

# Hazara

I was born in Afghanistan, but I only came to know where my country belonged in the world when I left it. I had seen maps of my homeland, of course, and I knew that Afghanistan had six other countries on its borders, but I took little interest in them. Then one evening, in a land of television sets far from Afghanistan, I saw a huge globe that rotated slowly, showing the weather for all the countries on earth. A young woman with dark hair and a green dress with silver buttons said that it would be dry in Kabul with a top temperature of thirty-nine degrees. I realised for the first time that Afghanistan is in the middle of the world, stranded there with no coastline, with no escape.

The sight of my native land on the television set fascinated me, but I must confess that it didn't fill me with pride. I had no desire to stand to attention and sing the national anthem. This had nothing to do with the fact that Afghanistan is only on the news when things are going badly there. It had nothing to do

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with the explosions that tear people apart in the streets; nothing to do with the American jets that fire rockets into houses from a great distance; nothing to do with harvests of opium poppies. No, it was because my loyalty is not to this land in the middle of the world, but to the small part of it in which my people, the Hazara, have toiled for their bread for eight hundred years.

Afghanistan is a land of struggle, more than most, but of all those who live there, none have struggled like the Hazara. Perhaps this is because we are a mystery people; no one knows for certain where we came from, and we have been resented for generations by those who live in Afghanistan in greater numbers than ourselves.

I say we are a mystery people, but only to others. We are not a mystery to ourselves; at least not amongst the Hazara I know. Many believe that we are the descendants of Genghis Khan's warriors who swept down from Mongolia eight hundred years ago and overran China, northern India and the whole of Central Asia. Scientists who have studied us say, 'Maybe.' They look at our faces, and see the same faces as those of the people who live in Mongolia today. They look at our customs, and see many that we share with the people of Mongolia. They look at our yurts, our tents, and see the same yurts that the people of Mongolia pitch on their plains. They look at a hundred different things, a hundred different signs, and the more they look, the more they see what ties the Hazara to the Mongolians. And then they say, 'Maybe.' They have to be cautious, in the manner of scientists. But we, the Hazara, we don't have to show the same caution. We know in our bones and in our blood where we came from. But does it matter? People are not theories. People are blood and bone, the eyes they see with, the hands they work with. Hazaras,

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who work with their hands, have lived in the land now known as Afghanistan for a very long time. There is no other land to which we belong.

A tribe is a world. I have described myself to people who are not of my tribe in this way and that, and usually I satisfy the person I'm talking to, and also satisfy myself, up to a point. I say, 'I am a pacifist,' and so place myself in a very large tribe of people who share at least one belief with me. Or I say, 'I am a businessman,' and the banker I am addressing knows that I can be relied on to keep an accurate account of what I buy and sell; that I make sensible decisions with my money. I say, 'I am a Muslim,' and the Muslim listening to me will make a dozen assumptions about the life I lead, most of them correct. When I meet a Hazara, I don't say, 'Nice to meet you, I am Hazara.' There is no need. We will greet each other in a different way to the way we greet people who are not of our tribe. We will be both excited and shy at the one time. Excited because we are brothers, shy because without even knowing my name, the man I am talking to can see deep into my heart. And if this man says, 'I have no bed for the night, I have no bed for the next year,' I will say, 'You have a bed in my house.' As we stand facing each other, hundreds of years of good news and sad news flow between us. We are made from the same clay; or rather, we have heard the same stories.

In the city where I now live, all the stories are in books. They are studied in the universities. I am not sure that these stories still pierce the flesh of those who hear them and make a life for themselves in the listener's heart. In Afghanistan, we have

very few universities and very few professors. The history of the Hazara is told in the fields, in our tents, in our houses. Many of the stories I heard when I was growing up, even those from centuries ago, came to life again before my eyes. I was told the story of Abdul Khaliq who was cut to pieces with knives because he would not submit to the enslavement of the Hazara people. Some years after I heard the story, I was running for my life from people who wanted to do to me what had been done to Abdul Khaliq, and for the same reason. I heard stories of Hazara chieftains who'd fought five hundred years ago to hold onto the small piece of Afghanistan that Hazaras hold sacred today. In my own lifetime, the great Hazara chief Abdul Ali Mazari fought with all his strength in the same cause and died because of the same small error as the chieftains of the past – by looking for a moment to the left instead of the right. I heard tales of the honoured eagles who came down from the highest part of the sky and took hares as they ran between rocks, and I saw the same thing when I was a shepherd in the mountains. My heart and my mind, my bones and flesh and all the organs of my body are bound together with the cords of the stories I was told. They made me Hazara, week by week, tale by tale.

