush

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administration's war on terror' came to be known, more simply and lazily, as 'the war on terror', as if it had our endorsement. It was only much later that we added the qualifier.

Nowhere was this sense of alignment stronger than in Washington. When first I started reporting from the American capital, at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in 1998, I quickly got used to the sight of members of the White House press corps rising to their feet even when the president came into their presence. Soiled blue dress or not, he was, after all, their head of state. In the aftermath of 9/11, however, too many reporters dropped to bended knee. Polished enamel flag-pins started appearing on the suit lapels just as quickly as scepticism started disappearing from their copy.

Few were as brazen as Geraldo Rivera of Fox News, who bought a pistol and vowed to gun down Osama bin Laden, but by the same token few wanted to be labelled as unpatriotic. On overseas trips with the president, one of the chief wire reporters, whose copy commonly set the tone of the overall coverage, took to wearing an NYPD baseball cap to display his fealty. It did not mean necessarily that he agreed with the Bush administration, but it hinted at a 'Don't fuck with America' bunker mentality that the White House tended to take on the road. It was a climate in which half-truths and half-baked theories, especially about the stockpiling of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, were often accepted unquestioningly as gospel. Why, faulty intelligence even made regular appearances on the front page of the *New York Times*, that one-time haven of reportorial infallibility, which gave it the stamp of truth.

Even before 9/11, George W. Bush had mastered the art of flattering the White House press corps – a technique that,

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paradoxically, centred on their belittlement. Favoured reporters were given playful nicknames, which some interpreted as an attempt to create the sophomoric bonhomie and occasional cruelty of a college frat-house, but which felt more like a final club at Harvard because of its exclusive membership. The tallest reporter in the press pool was christened 'Super-stretch', while the next in Bush's vertiginous ranking system became known as 'Stretch' and then 'Little Stretch'. The reporter for the wire service The Associated Press was known always as 'the AP person', while a partially blind reporter who then worked for the *Los Angeles Times* was called 'Shades'.

A nickname not only conferred insider status, and admitted selected reporters into a kind of West Wing brotherhood, but also changed the character of presidential press conferences and the more regular question-and-answer sessions in the Oval Office. Ideally, they should have been combative, like a martial art where the skirmish was bookended with protocols of respect. But the genius of Bush's bantering style was that it disarmed so many of his potential critics.

During the period of ultra-patriotism that followed the attacks, when home-grown journalists could perhaps be forgiven for their lapses, the foreign press should have filled the void. But most of us had ended up in America precisely because we loved America, so we, too, often equated scepticism with disloyalty. In the months and years after the attacks of 9/11, we should have been solely dedicated to the quest for understanding, but frequently we were sidetracked, along with our American colleagues, by a desire for revenge. We, too, had been caught in the clutch of circumstance, and it made some of us temporarily lose our grip.

Perhaps my reassignment to South Asia, where it was easier to

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take a more dispassionate look at the Bush administration's war on terrorism, was an attempt to balance the ledger. Perhaps I was living out a personal variant of what the then secretary of state Colin Powell described as the 'Pottery Barn rule', his unheeded warning to President Bush on the eve of the Iraq war: you break it, you buy it. Perhaps I was simply more interested in America's original post-9/11 mission, the hunt for Osama bin Laden.

Yet I am in danger of sounding maudlin, when my real intention is to convey the fun and white-knuckle thrills of Correspondentland, along with my good fortune in ending up there. Certainly, it seemed a distant prospect on the morning I sat my university entrance exam, when my history teacher swung by to tell me that the examiners would look upon my application with hilarity, which he later claimed was a textbook example of successful reverse psychology but at the time seemed rather callous. Fortunately, the dons at Cambridge were gentler and offered me a place based on a few semi-coherent essays on the economic impact of proportional reputation, of all things, that vexed historical perennial the Irish question, and the societal scourge 'known as football hooliganism', in the cultivated wording of the examination paper.

