

Willy's Summer Vacation

In Ghor, Afghanistan



I come from a family of very intense and creative people. In family speak this means “Difficult” and if we are being kind, then “Special”. My sisters and I have been challenged as we worked to raise the next generation of our family, four boys albeit our oldest, my son Colin, is still not quite sure whether he is actually a blood relative because he was very easy on us as he grew up, or so he tells us.

In 2009, my sister Fran and I had a call about her son Willy who was 17 and trying to find a purpose for his life and he disliked all apparent paths forward especially school. She was trying to figure out how to support him *and* she

was ready for a break. I suggested that she send him to me in Kabul for the summer and to our surprise Willy jumped on the opportunity. He joined his cousin, my son Reese, who came to visit me in a similar unsettled period of his life two and a half years earlier. We also had the son of a dear family friend, visiting us, Connor, who will evermore be known as Poor Connor, for having to deal with Reese and Willy for a whole summer.

Visiting family in Kabul is a very different experience than most international people have in Afghanistan, and Willy slipped into our house and family life very comfortably, cushioned from the difficulties of living here by the welcome

from our Afghan family and friends. Fran had very carefully helped him pack with all items that he might need spending his summer in a war zone. He moved into Reese's room, dumped the contents of his suitcases on the floor by his bed in a big heap (for better access he told me) and made himself at home. Reese and I pilfered items from his pile for the duration of his trip and blessed Fran.

For our summer vacation here, we packed up the family and flew to our PARSA offices in Ghor province for 10 days to work on our projects there, and got some relief from Kabul with Yasin and Dawn. Yasin is PARSA's country director, who I have worked with at

PARSA since 2004, and the head of our Afghan PARSA family, meaning he was Reese and Willy's "big brother".

Dawn was my best friend when we lived here in the '60's and moved back with me in 2004 and we both ended up adopting PARSA, or PARSA adopted us...we are still not quite sure.

It was scheduled as an early morning flight, which means we got to the airport early and flew out by noon. Reese usually copes in these predictable waiting gaps in activity by snoozing, upright, but Willy has since he was small talked, teased and needled anyone within hearing distance when bored. Proximity to family members with time to fill brought out the best in him. Traveling in the provinces is our opportunity to "be together"; as there are so few amenities or distractions we have to be our own entertainment. As the rest of us actually had work to do in the orphanage in Ghor, Willy took on the job of filling the long gaps between intense activities, with "entertaining" us.

"Whatcha doing Reese?" Willy asked.

Reese raised his eyebrow.

"When do you think the airplane will be here?"

"I don't know any more than the last five times you asked that." Reese



observed.

"But really, guess, and then lets make a bet and whoever wins pays the other \$5."

"Willy, it will get here when it gets here," Reese said.

"Ok, I will clean your room for a week and give you \$5 if you win and if I win I get a favor," Willy offered.

"Willy, I am a slob but you have me beat hands down and that "clean the room" offer is no prize."

"Ok, I will teach you my workout routine and give you \$5."

"I have my eyes closed and I am sleeping now," said Reese.

Willy turned to me," Marnie, when do you think the airplane will get here?..."