This new land of mine is also the land of the Net; of the dot-com, Skype, Facebook, Google, Wikipedia, Twitter; of conference calls, direct debit, online banking. In the course of a day, I'm likely to employ all of these inventions and devices. A man I know well comes to my business premises, points at three rugs of great value and says, 'I can auction these at \$25.50 minimum; that's each one, fifteen points to the gavel, ten to me. What do you think?' I take out my calculator, busy myself for two minutes,

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then reply, 'Fifteen to the auctioneer is steep. If he can make it 12.5, go ahead, ten points to you, of course.' I've embraced the digital world, and I've embraced arithmetic. But when the day comes to an end and I lock up my shop and prepare to drive my Corolla the ten minutes to the apartment where my wife and daughter are waiting, I always glance at the sky as I did a hundred times a day when I was a shepherd and try to work out the sort of weather I can expect the next day. If there are clouds in the sky, I take into account their height above the ground, the speed at which the wind drives them along and the exact direction in which they are heading. If there are no clouds in the sky, I look at the colour of the sunset, whether it is red or scarlet or orange or pink, because I will make a different calculation for each colour. Within my shop, it doesn't matter if the weather is hot or chilly, wet or dry or humid. And yet I cannot forget the habits of the shepherd. It is the same when I purchase honey in the supermarket. My brother, Gorg Ali, a beloved man, made the finest honey in the world, and he managed this by speaking to his bees, by pampering them, by searching for the place where they would be happiest. And so I still ask myself in the supermarket, 'But does this jar of honey come from bees who were loved?'

No, I cannot forget where I came from, the life I led when I was a boy and a young man, the people who stood close to me and told me the tales of my people. Some of those tales, like those of Abdul Khaliq and Abdul Ali Mazari, are known to every Hazara; others, like that of Esmail Behishti, himself a great storyteller, and Ahmad Hussein, the man who knew bees better even than my beloved brother, better than the bees knew themselves, are known mostly to the Hazara of the village in which I grew up. And some are known only to me.

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When I open my shop, I am a businessman, no different to many other businessmen. And I am a citizen, no different to many other citizens. I take an interest in politics. I watch the news. I think, 'But is enough money being spent on education?' Or I might think, 'Is the earth becoming warmer? What is to be done?' I have a friend who comes from Uzbekistan, and he thinks such things as those that come into my own brain. I talk with my friend from Israel knowing that he has the same interests as me. I am alike to many people, millions, perhaps even, say, billions. But when I sleep, I am not the same. When I sleep, I dream like a Hazara.



## 2

# The Wolf is the Most Intelligent of Creatures

He was an old man who lived in a village three hours' easy walk from the banks of the Murghāb River. In his life he'd had three wives and had outlived them all. Since he was so esteemed amongst the Hazara, he could have chosen a fourth wife but he preferred to live a widower with the family of his oldest son, Jafar Ali. He found enjoyment in the company of all his sons, all of his daughters and grandchildren but he liked the youngest son of Jafar Ali best, a boy by the name of Abbas. At twelve years of age, the boy had a quick mind and a ready smile. He had been to school in a town further south and could recite mathematical tables and measure angles. Abbas made it his job to sit with the old man over breakfast and bring him more tea when it was required.

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Each morning, Esmail told the boy one of the stories for which he was famous. The first story he told was of a man whose hearing was so sharp that he could hear the sound made by cloud shadows as they passed over the land below.

‘And what sound do the cloud shadows make?’ asked the boy.

‘A cloud moving fast makes a sound like this,’ said Esmail, and he put his lips together and whistled softly, almost too softly to hear. ‘But when the wind is light and the clouds travel slowly, they make a sound like a flower opening in the sun.’

Abbas smiled. He had a practical mind and he didn’t believe that the stories he was told by Esmail were strictly true.

‘My hearing is good,’ he said. ‘I can hear the sound of pebbles rolling when a red fox stumbles a long way off. But I have never heard a shadow.’

Nevertheless, he enjoyed listening to the old man. While they were being told, he believed the stories for the pleasure of it. The old man had tales to tell of horseshoe bats that flew across the sky in such numbers that they blacked out the light of the moon; of brown bears that held conversations with human beings; of snow leopards that sang songs.

When he’d finished a story, Esmail would ask the boy if he’d enjoyed it. The boy would say, ‘A snow leopard cannot sing,’ or ‘Bears don’t talk,’ but he always said it with a smile. As he grew older, he understood that Esmail had such mastery as a storyteller that sometimes he would become fanciful just for his own amusement.

