

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER SECRETARY

IN AFGHANISTAN IN 1968

I walk to the office through the fruit bazaar, laden with seasonal oranges, pomegranates, melons, dispersed with some onions, carrots and eggplant, and pick up a faint scent from the chicken bazaar two blocks away. Once I arrive, I make my way through several bicycles framing the door and encounter the Peace Corps nurse staring down at a dozen stool cups lining the threshold. She looks at me and says, "Look at that! Every other woman in the world gets roses. All I ever get is nonsense!"

I stop by the kitchen on my way in and start the coffee. I get to my desk to find that my boss, the Peace Corps Director, has gotten in early and left piles of paper for me to deal with. I also notice that my work station has been turned upside down. It looks as though a visiting volunteer from the provinces has come in to use my typewriter and made himself at home.

The nurse comes through announcing that the driver is making a run to the Embassy and do I have anything ready to go. I don't, but I'll be going in a few hours anyway.

One of our Peace Corps doctors stops by (we have two on staff at all times) and needs to see the Director. They confer while I'm checking with the mailroom for cables and pouch mail that I'll take on my daily run to the U.S. Embassy. The Peace Corps maintains three Afghan drivers and one of them will take me. I get back to my desk as the doctor is leaving and I hear him say, "I'm leaving right away." We apparently have a medical crisis that demands his personal attention. No matter where he goes, he'll probably be out for at least a week, accompanied by his wife. Later I learn that a volunteer from my group has had a breakdown and will have to be accompanied back to the States. It's a heavy blow to me as I admired this woman a great deal and always considered her to be the "ideal" Peace Corps volunteer. This will ripple through the volunteer community and cause great concern. If she can't make it, can we?

Medivacs are common in Afghanistan. Most times, volunteers leave on their own steam. But in some cases, they have to be accompanied by a doctor or a nurse. We have no hospital to take care of us, only a lab at the Embassy to process our stool specimens. If possible, we send people to New Delhi, India, or Wiesbaden, West Germany, to the military hospital. Wiesbaden is the closest American medical installation for us.

I no sooner get back to my desk when the Cashier comes by. There's a problem with one of the signatures I obtained during payroll delivery: a wife has signed for her husband. That's a no-no, so don't let it happen again. Who thought it would be so complicated?

One of the Kabul volunteers comes through looking for a bicycle. His was stolen and he's looking for a replacement. I think we have some in the basement, which looks like an antique shop, so we troop down and stumble around until we find what we need. He signs for it and heads off to find one of our handymen to get the tires pumped up. While in the basement, I discover lots of little treasures that might come in handy in the future and make mental notes.

Our Deputy Director strolls by. "Look what I've got," he says and holds up a small paper bag. Paper bags are made in the bazaar, probably in the paper-bag bazaar, and are made from recycled printed matter: books, newspapers, calendars, posters. This one happens to be made from a memo written by the Peace Corps director to the volunteers. The handymen are called in and grilled. Their instructions are to bag all our paper trash and sent it to the Embassy for disposal. Seems these guys were selling the paper on the bazaar to the bag makers. Looks as though these two guys are in trouble.

By now it's eleven o'clock and I make the Embassy run. I stop by to chat with the Marine Guard (they love to see the Peace Corps women come by), stick my head into the Ambassador's office to wave at his secretary, chat up the folks in the cable room and head back to my patient driver. I have no clearances, but I carry cables to and from, usually sealed in a large envelope.

I get back around noon to find one of the volunteers is in from Baghlan for a consultation with her technical advisor. She's having problems at her site and is wondering if she can transfer to another facility. Volunteers come to Kabul for a variety of reasons: medical, looking to transfer, problems with supervisors, family situations back in the States that are insurmountable, taking a break after being in the field for a long time. The technical advisors and doctors do get out to do site visits, but some problems are more immediate. Provincial volunteers come in on an average of every three or four months. In any event, the volunteer asks if I can get away for lunch, and later would I like to go to the US/AID staff house for a tuna fish sandwich. And, oh, by the way, could she stay with me. The staff house is technically off-limits to Peace Corps, but the staff there is very sympathetic to us, so I go when provincial volunteers come in. Their cravings are larger than mine as I do have access to luxuries like tuna fish, ice cream, and an occasional scotch. The staff house sells coupon books that allow us to purchase these items and more (beer, hamburgers, hot dogs, more beer). I have one friend who starts at the beginning of her coupon book and doesn't leave until it's all gone.

