

# TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

## Number 42

### Break Time in Kabul

*Sometimes teachers get time out of school. Some have exchanges with teachers from other countries; some are released on 'sabbaticals', a time for further study for longish periods, even for as much as a year. They are expected to enhance their knowledge and expertise. One Headmistress told me of a 'time out' in her youth which turned out to be more than she bargained for.*

It was the early 1980s, and I was into my first year as a History lecturer in a college of education. I was also taking classes in abstruse aspects of the Religious Education programme..... because no-one else would, and I was the newest recruit. Pretty normal reasons.

We got to the 'other religions' part of the course in the early summer and I found myself immersed.... nay swamped.... in books on Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Judaism and Jainism and encountered other more minor isms, as well.

One late night I decided that the only 'sensible' course of action was to go and visit the melting pot for nearly all these - an area where most of these isms operated, and where I could get a feel for the real religion and not just the bookish explanation. So, where do you go for an insight into these ancient religions? Why, the Middle East and Pakistan and India, of course!

The college, grateful to me for taking on this part of the course..... that no-one else wanted to touch – not a single one - gave me a grant, wished me 'God speed', and waved me off. Immediately after the end of term I was on my way.

I needed to spend time in Cairo, for the Coptic religion....and Jerusalem, of course, so I arranged visits there for my return journey. My first port of call must be Karachi.....but then I had to get to Karachi. The cheapest route – by far—was via Frankfurt, Cairo, and then Kabul, which I did not know in the 1960s, was in Afghanistan! And I had no idea where Afghanistan was either. It took a trip to the college library to work that one out.....and no-one, but no-one in the college had any knowledge about it. That seems impossible now, but at that time Afghanistan was not on the British radar. It was being invaded by Russia! Ah well, I thought. Since I have heard nothing and no-one else has heard anything, and the Foreign Office is silent on the matter, what the hell! Since fights were going there, and leaving there, and as the waiting time between flights was short, what's the problem? Kabul here I come!

And that is where I found myself twenty hours after leaving my books, my friends, my department. Unfortunately.... and as I learned later...inevitably.... my flight from London via Cairo was late and the next connection to Karachi due was not due to leave for 24 hours, or even more!

I could wait in the dreary closed-down airport, I was informed, or try my luck at a Kabul central hotel. No problem with that decision. The centre of Kabul beckoned.

So, leaving my large case at the airport and carrying just my small rucksack I took a taxi - of sorts- to the 'Grand Hotel' – the 'Next Best hotel' in Kabul, my cheery driver told me. The 'Best', he said was exclusive, o yes, very exclusive, and its astronomic prices rivalled the Ritz in London.

At this point I should explain that I was at the time a 26 year old single female, a trifle hippy in dress style... with flowered blouse, frayed jeans, floppy shoes, bronze bangles and large chain necklace. It was not a usual vision in Kabul, I discovered.

Furthermore there was indeed a war going on. Russian soldiers were everywhere, mingling with local ones, a riot of brown, grey and off-white uniforms. I recalled that the United Nations had recently demanded that the Russians should withdraw, but like most British people I had not taken all that much notice. In suburban Middlesex it all seemed a bit remote. But it wasn't now. It was becoming more and more real.

The male night - receptionist at the 'Grand' did not bat an eyelid when he saw me. He beamed at me, as he politely, and with a wide smile, even wider than the taxi driver's, informed me that there were no spare rooms, .but maybe they had a suitable room at the nearby 'Less Grand hotel', whose name now escapes me. I declined, sensing something of a stitch-up, and believing wholly in my own survival capabilities. It should not be hard to find a hotel of my own choice in a city. Indeed I had spotted one next door when I stepped out of the taxi.

So, with no more ado, I stepped out into the night and tried next door....nothing doing.... and then the door after that. No rooms there either. I never did find the Less Grand Hotel.

But as I tramped the streets between New and Old Kabul it dawned on me that I was the only female around, even though the streets and cafes were heaving with customers. And to top that, this female, me, had a sallow complexion, skirt allowing knees to be shown, flowery blouse and a full head of curly hair.... not a sight my fellow night-outers were used to. Most of these, maybe all of these, were men, and men who all appeared to be bearded and old.....peering at me over their hookahs puffing away even more rapidly as they followed my flip-flop, necklace-swirling passage down the street.