If the old man had only told stories of talking bears and singing leopards, he would not have built the reputation he had amongst

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our people, the Hazara. He was considered a man of learning, even though he had never been to school. Men came to him when they were troubled and listened to his advice. He spoke quietly on these occasions, sometimes standing, sometimes sitting. He carried a staff with him everywhere, made from the wood of a gundy tree and worn smooth all along its length. When he gave advice, he would tap the base of the staff on the ground, digging up the soil just a little, as if this helped him to concentrate. He gave advice on disputes between families, on marriages, on children who were growing up wild.

Nobody but Abbas ever questioned his advice. People saw he had a great power that he could use in a number of ways and they accepted everything he said. One day a man came to him to ask for advice about a woman he wished to marry, and since Abbas was then twelve years of age and much more than a boy, Esmail let him stay and listen. The man, whose name was Naid, was twenty-two. The woman he wished to marry was twenty and was considered very beautiful but also very lazy. Naid himself was anything but lazy. He was a carpenter and a house-builder and was always at work when the first light of morning came into the sky. Abbas could see that Naid was deeply worried about this marriage he was contemplating. Amongst the Hazara, there is hardly a worse vice than laziness. We have survived in the mountains of the Hazarajat by throwing ourselves into our work without complaint. In the mountains of the Hindu Kush, you work hard or die young. Women work as hard as men, or harder. Every meal must be thought about. Every purchase must be wise. A lazy wife is a catastrophe.

Young Naid told his story wearing a frown the whole time. He gripped one hand in the other and squeezed and kneaded it.

Abbas' mother Amalia served him tea which he drank very slowly, sometimes forgetting it was sitting before him. Often he pushed his hands against his temples and rubbed with his fingers. As Abbas sat watching, he could see only one answer that the old man could give Naid: forget this woman for she will be your ruin. Nobody supported Naid in his choice of a wife; his mother was full of scorn; his father said he was mad. And so Abbas was shocked to hear his grandfather say to Naid, 'Yes, marry her. Of course you must.'

'You believe so?' said Naid, who was as shocked as Abbas. He had been stooped over, sitting before Esmail, but as soon as the old man spoke he sat upright as if he'd been stuck with a prickle.

'Yes, that is my advice. Marry her. Buy a present for your mother to calm her temper. Ask your father for his blessing.'

'Then that is what I will do. My mother and father will accept the marriage once I tell them that you have approved. I thank you with all my heart. I honour your wisdom.'

When Naid had departed, Abbas said to the old man, 'That was a very strange thing to say!'

'Do you think so?' said the old man, and he gave Abbas a look that meant, 'There is more to this than meets the eye.'

'Surely you have sown the seeds of unhappiness for Naid.'

'Listen,' said the old man, and he made a gesture with his hand, touching one ear, so that Abbas knew to attend closely. 'Have you seen a man who has only one leg to carry him through life? Have you seen a man who has lost a hand? Laziness is like that. It is a handicap to carry through life. The woman Naid wishes to marry is like a woman with a misfortune to bear. Better she should have a husband who knows nothing but hard

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work than a husband who is lazy himself. Naid will always toil until the sweat falls from his face. Now he will have a wife whose beauty will enrich his life in one way at least.'

The old man was revered for the advice he gave, but strangely he found small pleasure in his reputation. And this was something that Abbas noticed, so closely did he study the old man.

'When people say you are the wisest man in the world, you always close your eyes and bow your head,' said the boy. 'It doesn't please you, I think.'

The old man smiled and took the boy's hand in his own, much older, hand.

'This is why I live in your father's house,' he said. 'To hear what you have to say.'

'Then it's true? It doesn't please you to be praised?'

'When I wake in the morning, I look at the sky and wish to return to my bed. My bones ache. But I wash and pray and eat some food and go about my work. The people who say I am as wise as a prophet don't see me wishing to sleep an hour longer. A human being cannot be a god, Abbas. He is just a man with pains in his knees and a sore back.'

'But you should be proud. People walk for a whole day to listen to you,' the boy responded.

'Abbas, every life is a life of folly,' said Esmail. 'For each intelligent decision we make, ten more are foolish. That is what it means to be a human being. I once knew a man who found a gold coin on the ground. It must have fallen from the purse of a merchant – that may be one explanation. The man found the coin and rejoiced. For a while, the gold coin made things easier for his family. Every day for the next two years, the man went back to the place where he'd found the coin to see if another

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one was waiting for him. But he never found a second coin. This is what we do. We think good fortune will happen again and again. But our eyes tell us that good fortune only happens now and then, not every day. I am no different. Much of my life has been devoted to folly. When people say, “Esmail, how much you know!” I think of how foolish I have been and feel ashamed.’

