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A Dinner to Remember

by Jon Pollack

(English 1101)

In 2010 I was deployed with the Army to Afghanistan. My temporary home was a dusty, desolate outpost in the badlands south of Kandahar City. The year spent at war was full of memorable and vivid experiences, some less pleasant than others. Reflecting back on my time spent overseas one particularly bizarre episode often sticks out. I once had to eat an entire dinner of raw sheep fat and pretend to enjoy every bite. The trauma and hilarity of choking down the gelatinous goo became a bonding experience forged through shared suffering.

Random events led me, as they so often do, inextricably to my fate. I was sleeping in one morning when I awoke inside my tent in an uncomfortable lather of sweat. Normally the sleeping tents had been well cooled so I investigated outside, finding the generator busted. It had been an unfortunate day for it, as the stifling desert sun raised the temperatures well north of 100 degrees. Worst still, by going outside my tent I had dangerously exposed myself to the most feared threat on base: being assigned a task by our company First Sergeant. My naiveté had doomed me, as the First Sargent picked me off like a wounded antelope, informing me that I would be filling in for the normal radio operator in the command tent. The normal radio guy, rather ironically as it turned out, was down with food poisoning.

My day inside the command tent started with the sort of mind numbing boredom that so often characterizes military life. My task was to man the radio, keeping track of our patrols out in the villages. The guy next to me stared at the camera feed that overlooked our base for several miles in every direction, keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Every 2 hours we would switch tasks, in an effort to stave off monotony-induced insanity. After what seemed an eternity, we got a call from a guard tower; the malik (mayor) of the adjacent town had come to the base. Through an interpreter the malik communicated that he had brought dinner to share with the leaders on our base. Our mission in Afghanistan was highly contingent on building relationships with the local villagers. This was the first time the leadership of a neighboring village had approached us, and so it was a pretty big deal to our company's leadership group. Building a strong rapport during this dinner was significant certainly it wouldn't be some casual dining experience. My company commander, first sergeant, and all the present lieutenants gathered to meet the malik. It was at this moment my fate was sealed. My commander looked at me, remembering that I enjoy the local cuisine more than most, and invited me to take a break from boredom and join them for dinner. I happily accepted the invitation.

We all filed into the tent to meet the malik. He was a middle aged man dressed in traditional Afghani robes, with an unkempt beard ceremoniously dyed red, as was their custom. We were seated around the floor in circle of 6 or so people. The malik then reached into his sack and removed what was to be our dinner: Red, raw, shimmering, hunks of unknown ostensible meat product. The rest of us looked at each other wide-eyed in fear. We had never seen anything like it in our time in Afghanistan before. Sadly it was too late to beg off without insulting our guest. He placed a portion of meat in front of each guest, careful to give me the most rancid looking piece of all, as I was clearly the junior member of our group. We had no choice but to give in. The commander made retching noises as he choked down each piece, relaying through the interpreter that this was merely an American custom of appreciation. One young lieutenant made a great effort to methodically dispose of his dinner piecemeal under the rug in front of us. For my part, I was determined to hold a brave

face in front of higher ranking members of my unit. Each oily bite slid down my throat leaving an indescribably foul after taste. After 15 minutes or so of waging a great battle in the name of politeness, we all slowly slipped away in order to evacuate our meals into the nearest latrine. It was weeks before I could eat any other food without having revolting flashbacks to the infamous sheep fat. Whenever I crossed paths with another member of the dinner party we would exchange disgusted, knowing looks.

Just a few months after returning from Afghanistan I was discharged from the military. Sadly, I would soon be reunited with my company on the occasion of a funeral for one of our comrades. We gathered in New York for what would surely be the last time the whole crew was back together. We all drank and traded war stories, as soldiers do. But what I found was that I had forged a lasting connection with the guys I had shared the worst supper with. Though they were officers and senior non-commissioned officers, and I was but a lowly grunt, we could not stop reminiscing about that evening. The cruel memory had faded into a mere joke. In the end, the suffering and absurdity we had experienced swallowing rancid lard had managed to transcend rank and status, and form a common bond.