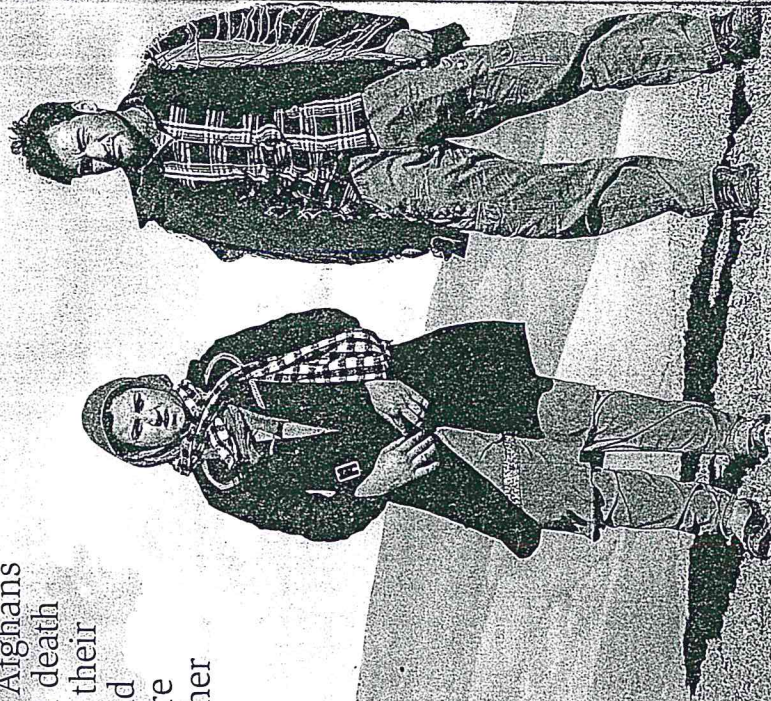


Afghanistan's Romeo & Juliet

The true story of two young Afghans who risked death by defying their families and their culture to be together

BY ROD NORDLAND



Watch a video about Zakia and Ali at UPFRONTMAGAZINE.COM



Zakia and Ali in Afghanistan, 2014

Her name was Zakia. Shortly before midnight on the freezing-cold night of March 20, 2014, she lay fully clothed on her thin mattress on a concrete floor and considered what she was about to do.

She had on all her layers—a long pink sweater, and an orange-and-purple scarf—but no coat, because she didn't own one. Her 4-inch open-toed high heels were beside her mattress next to the photograph of Ali, the boy she loved. It was not the best escape gear for what she was about to do—climb a wall and run off into the mountains in central Afghanistan—but it would soon be her wedding day, and she wanted to look good.

That night was not the first time Zakia had contemplated escaping from the Bamian Women's Shelter. She had been in the shelter for the past six months, since the day she ran away from home, hoping to marry Ali.

As an 18-year-old and an adult, she had the legal right to wed. But as happens with so many Afghan girls, her family had denied her the right to choose who to marry—and threatened her with death for daring to defy her father. When an Afghan girl has done something culturally forbidden, it's considered acceptable—expected even—for her male relatives to kill her

to wipe clean the shame brought to the family; it's called an honor killing. Zakia knew that soon her family would succeed in its legal efforts to have her removed from the women's shelter, and she expected to be killed if that happened. So she was determined to escape and elope with Ali.

A Daring Escape

On the other side of the Bamian valley, Ali was waiting for Zakia's call. Several weeks earlier, when he visited the women's shelter, Ali had secretly left Zakia a cellphone with which to contact him. He had had to teach her how to use it: Zakia couldn't read or even recognize the numbers zero to nine to dial on a phone.

To escape the shelter that night, Zakia dragged several mattresses, across the courtyard to the back wall. She doubled them over and piled them up to make a ledge high enough to climb over the 8-foot wall. Once over the wall, she ran in her high heels until she was far enough away to call Ali.