The old man liked to be questioned – that is what Abbas understood by the time he was twelve. And so he spoke his mind to his grandfather whenever a story seemed strange or crazy. The old man called Abbas ‘the scientist’ because of his habit of asking for proof. ‘When a brown bear sits and talks to me, then I will believe you,’ Abbas said, and the old man smiled with approval.

‘But what if I tell you that the wolf is the most intelligent animal in the world? What if I prove to you that a wolf is more intelligent than a man?’ said Esmail one spring evening.

‘That can never happen,’ replied Abbas.

‘It will happen tomorrow,’ said the old man. ‘I will come with you when you watch the sheep. You will have your proof.’

It was Abbas’ job to guard his family’s sheep and goats when they were grazing on the spring grass in the hill pastures. It was not his only job, but in the spring it was the most important one. He had been a shepherd for a year when the old man told him that a wolf was the most intelligent creature in the world, but so far he had never seen a wolf come close to the flock. It could happen any day. Lambs were being born and wolves would pick up the scent of the afterbirth and come down from the mountains to hunt.

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In the early morning when the sky and the land were the one dark colour, Abbas woke the old man and brought him some breakfast. While the old man was eating, Abbas took four pieces of the bread his mother baked in the *tandoor* and poured honey on each piece. Then he rolled them up and wrapped the four sandwiches in cotton cloth. He placed the parcel of sandwiches inside his jacket of sheepskin so that the warmth of his body would prevent the honey from freezing. He filled two bottles with water to drink during the day and placed them in a woven bag that he would wear over his shoulder. In the mountain pastures where the sheep were grazing, there was nothing to eat except that which you carried with you.

Abbas asked the old man, 'Are you ready?' and the old man said, 'I wish I was still in my bed.'

It was just past the time of morning prayer when Abbas and the old man started on their journey. They walked the path from the village to the mountain pastures without a lantern. Their feet knew where to place themselves. The old man was carrying both his staff and a heavy rifle of Russian make that dated from the time of the tyrant Abdur Rahman and had once belonged to one of Abdur Rahman's soldiers. It surprised Abbas that the old man should wish to carry a rifle with him. When he asked about it, the old man said, 'I am attending to your education.'

'Tell me again how the rifle came into your hands,' Abbas enquired.

'You know the story of the weapon. Why should I tell you again?' came the reply.

'For my pleasure.'

Walking through the darkness with Abbas' dog at their heels,

the old man repeated the story of the rifle to the boy. He started by saying, 'This is a story that is a sorrow to tell,' which is how he began the story each time he told it. He said that twenty soldiers of the tyrant Abdur Rahman had come to the village in Hazarajat where he had lived as a boy. 'They came to shoot Hazara,' he said. 'They killed many. My mother cried out to me, "Child, run for your life!" and I ran as fast as I could. One of the soldiers chased me. I was thinking as I ran, "Where can I hide?" But there was nowhere to hide. I ran into a little valley that all of the people of the village kept away from because it was the home of snakes, both black snakes and grey snakes. When I was deep in the valley, I stopped and waited. The soldier saw me waiting and he raised his gun. I knew that his gun would fire only one bullet before it had to be reloaded. I said, "You have a choice. You can shoot me, or you can shoot the snake at your feet." He looked down and indeed, a black snake lay on a rock close to where he stood. He screamed and fired at the snake, but in his fear he missed. The soldier threw down his gun and ran back the way he had come.'

'And the snake was a black one, and not poisonous,' added Abbas.

The old man affirmed, 'As we who live here know, the black snakes are not poisonous. Only the grey ones.'

'You kept the rifle for yourself?'

'For myself,' said the old man, and Abbas knew that he was smiling in the darkness.

'And you taught yourself to fire the rifle as straight as a man can fire an arrow.'

'Yes,' said the old man, 'I taught myself, whenever I could find a bullet.'

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Abbas was about to say something more, but the old man made a sound of displeasure in the darkness. 'Of that we don't speak,' he said.

Light had come into the sky by the time Abbas and his grandfather reached the pastures. The sheep and goats were jostling inside the fold, waiting to be freed into the fields. The fold was made up of wooden sections that joined together and had to be taken apart one section at a time. When the first section was lifted, the sheep and goats rushed through the opening to feed on the spring grass wet with dew. Abbas said to his dog, 'Hurry!' and the dog loped along with the sheep and goats, bumping them and sometimes giving a deep bark. The dog was showing the sheep and goats that he was at his post. He was well trained and he returned to Abbas and the old man once he was done.