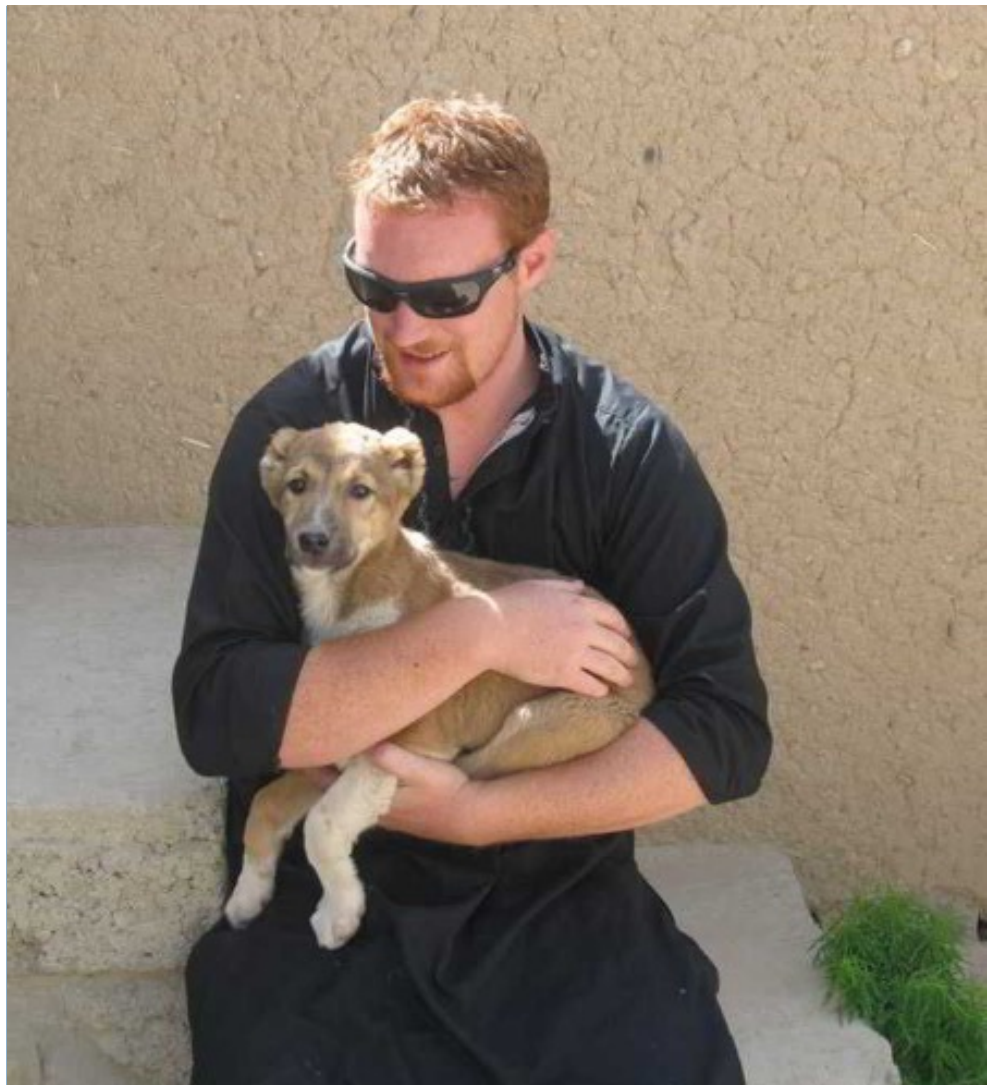
When he forgot his hygiene protocol, brushed his teeth with local tap water and contracted giardia, I was quite relieved for the break from his wit although we were then treated to constant moaning from his bedroom, punctuated with his trips to the

bathroom and the sounds of dramatic vomiting.

Reese is our "treasure" finder. He came into Afghanistan for a short break, but found life here so interesting that he stayed and started working. He thrives here because he suspends judgment and has no pesky need for rational understanding of the Afghans and simply immerses himself in the most enjoyable parts of life of living and working here. When we travel he is at his best discovering little places for us to explore, meeting interesting people, and his rudimentary Dari never seems to deter him from speaking and mixing with the locals. For him, living in this warzone is white noise; a background nuisance that needs to be attended to that only diminishes his enjoyment when he is personally touched by tragedy affecting one of his Afghan people.

Notably, some of the "treasures" he finds are met with mixed reviews or sighs of resignation from his family and colleagues.