When Ali got the call, he sprang into action. A friend who owned a battered Toyota Corolla had agreed to help the couple elope by taking him to pick up Zakia, about 20 minutes away, and then driving them up into the mountains. When Zakia got into the car with Ali, she took his hand in hers. It was a shockingly intimate gesture in a society as conservative as Afghanistan.

Late the following day, they paid a *malah* (an Islamic religious leader) to marry them. But getting married didn't solve their problems; it only created new ones. Afghanistan is one of the poorest

Afghanistan BY THE NUMBERS

\$594
PER CAPITA GDP
(U.S. per capita
GDP: \$56,000.)
SOURCE: WORLD BANK

24%
PERCENTAGE
of women over
age 15 who can
read (vs. 52
percent for men).
SOURCE: WORLD BANK (2011)

110%
PERCENTAGE
of infants who die
before their first
birthday—the
highest infant
mortality rate
in the world.
SOURCE: WORLD BANK (2011)

and most unstable countries in the world. Since the Soviet Union invaded in 1979, it has endured close to four decades of upheaval. The Russians withdrew after 10 years, but then rival Afghan warlords continued to fight. In 1996, a radical Islamic group known as the Taliban took control of the country and enforced a harsh interpretation of Islamic law, especially with regard to women. They banned girls from going to school and women from going to work.

But the oppression of women was a big part of Afghan society long before the Taliban. After the American-led military intervention that ousted the Taliban in October 2001 (see "America's Longest War," below), the laws restricting women so harshly were repealed, but that did little to change attitudes. For example, honor killings are illegal on paper. But in reality, they're just one of many abusive customs toward women and girls that remain common, including child marriages and wife beating. Afghanistan is also a deeply tribal society, and marriages between different ethnic groups are frowned on. This was another reason Zakia's father opposed her marriage to Ali. Zakia is Tajik, and Ali is Hazara. To make matters worse, she's a Sunni Muslim, and he's a Shiite Muslim, and their sects have been in violent conflict for centuries.

Their forbidden relationship had started years earlier, across a low mud wall that divided their families' adjacent potato fields. "We were children and never thought about each other in that way," Zakia said. Then they reached their teens and did. But once an Afghan girl reaches adolescence, she's forbidden to see

any men outside her family. So Ali wooed her in secret, playing his flute when no one was around and reciting bits of Persian love poems he'd memorized even though he couldn't read.

'I'm With My Love'

Their escape that night in March 2014 into the high mountains of central Afghanistan seemed hopeless. The barren terrain provided nowhere to hide, and they had fled without any warm clothes or other necessities. "If we had only had one day together, it would have been worth it," Zakia said. "How can I be sad? We're together. I'm with my love."

In Afghan society, a girl is considered her father's property until she becomes her husband's property. By eloping, Zakia was not just defying her father's wishes but also stealing what he saw as rightfully his. So the police began looking for them, as well as Zakia's increased family members. I was searching too. As a reporter for *The New York Times*, I had already written about the star-crossed couple once, calling them an Afghan Romeo and Juliet, and I managed to find them before the police and her family. They were in a mud house in a remote village in the high mountains, and it was pretty nearly the end of the road for them. Their hosts, hearing the police were on the way, were about to turn Zakia and Ali out so they wouldn't be arrested too.

The couple had no car, no money, no prospects. What they had was me. I didn't want their story to end like this, and I felt responsible: Quite possibly my arrival had made it even easier for the police to trace them, since foreigners were so rarely seen

A Journalist's Dilemma

What do you do when the people you're reporting about desperately need your help?

It's one of the cardinal rules of journalism: Reporters shouldn't get personally involved in the stories they cover.

But that's exactly what Rod Nordland of *The New York Times* did when he helped Zakia and Ali escape an honor killing by her family. "You're supposed to stay impartial and independent," Nordland acknowledges, and he strongly

supports that idea in principle. But this case made him reconsider: The couple hadn't broken any laws, but if they were caught, Zakia's family would almost certainly have killed her for marrying Ali. In the spur of the moment, he decided to help, giving them money and transportation.