Abbas, the old man and the dog walked up into the pastures and found a place to keep watch on the valley slope above the sheep and goats. Abbas would normally stand for most of the morning, resting on the stick that was his only weapon. But because the old man said, 'Why stand when a seat on the ground is free for the taking?' Abbas sat down and offered the old man a drink of water. Then he said, 'Would you like something to eat? I have two sandwiches for you.'

'I think I'll wait,' replied the old man.

They sat side by side, the old man Esmail and the boy Abbas. The light grew stronger in the sky above the mountains but there were no shadows yet. When at last the sun rose above the mountains the peaks changed from black to red, then to gold.

'Thank you for coming with me today,' said Abbas.

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‘I wish I was still in my bed. I’m too old to be on my feet before sunrise.’

‘Do you still believe a wolf will come?’

‘Oh yes. A wolf will come.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Abbas. Then he said, ‘When I first came to guard the sheep, my brothers said to me, “The wolves are always watching,” but I have never seen one. They said, “If you fall asleep, the wolves will seize you and eat you. They will start at your feet and finish at your head.” It’s nonsense.’

‘Tell me about numbers. How many numbers do you know?’ asked the old man.

‘How many?’ repeated Abbas. ‘All of them.’

‘You know all of the numbers in the world?’

‘Numbers are not difficult,’ said Abbas.

‘Tell me about measuring,’ said the old man. ‘How is that possible?’

‘It’s simple,’ responded Abbas. With his staff, he drew a right-angled triangle in the brown dust. ‘You see this angle? It measures ninety degrees. This other angle measures forty-five degrees. In a circle there are three hundred and sixty degrees. Once you know that, you can measure anything.’

The old man shook his head, as if in wonder. He asked Abbas about the countries of the world. He said it interested him greatly to hear of the countries of the world. He knew very little about them. ‘But you have read a book about countries, so tell me. Is there a country with more mountains than we have here?’

The book that the old man spoke of was an atlas. Abbas had been permitted to take home the atlas from school to study it. ‘There is a country called India that has more mountains than us,’ said the boy.

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‘Is there a country called Russia?’ the old man asked. He had heard of Russia.

‘Yes, and another called America. There are two Americas. One is south and the other is north. In the north, the people drive cars, everybody drives cars. I have seen pictures in a magazine.’

Abbas was speaking of a magazine kept at the school by the teacher, who let only the best students look at its pages. It was from America and was called the *Saturday Evening Post*.

The old man had some idea of what a car looked like and what it did, but he asked Abbas to tell him more. He asked him about aeroplanes, too. He was curious about everything that Abbas had learnt at school, but he kept returning to the magazine. He understood that a magazine was like a book, but with pictures, and every question he asked betrayed his interest in seeing it. Abbas pronounced the name of the magazine in English, as his teacher did. The teacher could speak some English and read even more. He had been out of Afghanistan to the city of Istanbul. He could have lived in Istanbul if he’d wished, but it was his great passion to see the Hazara educated, and so he had returned to be the schoolteacher in a poor village.

When Abbas had answered questions for almost an hour, the old man said, ‘I’ll eat a sandwich now.’ Abbas gave him a sandwich from the fabric bag and took one for himself, also.

As they ate, they gazed across to the other side of the valley where a terrace had been constructed on the mountainside. A man named Sayed Ali grew pears on the terrace. The pears grew over a trellis made of timber. These were the prize pears of the district. Each one sold for five times the price of ordinary pears. Sayed Ali and his family looked after the orchard as if it were

a goldmine. When the frosts came, Sayed Ali built a fire so that the air around the pears didn't become too cold and kill them in their infancy. In the years of the tyrant Abdur Rahman, soldiers had been sent to burn down the orchard, which was very old. But the soldiers had been turned away by Hazara with guns. Esmail had been one of those who had turned Abdur Rahman's soldiers away. He had killed two soldiers when he was only fourteen years old, but he never spoke about that time if he could avoid it.

Well into the morning, the old man lay back on the ground with his hands behind his head and his knees raised. Abbas wasn't sure if the old man was sleeping or only resting. He began to feel guilty for encouraging the old man to rise so early. Normally the old man would pray at five in the morning then go back to sleep, but this morning he had stayed awake. Abbas studied the old man's face at rest. Deep lines ran across his forehead and down his cheeks. Abbas thought sadly, 'Well, he will not live forever.'

But just as he was thinking this, the old man spoke without opening his eyes.

'A wolf has come,' he said.