On our first day in Chagcharran, Reese disappeared for a couple of hours as he does when he can, and returned with a puppy. A hefty big puppy that he said he saved from children who were stoning it. Naming the puppy Sherak, he informed us that the puppy was



coming home with us, which Yasin being a lover of all animals was on for. Wisely, he had asked Yasin first. A couple hours after his rescue, a boy came banging on our door asking for the puppy back as it was a valuable "fighting dog" breed. Reese told the boy to go away as he did not deserve the puppy because of the bad treatment from the children, and that was that. Sherak was now Reese's or Reese was Sherak's. We weren't sure and still aren't. When Reese brought him a piece of bread, Sherak took issue with how close Reese was to the food and bit him. The discussion between them about who was

head of the pack began and at that point Reese had weight on his side and puppy Sherak had genetics and cunning, as he came from a long line of Asian mastiffs who are used to protect herds of sheep from wolves.

Sherak's orientation to joining our family involved quite a bit of Reese's time laying on top of him for one bit of naughtiness or another. It was also the beginning of a very special relationship, as Sherak has become a central member of our family.

On our second day in Chagcharran, an

older man brought a boy to our door to have an extensive conversation with Yasin. He was a distant relative of the boy, and explained that Nassim was living in the streets of the village, eking out a living by serving in tea houses, and the man asked Yasin if he would help get the boy into the local orphanage

Nassim moved in and Yasin helped him take a shower. The guys went through their packs and between them found him some clean clothes and Nassim was happy to be part of a family and settled into the men's bedroom. I was sitting with Dawn at the end of the day, and Willy slipped into our room with a funny look on his face.

"That boy is looking at me!"

"Okay" I commented.

"No, but really he is looking at me when no one is looking at us and he widens his eyes at me and crosses his eyes!"

"Well, you are a little strange to him given you are a foreigner."

"But he doesn't do it to anyone else, and he tries to sit really close to me," Willy complained.

"...and the problem is?"

"Do I have to be nice to him because he is an orphan? He is getting on my



nerves."

"Well, I would appreciate it if you didn't treat him like you do your brother, but hanging with him would be good. This is a special time for him in an otherwise difficult life. And he is obviously curious about you," I said.

"Ok, but if I am too uncomfortable can I move in with you and Dawn? "

"This is the women's bedroom, Willy, which matters here. So, no."

"Ok. I will do my best," Willy sighed.

Ten minutes later...Willy is back.

"Ok, now I have had it. He shoved me! I don't like shoving even if he is an orphan."

"I think he is competing with you for the

special place of being youngest in the family."

"He is evil. Can I move in another room? How do you say, "go away" in Dari? AND he is wearing my sweat pants!!! I thought orphans were cool," Willy grumbled.

"Please do move if you want to."

"What if he finds me in the night?"

"Ok. Go tell Reese about this and put your bed right by Reese's and Sherak's. Reese will walk you through this issue....and get Yasin involved if you need to. I think he is having a power struggle with you, and he is winning."

"He can just have a power struggle with himself," Willy said.



The day that Yasin, Reese and Connor traveled out to Nassim's village, I stayed behind with Willy who was still sick, hoping to get some other work done. It wasn't long before I realized I was trapped, in "ends of the earth", Afghanistan having quality time with my nephew who was lolling on his pallet, bored.

"Do you think if I die here my parents will miss me?" Willy said lying on his bed.

"They may be enjoying a break from you now but, yes, we all would miss you if you died, but what made you

think of that?"

"Well it is dangerous here."

"And what are you basing that assessment on?"

"I read the media!!!!" Willy said indignantly.

"Do you feel in danger?"

"No, but I could be in danger. And I certainly could be dying of giardia. I don't think Joe (his brother) would miss me. Or Connor."

"Hmmm."

"Do you think I am dying of giardia?"

"No."

"My dog would miss me."

"Willy, I am working now. If you would like to discuss why you didn't finish your class this year, work on your schoolwork or discuss your future prospects in life if you don't finish high school, I am on for the discussion, otherwise I need to work."

"I'm good."

"I will just lay here and try not to die of giardia."

"Why do they call it giardia?"

"Willy!!!!!"