Had I been more philosophically minded, I might have been tempted to answer the 'Is this a question?' teaser, which now sounds like the sort of thing Bill Clinton might have said under oath during a deposition. Yet I played it safe and was offered a place conditional on me passing my A-levels, which was a formality, and demonstrating a rudimentary knowledge of a foreign language, which was anything but. Shamefaced as I am to admit this, languages have never been my forte, and it required the combined forces of a French teacher, the head of modern languages and even

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one-on-one sessions with the headmaster to pass muster. Unused to getting pupils into Oxbridge, my comprehensive school on the outskirts of Bristol went all out, and lavished upon me the kind of attention now reserved for contestants on an extreme-makeover show.

Perhaps it was the panic of being compelled to learn French in the space of a few months that made me forget it almost as quickly, which helps explain what to this day remains my most embarrassing moment on air. It came in Paris during the 1997 French elections, when I launched into a live interview with a guest who had arrived just as the presenter in London crossed to me and who did not speak a word of English. This became apparent immediately when he stared at me blankly at the end of my first question – my second, too – and responded with a baffled ‘pardon?’. Just about all that my surviving French vocabulary would facilitate was the daily procurement of coffees and pastries in the patisserie next to our Paris bureau. Needless to say, my most awkward interview doubled as my shortest, and I handed back to London more quickly than my guest could say ‘*je ne comprends pas*’.

I had gone up to Cambridge to read architecture, that most multidimensional of subjects, and floundered from the outset. Judged solely on their aesthetics, my proposed buildings were rather eye-catching. At least, I thought so at the time. Structurally, however, they were calamitous. Like foreign languages, maths and physics were weak subjects for me at school, but they were twin disciplines that any budding architect needed to master. Fearing I would never do so, I sought refuge in the history faculty, which was housed in a startling modern building designed by Britain’s most celebrated architect, which was continually being plugged for leaks.

My new history tutor, who regarded me as an academic

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dilettante, was not particularly welcoming and often started supervisions by looking me up and down with utter disdain. 'Nicholas,' he would say sternly, 'you look like you have come straight from the sports field.' Here, however, he was only half-right, for I had often stopped off on the way back from a football or cricket match via the offices of the university newspaper, where I had handed in my latest copy or picked up my next assignment.

Promiscuous as a student journalist, I covered everything from the usual undergraduate rent strikes to a crazed boffin, never to be heard of again, who believed he had come up with a cosmological construct rivalling Einstein's theory of relativity; and from visiting politicians at the fag end of the Thatcher years to the KGB's recruitment of Cambridge undergraduates in the dying days of the Cold War. With the Berlin Wall about to tumble, along with the statues of various eastern European tyrants – and at a time when post-war history dons started lectures by brandishing their now redundant study notes and theatrically tearing them into pieces – these were thrilling days for the news business. Yet, however much I would like to claim the 1989 revolutions as the crucible moment in my professional life – my very own perestroika moment, if you like – the move towards journalism was more gradual and less epiphanic. Perhaps after years spent poring over newspapers, drinking coffee, propping up bars and occasionally having to write something, it seemed as good a way as any of prolonging my student life.

For now, though, I had come up with a simpler strategy for remaining a student, which was to remain a student. Much to the surprise of my history tutor, for whom I was always something of a backslider, I became a born-again academic: a Damascene conversion that set me on the road to Oxford, where I enrolled as

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a PhD student in American politics.

Studying President John F. Kennedy's record as an undergraduate, I had started to suspect that my childhood hero was not quite as heroic as history had cast him, particularly when it came to dismantling segregation in the American south. So, as a postgraduate, I set about trying to debunk the myth that Kennedy should be spoken of in the same breath as Abraham Lincoln, as the second Great Emancipator. JFK's response to the March on Washington, where King successfully subpoenaed the conscience of white America with his 'I have a dream' speech, was a case in point. Fearing its violent potential, the Kennedy administration first tried to persuade King and his cohorts to cancel the protest. When that failed, it ordered up one of the biggest peacetime military mobilisations in American history to ensure that it did not degenerate into a mass brawl.