Abbas was startled. He glanced quickly down at the sheep and goats. His eyesight was excellent, but he saw no wolf.

'No,' he said. 'I see nothing.'

'Look at the boulder on the north side of the little stream.' The old man's eyes were still shut.

Abbas stood slowly and scanned the banks of the little stream below. He stared hard at the boulder that loomed above the stream. He saw nothing for a minute or more, then all at once he saw the shape of a wolf in the shadow of the rock.

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‘Hai-wah!’ he said. ‘I see it!’ Then he said to the old man, who was still on his back with his hands behind his head, ‘How did you know?’

The old man was smiling with his eyes shut. ‘The wolf has been there since we ate our sandwiches,’ he said.

Abbas looked back at the boulder. Again, he couldn’t see the wolf. Then he could.

‘Hai-wah!’ he said. ‘Why does it stand there?’

Now the old man sat up and reached behind himself to brush the dust and dry grass from the back of his jacket. ‘He is waiting to see if you fall asleep. See how he waits with the breeze in his face? The dog cannot catch his scent while he remains there.’

‘Use your rifle, grandfather! Shoot the wolf!’

The old man was on his feet now. He was staring down to where the wolf was hidden. He was smiling. ‘No, no,’ he said. ‘We will not shoot the wolf.’

‘Why not?’ said Abbas. Sometimes he couldn’t follow the old man’s reasoning. It made him angry. ‘The wolf will take our lambs. Why not shoot him now?’

The old man said, ‘No, he will not take any of your flock. He is waiting to feed on the afterbirth when the pregnant ewes drop their lambs. He is an old wolf – as old as me. We know each other.’

Abbas looked at his grandfather. The smile on his face made all the lines and furrows deeper. He seemed happy. Abbas thought, ‘Maybe he is losing his wits. That would be a great shame.’

The old man looked at Abbas and kept his smile. The boy thought, ‘Surely he can’t read my mind?’

‘Did I not tell you that the wolf is the most intelligent creature in the world?’ he said. ‘Now I will show you.’

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He picked up the rifle, pulled the bolt lever aside then pushed it home. He gave the rifle to Abbas. 'Aim at the wolf,' he said.

Abbas had fired a rifle before, but it was a modern rifle, much lighter than the old Russian weapon. Even with a modern rifle, he was not a good shot. Perhaps average. But he did what the old man said. He planted his feet apart and with the stock of the rifle buried in his shoulder he raised the barrel and searched in the sight for the wolf. When he found the wolf in the shadow he adjusted the sight so that the gun was aimed at the wolf's head.

'Will I shoot?' he said.

'No,' said the old man. 'Tell me Abbas, what is the wolf doing now?'

'He is standing still.'

'Where is he looking?'

'He is looking at us.'

'Now give me the rifle,' said the old man, and he planted his feet and aimed the rifle at the wolf. To Abbas' surprise, the wolf withdrew deeper into the shadows. Then the old man returned the rifle to Abbas. As soon as Abbas had hold of the rifle, the wolf re-appeared.

'Do you see?' said the old man. 'Do you understand, Abbas?'

'No,' said Abbas.

The old man took the rifle from the boy and pulled the bolt lever aside. Then he rested the rifle on the ground.

'The wolf knows that you cannot fire a rifle such as this accurately enough to endanger him. But he knows that I can.'

'How does he know?' said Abbas. He didn't feel ashamed to be seen as a poor shot. Everybody knew it.

'His brain tells him,' said the old man. Then he added, 'Do you think you could throw a stone from here and hit the wolf?'

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Abbas studied the distance to the boulder and the wolf. It was twice as far as the shadow cast by a tall tree. Although Abbas was not a good shot with a rifle, he could throw a stone with great accuracy. All the boys who guarded sheep on the hills could throw a stone with great skill. It was necessary in the day to throw stones at the goats, who would climb up to rocky parts of the valley and stay there. Why the goats should wish to climb away from the grass and into the rocks was a mystery. Abbas thought they did it simply because they could and for no other reason. Simply because they could and to make his life difficult. If the dog chased down every goat that climbed into the rocks, he would tire himself out, so Abbas threw stones at the mischievous goats until they came down to escape the blows. He knew he could hit the wolf with a well-aimed stone from where he stood.

‘Yes, I can hit him from here.’

‘Pick up a stone,’ said the old man.

Abbas searched on the ground for a good stone, one that was not too heavy and that felt good in his hand. When he’d found one, he asked the old man if he should throw the stone and hit the wolf.

‘Hold the stone ready to throw,’ said the old man.

