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The Honey Thief



Najaf Mazari & Robert Hillman

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This book is dedicated with
great affection to Robin Bourke,
Norman Bourke, Jeanie Gibb,
Hakeema Mazari, Maria Mazari,
and also to Bruce Norman.





UZBEKISTAN

TURKMENISTAN

Mazar-e-Sharif ●

Murghab river

Oxus river

Herat ●

AFGHANISTAN

Hazarajat

IRAN

Helmand

Kandahar ●



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Note

The inspiration for the tales in *The Honey Thief* is derived from the long oral tradition of storytelling in Afghanistan. As in those tales of centuries past, a number of the stories in this collection are based on actual events, and some make reference to people who have played a role in the larger narrative of Afghanistan. The oral history of Afghanistan, preserved by storytellers in villages, towns and cities, is a living treasure. *The Honey Thief* is conceived as a tribute to the men and women who for many centuries celebrated in poems, songs and stories the experience of ordinary Afghans, their culture and wisdom.

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

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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.