On the 30th anniversary of King's speech, a newspaper column on 'The Race Riot That Never Was', as the subeditors headlined the piece, gave me my first byline in a national broadsheet. By now, however, I was making regular trips up the motorway to London, where I had been given my first part-time job in what was still known as Fleet Street, even though all the newspapers had moved out.

Bizarrely, and for reasons that we will touch briefly upon later, it came at a high-society gossip column in London, for the *Evening Standard*. Here, the idea of a scoop was to reveal that the Duchess of Devonshire's crocuses had bloomed unseasonably early or that some dodderly viscount had tripped on the steps of The Athenaeum Club, sprained his wrist and discovered that he could not lift a shotgun for at least three weeks, thus ruling him out of the start of the grouse season.

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Since the sparse details of these stories could usually be recounted in the space of the opening paragraph, or often the opening sentence, the skill was to pad them out with reaction from other toffs, who would provide quotes that were sympathetic, incredulous or, best of all, witheringly snotty. Then the prominence attached to each story would be determined by either the rank of those involved or the standing of those who volunteered quotes – where they fitted within what I suppose could be described as a sliding scale of social hierarchy, so long as it is understood that the slides took place, like slowly shifting tectonic plates, over many hundreds of years.

With British celebrity culture now in full flower, other parts of the paper focused on A-, B- or C-list celebs. Maintaining a quaint fastidiousness, ‘The Londoner’s Diary’ was obsessed instead with the title that preceded the name – unless, of course, the letters spelt out HRH. It was a recondite world in which dukes would always lord it over a marquess, a viscount would always trump a baron and a royal, however minor, would always be guaranteed the banner headline. With no contacts within the upper echelons of high society, and little chance of making any, I came brandishing high-table tittle-tattle from Oxford. I also had nuggets of gossip ground from the rumour mill of Westminster, much of which started out as pillow talk courtesy of my girlfriend at the time, who worked as a parliamentary researcher and ended up in the Cabinet.

The diary’s ruddy-faced editor, who was charming to the point of unctuousness in the company of the aristocrats who appeared in his pages, was a tyrant towards those who worked for him – or under him, as he preferred to think of it. His great early-morning ritual, which was conducted in courtly silence, saw



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him move from one desk to the other, listening to each frail-voiced reporter as they opened up their notebooks and sketched out their freshest yarn. Then, after a sometimes interminable pause, the editor would deliver his verdict: a cackle of high-pitched delight that sounded like an orgasmic hyena, or a violent tantrum in which his complexion changed from red to beetroot to rosewood. Then, he would move to the next desk, the blood having drained from his face, and repeat the entire spectacle again. Needless to say, the punishment meted out to new recruits was always especially cruel, particularly those who failed to arrive with any gossip worth publishing – an egregious lapse that automatically disqualified them from ever being invited back again. Withering scoldings were the norm. Tears were not uncommon. Once, an empty-handed new recruit was dispatched to the basement, mop in hand, where he was instructed to wash the editor's car, still caked in mud after a weekend hunting trip.

Happily, I never became the target of his tyrannical rants, nor the victim of a management technique modelled on the public-school fagging system. On reflection, I think it helped that the editor, who had always struggled to locate my classless accent, thought I was Australian, which granted me a kind of diplomatic immunity. By the time that I corrected him, classlessness had become so fashionable in modern Britain that he considered me a useful addition to his stable, which at that point only included thoroughbreds with pukka bloodlines.

Despite being made to feel unexpectedly welcome, then, I was determined to bid farewell to the world of high-society gossip before the Duchess of Devonshire's crocuses could bloom again. After finishing my PhD and moving permanently up to London, I started to plot my next upward move.