When Abbas raised his arm, the wolf withdrew.

‘Hai-wah!’ said Abbas. ‘He knows my stone would hit him!’

‘Do you think I could hit the wolf from where I stand?’ said the old man.

It took a lot of strength to throw a stone all the distance to the wolf. Abbas doubted the old man could throw so far at his age – well over eighty years. But to be polite, he said, ‘Yes, surely.’

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The old man spoke. 'At your age, yes. But not now. The wolf knows my age. Watch.'

He took Abbas' stone and drew back his arm, as if he were about to throw. The wolf had come out of the deep shadow. He remained where he was while the old man held his arm back.

Now the old man told Abbas to take the throwing stone and go back six paces. Abbas did this. The wolf was watching. When he raised his arm, the wolf didn't move.

'He knows how far you can throw,' said the old man, and he laughed. 'You see, Abbas. The most intelligent creature in the world.'

In the middle of the day, Abbas and the old man ate their second sandwich and drank a little water. The old man praised the honey, which came from the beehives of Abbas' brother Barush. Then the old man stretched out beneath a small tree that grew by itself above the pastures and fell asleep in a minute. Abbas remained awake, as was his duty. Standing on the mountainside with his staff and his dog, he worried that his grandfather would not live long enough to teach him all he knew. Thinking this, he looked down to the boulder where the wolf had waited earlier. He could no longer see the wolf. But after staring for five minutes, he saw its shape in the shadow. The wolf was lying down, perhaps asleep. Abbas thought of waking his grandfather to tell him, but he wanted the old man to enjoy his sleep and didn't disturb him.

Late in the afternoon, Abbas and his grandfather herded the sheep back to the fold, with the help of the dog. Three of the ewes had given birth during the day. The new lambs were

## THE HONEY THIEF

unsteady on their legs and had to be nudged along by their mothers. Two of the lambs were still bloody from birth and the ewes stopped to lick them on the way to the fold. The old man was pleased that the wolf would be able to feed on the afterbirth left in the pasture. 'He is too old to hunt,' said the old man. 'He doesn't have a family to care for him. He doesn't have an Abbas.'

When Abbas went to the pasture the next day, he looked for the wolf exactly where he'd seen it with his grandfather the day before. Sure enough, the wolf was there in the shadows of the boulder. It must have been the wolf's plan to stay for the whole of the lambing season and live on afterbirth, but that would only be for another month. Abbas began to worry about the wolf, in the way that he worried about the old man. Where would the old wolf find his dinner when the lambing season was over? Such a strange thing, but after living in dread of wolves ever since his brothers had warned him of their savagery, he now could not bear to think of this wolf, his grandfather's wolf, struggling through the seasons to come. That day and the next day, he called out to the wolf, 'I don't fear you and you have no need to fear me! Find what comfort you can!' The wolf gave no sign of having heard, and when the lambing season was past, it disappeared.

The old man remained strong through the summer and the autumn, but in the winter he began to show more signs of age. Often he would stop eating his breakfast and begin gazing into the distance. When Abbas said, 'Grandfather!' and touched his shoulder, the old man's face would take on an expression of

bewilderment, as if he did not remember where he was, or who Abbas was. Abbas grew more and more concerned and took charge of the old man's affairs, as best he could. When people came to ask for his grandfather's advice, he told them that the old man was not well. There were complaints, but Abbas was firm. 'Go to the mullah,' he would say. If he felt impatient, he would say, 'Write a letter to the Ayatollah, he has a secretary.' Ali Hussein al-Sistani was a famous Shiite who lived in the holy city of Najaf, in Iraq.

When the old man's sons and daughters spoke to their father, Abbas told them to talk to him as if he would still be alive for years to come, for very often they would say, 'When you are gone, there will be many who will miss you.' They took it for granted that the old man knew he was nearing the end of his life. And in this they were right, but it wounded Abbas to hear them say so. Amongst the Hazara, people are not sentimental about old age. It is natural for a man to die when his strength is used up. When Abbas said, 'Grandfather will be with us for many Ramadans to come,' Esmail's sons and daughters said, 'Oh, surely!' but they didn't believe it.

Abbas had asked his teacher many times if he could bring home the *Saturday Evening Post* for his grandfather to see, but the teacher always refused. 'If I allow you to take it home, many others will make the same request,' he said. 'It will be damaged, and it is the only one in Afghanistan.' But Abbas persisted. He told his teacher that he would bring the wood for the furnace that gave heat to the classroom in autumn and winter, and he made sure he did. He tutored other students whose minds were not as quick as his. He brought ewes' milk for the teacher two days a week. One afternoon, the teacher said, 'Take home the

magazine, Abbas. Keep it for a week. But if it is damaged, there will be a whipping.’