Willy was well enough to join us the next day when we visited the local orphanage, run by the government. We were providing a number of programs to both the staff and boys living there. Inspection of the orphan's living quarters were grim, particularly the bedding which was filthy. Dawn and I started to call around to find donors to replace it, while Yasin organized a trip to the river with the orphans to wash the existing Afghan "tushaks" or foam floor pillows. Working with Connor, Reese and Willy, all the boys loaded up our worn out SUV with the dirty mattresses and took three trips down to the river running through town to set up our tushak washing project. It was a warm day, the river cool and the serious business of washing quickly turned into water fights and finally tug of war with one of the sopping mattresses. The boys quickly separated into "foreigners" and Afghans, on opposite sides. Willy and Connor were highly competitive as were the orphans, and fun turned intense. And...the orphans won. Twice.

"I am amazed that they won, Marnie." Willy said to me. "They are scrawny, and underfed and I am well-fed and in really, really good shape. But there is a very big difference between someone



like me who works out for sport, and people like them who just live a very hard life, surviving. They were so good. They won and they should have won. I actually don't mind that."

Our work days in Chagcharran were busy working with government officials, finding resources for the kids in the orphanage, sorting out how much food the children were actually receiving after all of the "taxes" various officials exacted from the bulk allotments shipped to the orphanage and other soul numbing encounters with bureaucrats. Reese had to consult with me at one point while he was observing our program at the orphanage. He called and asked "Do the kids get three kidney beans with their rice or five? Everyone is arguing about that!" This prompted a couple of days of a very agitated Yasin making the rounds of the

supervisors demanding that they free up more food for the orphans.

The orphanage director managed to engage me in a lively discussion about a recent children's rights workshop he had attended. "Mrs. Marnie, they taught us that we are not supposed to beat the children, but then what are we supposed to do when they are naughty? They don't understand anything but the stick!"

Our hot, frustrating workdays ended around 4 pm. On a previous trip, Yasin and Reese had found a waterhole a couple of kilometers out of town that they went swimming in. At 4:05 they would pack us up with a picnic and take us to this special spot and we would spend the late afternoon fishing, swimming, reading and sunning on a small sandy beach enjoying the crystalline water. Nassim came too,

and played in the water with the boys in air filled tires. A cliff provided a great leaping off point for jumping into the waterhole. We were able to watch caravans of "kuchi" nomads make their slow way across the high sandy banks heading south for the winter months. Our location was quite private and Dawn and I were able to swim fully clothed. Puppy Sherak had a great time racing around and rolling in the sand with his new family pack. It was a soothing and refreshing interlude from our work.

We began preparing to go back to Kabul. Yasin called the airline to find out how we could take Sherak home with us, and they told us that if we could crate him so that he did not escape in the airplane he could come. Yasin and Reese went down to the bazaar to find anything that could contain Sherak for the short flight home. He made quick work of their first attempt at a crate, which was a reinforced large birdcage. Second attempt with a large vegetable crate seemed sturdier, and they settled on that, and Yasin called again to confirm we would be traveling with our puppy.

Our final day came, and we reluctantly took Nassim to the orphanage, which Yasin had managed to get him enrolled in. We left him with the other boys, getting ready to go to school and



packed up our bags and drove to the airport with Sherak in his crate. The pilots of our plane hadn't been informed about their canine passenger, but were compassionate about puppies and agreed to take him. He went in the crate in the back of the small plane with the rest of our luggage. As we took off, and flew over the spectacular high plains of Ghor, I caught movement in the back of the plane and looked back to see Reese sitting on the crate with Sherak's head poking out. He was trying to look calm as if all was well, pushing Sherak's head down to suppress Sherak's attempts to explore the interior of the plane and to visit the pilots. We flew home to Kabul with a more mature Willy, who was nevertheless quite happy to see the backside of Nassim the orphan.



This is an excerpt of my "Living and Working in Afghanistan" writings, that I began when I arrived to live here in 2005. Mostly, I started writing to explain to my family why I am still here. I tell Afghans that Afghanistan is my "uncle" country. It is home to my family and I, and the richest part of my life here is just the everyday adventure of living and working in this amazing country.