I nipped swiftly into yet another hotel, the fourth, only to be told once again with a resigned wave of the arms that there were 'no rooms'. But this young man did have a cousin at an even more down-town establishment who might be able to help, and he also happened to have another cousin, a taxi driver no less, just outside the door. I thanked him for his help and accepted the ride.

I was whisked at speed through the old town to the outskirts, breath-taking in heat, smell and general squalor. I told the taxi man to hold on a second while I sussed out the hotel.

The hotel fitted in with its environment in every aspect. I knew immediately that I could not stay there.... but I knew, too, that the manager was bound to have a free room, and would resent greatly my turning up my nose.

He did have a room....and, he said, at a 'special price' just for me, an honoured guest. But to my relief he could not offer me any meals, and so with a beatific smile and what I hoped would be a winning expression of sorrow and regret I sped back to my waiting taxi driver.

'What am I going to do now?' I asked him, not expecting an answer but needing some kind of reassurance, however thin.

'Maybe you offer bigger deposit,' he said.

'A what?' I cried, 'A deposit! Do you mean – a bribe?'

A sharp intake of breath from my companion.

'In our language we call it a 'negotiated non-returnable deposit' ....used to secure the services of a room, or any other service. It is normal.'

'Well, in anglo-saxon as usual, there is a much smaller word. We call it a 'bribe'.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'As you wish. In Kabul... we bribe, we get. We no bribe, we no get.'

So that was it! I had not offered a tempting wad of dollars. You get what you pay for! I was rapidly becoming one of 'the SET', a 'Seasoned Eastern Traveller'.

The hotels were all half empty. I learned. The Russians all lived in their compounds; there were few people on business, and no tourists at all. And so back at the Reception Desk at hotel number one, the Next Best Grand, some two hours later, I again eyed the wide-smiled night receptionist. But this time I had in my hand a wad of folded one dollar notes – twenty of them or thereabouts. It was now ten o'clock at night and I was past counting.

He stared at my credentials – the bundle in my hand. Then he told me that he was glad I had returned as he had 'just had a cancellation', and there might be a possibility of a first floor room. And as I placed the whole wad on the counter, he smiled even more widely, and assured me that for a deposit of.... well, that exact amount.....sweeping up the pile... there most certainly was such a room.

My room was adequate, and had the luxury of a loo that worked and water that ran. I went down to the restaurant to see if I could get a little something to assuage my ravenous hunger and found the dining room deserted of diners but crowded with waiters eager to serve. There was no menu as such at that time of night, one of them explained, but the set meal was renowned throughout Kabul. I did not really care. I ordered the lot. I even ordered a glass of wine, even though it was priced in American dollars at the equivalent price of a Krug champagne. What the hell, I thought! All part of the great adventure...and it might make the adventure a bit more palatable. It did not! The 'soup' followed by scrawny spiced chicken might have been 'renowned throughout Kabul'... but not for the reasons suggested by the waiter! It was certainly memorable.

Halfway through sipping my urinal broth the dining room door burst open and an extraordinary figure filled the doorway.... Six feet tall, swarthy face, a pair of dark black spectacles, black shirt and vivid white bow tie. He stood in the doorway and looked slowly and casually around the room. There was no need really, as I was the only occupant. To my dismay he waved away an approaching waiter and made for my table.

'O Lor', neither my mother nor father nor school nor university nor present college had told me how you handle this. A History degree and Post-Graduate Teaching Certificate were of no help at all.

He walked, or rather, prowled, to my side and put an extravagantly golden- ringed hand on the back of the chair. He leaned over me as I sat with soup-spoon raised. I could smell his spiced breath.

'Haven't we met somewhere before?' he asked in a surprisingly elegant baritone voice.

The sheer idiocy of the question in a tourist hotel in war-torn Afghanistan completely threw me.

I should have burst out laughing, but all I could think of was to smile sweetly and say, 'I don't think so. I think I would remember you. Anyway, I have only just arrived..... and I am just going.'

I abandoned the remainder of my supper, smiled a wan smile..... and fled.

During the long Afghan war in the 1990s and 2000s I often thought of my ghost-like acquaintance. Did he ever find the person 'he had met somewhere before'? He might have been fun.... but not in 1960s Kabul.

But I can tell you for sure – the experience of negotiating the machinations of Kabul,, and my coming of age in the Next Best Grand Hotel, stood me in good stead with many an inner-city Year 10 class on a wet Tuesday afternoon over the next twenty years!

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