Abbas wrapped the magazine in cotton cloth and carried it home with the greatest care. He showed it to his grandfather, who was lying in bed. The old man looked puzzled at first, but then his eyes came to life and he smiled. He remembered what the magazine was called but had trouble pronouncing its name. Abbas sat beside his grandfather and showed him the picture on the cover, of a woman teaching a class of boys and girls combined. The picture was very skilfully painted. The date on the cover read March 17, 1956. Abbas explained to the old man that the days of Americans were different to the days of Afghans, but that the American date was the same as Sha’ban 4, 1375.

‘How strange!’ said the old man.

‘The Hijra of our faith starts from the time of the Prophet,’ said Abbas, ‘but Americans have the Christian faith.’

‘I met a Christian once, when I was younger,’ said the old man, ‘but he was not American.’

The old man enjoyed everything in the magazine. The writing was not American but English and when Abbas told him this he said again, ‘How strange!’ He thought the writing looked like lines of black ants marching across a field of snow. More than anything else, he enjoyed the pictures of cars. Abbas told him that Americans place pictures of cars in such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* in order to sell them. Americans had thousands of cars for sale, of many different colours and shapes. Abbas was able to tell the old man the names of the cars in English, such as De Soto and Oldsmobile and Chrysler and Dodge. He said the greatest of all cars for the Americans was the one called Cadillac. The old man put

the tips of his fingers on the picture of the golden Cadillac, but very cautiously.

‘Americans have such a number of cars,’ he said, ‘and yet they speak the language of another people!’

The old man was suffering in his chest, and had to cough painfully. Nevertheless, his eyes remained bright and he thanked Abbas many times for bringing home the magazine. He was interested in all the pictures that were not of cars also, and the one that fascinated him most was of a woman in a dress of the sort that is worn in America. She was smiling as she stood beside what Abbas said was an oven powered by electricity. The oven was white and shining. Inside the oven, a huge chicken was cooking. The old man said that it was the strangest thing of all for the Americans to use ovens that were so white.

Early one morning the following spring Abbas went to the pastures after bringing the old man his breakfast. He released the sheep from the fold and saw that two ewes had lambed since the previous day. The new lambs kept close to their mothers and tried to feed even as they tottered along on their unsteady legs. The ewes would not let the lambs feed until the pastures were reached, and the lambs made small bleating sounds of protest.

When the light of sunrise reached the mountainside, Abbas looked down towards the boulder above the little stream to see if the old wolf had returned for the lambing season. He saw nothing. Even when the sun rose higher, there was no sign that the wolf had returned.

Towards the close of the day, when the sheep were back in the fold, Abbas called to his dog and called a second time. The dog was off the path, sniffing at something amongst the rocks.

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Abbas walked over to the dog, calling, 'Hi! Come when I call you!' The dog turned its head and looked at Abbas but didn't come to him. Then Abbas saw that it was standing over a dead creature, a grey wolf. Abbas hurried to the carcass, suddenly sick with fear. The wolf lay with its lips drawn back from its teeth. It may have been the old wolf but it was impossible to say. Abbas put his hand on its flank. There was still a little warmth in the carcass, showing that the wolf had died only a few hours earlier.

Abbas waited no longer but began running along the path in the failing light, taking no care if he should miss his footing and fall. He ran with his chest burning at each gulp of air and kept running until he emerged from the uneven ground above his village onto the plateau. He then plunged across the creek without going further downstream to the stone bridge. He stopped to regain his breath only when he was within sight of his father's house, bent over with his hands on his knees. The dog licked his face, puzzled and pleased at the same time over this strange behaviour.

When Abbas' chest had ceased heaving, he walked slowly to the house, knowing before he reached the door that the old man had died. He could hear the sobbing of his sisters, of his mother and his aunts, and their cries of lament.

It was his father who noticed him first. He rose from the floor of the room in which the old man was laid out on a low table, his arms straight and his hands at his sides with the fingers spread. His white beard had been combed and looked much neater than it had in life. He seemed younger, too, than he had in the morning when Abbas had brought him his breakfast. He had not yet been dressed in his funeral

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gown but still wore the long shirt and loose trousers that kept him warm in bed.

Abbas' father said, 'Son, do not shame yourself.' He meant, 'Don't weep like a girl.' Abbas knew his responsibilities without being told. He walked to his grandfather and placed his hand on the old man's chest above the heart. Then he left the house and walked about outside for an hour and more, and longer still.