"I was immediately aware that what I'm doing now is crossing a line," he says. "But I felt like I had a responsibility."

Nordland is convinced he did the right thing, but he still has second thoughts, especially when others now ask him for help.

"They've said, 'You did it in that case. Why can't you do it in our case?'" he says. "And that's put me in an awkward position."

—Patricia Smith



Rod Nordland is the New York Times's bureau chief in Afghanistan.

Bamiyan, to Ali's father's house. In December 2014, their daughter, Kuqta, was born.

In the following year, hundreds of thousands of Afghans joined a growing exodus of migrants heading to Europe, often risking their lives to escape the violence in their homeland. After careful consideration, Zakia and Ali decided not to join them, moved by pictures of a Syrian toddler whose body washed up on a Turkish beach after the raft his family was on overturned in the Mediterranean. Neither Ali nor Zakia could swim, and they had their baby to worry about.

By early 2016, Zakia and Ali remained in what amounted to house arrest in Ali's father's mud house, shared with 18 relatives. She dared not leave home, fearing attack by still-furious family members.

It became clear that they needed to flee Afghanistan. But no nation stepped forward to offer them asylum. Zakia and Ali took these setbacks in stride. After all, they said, they had only ever hoped for a few days together; already they had had a couple of years.

But their situation changed last year, when an anonymous U.S. government official intervened behind the scenes. Apparently, he or she read my book about them and was moved by their plight. Suddenly, they were told they could get permission to come to the United States. They arrived in May 2016.

Today they live in Connecticut, where they're learning English and waiting for their asylum request to be approved. They hope one day to return to an Afghanistan that's safe for women, and for young people in love. For now, they have a new set of goals.

"I want our daughter to grow up and choose her own husband," Zakia said. "Above all, I want her to be educated."



Safe at Last: Zakia and Ali after arriving in New York City, May 2016

'I want our daughter to grow up and choose her own husband.'

By this point, Zakia was pregnant and she and Ali had realized that their only hope for survival was to flee the country. The stories I'd written about them in *The Times* had generated enormous public sympathy, and people worldwide donated to a fund set up to help them. In October 2014, they used some of that money to buy plane tickets to neighboring Tajikistan. Their plan was to apply for refugee status and from there apply for asylum in a Western country. But things went wrong almost immediately. They were picked up by corrupt secret police, who stole everything they had, beat them, then deported them back to Afghanistan.

Deeply humiliated by the fiasco, they went back to

women's shelter for her own safety.

But Zakia, whose face had become a fixture on Afghan TV, had become a hero to every young Afghan woman who dreams of marrying someone she loves rather than someone chosen by her family. When the couple was taken into custody, young Afghans were so outraged that the authorities let them go.

Robbed, Beaten & Deported

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American soldiers in Afghanistan, 2015

America's Longest War

U.S. troops have been fighting in Afghanistan for the past 16 years. And there's no end in sight.

But many Taliban fighters regrouped and continued fighting as insurgents. Their ongoing attacks on both the military and civilians continue to make Afghanistan a very dangerous, unstable place. Since 2001, almost 2,400 American soldiers have died in Afghanistan and another 20,000 have been wounded. In that time, the U.S. has spent more than three-quarters of a trillion dollars on the war.

Despite the huge investment, the situation in Afghanistan seems to be deteriorating, many experts say. In the past year, the Taliban has retaken control of some territory and ISIS fighters have tried to gain a foothold in lawless areas. Afghan government forces now control just 63 percent of the nation's districts. "The reality is that the Taliban have the initiative," says retired U.S. Army General Jack Keane. "They have the momentum. They attack when they want, where they want, and the outcome is usually successful for them."

Currently, there are some 8,500 U.S. troops in Afghanistan and the war there is costing \$3.1 billion every month. President Trump is planning to send more troops in an effort to stabilize the situation, but both the White House and the military are divided about whether that will really help.

—Patricia Smith