For lunch we head off to an Indian restaurant in the neighborhood that serves grilled cheese sandwiches. They always make me sick, but I have an incredible weakness for them, so I take the plunge. They're made with Dutch cheese that's stolen from the UN commissary. It's very much like a log of Velveeta, and it's the only place that I know of where I can find this cheese, unless I go to the Robber Barons in the bazaar. We can place orders for "rare" items and return in a couple of days to pick up our orders.

After lunch I try to get some work done. I still haven't had any one-on-one with the Director, and he usually has at least an hour of dictation for me. We're about to sit down to it when he gets a call from the U.S. Ambassador, who wants to see him right away. I'm left to deal with the pile of paper left on my desk that morning, but then one of the smallpox vaccinators comes in suffering from a dog bite so we all listen to her story. Things begin to settle down when the volunteer in charge of the mailroom comes flying across the room. She's a former ballet dancer and every once in a while the spirit moves her and she has to dance through the office. Actually, she usually dances through the office. The office building is one long corridor, one room wide. You can see from one end to the other down a long, narrow hallway, the Director's office at one end, the Medical Office at the other. In between are staff offices for our program officers in health, education and agriculture, our administrative officer, Afghan translators, drivers, cashier's office, two doctors, a couple of waiting rooms, mailroom (the most popular room), and a small library that I keep organized in my spare time.

The next interruption is from my houseboy, Khan, who tells me the cat has died (apparently from distemper), and he is inconsolable. I live only ten minutes from the office, so we walk back to the house together while he calms down and we bury the poor thing in the yard. I tell him I'll be eating out tonight so he's free to do as he pleases. He most likely will be studying his English. He's taking English and a food-handlers course because he wants to become a cook for Americans.

An hour later I'm back in the office and the Director has returned by then. Vice President Agnew is going to be making a stop in Kabul during his Southeast Asian tour, a command performance by the Peace Corps staff. This calls for a quick staff meeting so I try to round up as many as I can. Unless a staff meeting is scheduled in advance, it is rare that I can find a third of the staff in the office at any given time. So I plan to take notes and get the message out as best I can.

As the Administrative Officer files into the Director's office, she mentions there's a problem with one of the out-going trunks at Customs and could I find a driver and go over there to see what the problem is. Volunteers get 80 pounds of air freight coming in to the country and 100 pounds when they terminate.

As these trunks come in and out of the country, they have to go through Customs, which is located at the airport. One of my jobs is making sure these trunks are opened, cleared and stamped with a seal of approval before they leave. The driver is invaluable to me during this ordeal. Any little glitch can hold up a person's trunk for weeks and months. We make every effort to insure there are no delays, and the driver sometimes has to grease a few palms to make sure the trunks are processed in an appropriate manner.

It appears the customs form and the contents of the trunk don't match. We make the adjustments, and two hours later we're heading back to the office. I know now that I'm going to be working late. I still have that pile of paper on my desk, and I'm still waiting for the new pile of paper from the Director. The staff meeting is over by the time I get back, but there's a note from the Deputy Director and would I stop by his office. He'll be coordinating the VP's visit and wants to get the word out to the volunteers. Having no telephone or telegraph service, our best mode of communication is word-of-mouth. I'll try sending a telegram to our Field Rep in Kandahar so he can relay the information to the volunteers in the southern part of the country, but there are no guarantees the message will get through. I dash a note off to the doctor who is about to travel and have one of the drivers take it to his house, hoping he hasn't left yet. I then realize that the volunteer staying at my house is from the north so we can arm her with the information. Ah, it's great to have a back-up plan.

By now I'm thinking this day will never end. I head back to my desk and run into the Director's wife and the Deputy Director's wife, who have been to the bazaar shopping. The Deputy has recently arrived and is still not quite settled. The Director's wife wants to throw a party for the Deputy and his family, and she asks if I'll help. Of course! Mostly that means getting the word out. Again, there are no phones and no telegrams, but we do see a lot of each other. Since it's so late, the Director and Deputy decide to go home with their wives and call it a day. Now, perhaps, I can get some work done!

The Embassy calls. There's a cable that the Director needs to see right away. Since the Director has already left, I find a driver, go to the Embassy, pick up the cable and take it to his house. I hang around there for a while, catching up on family news, and by this time my day is completely shot. I don't stay too long as my ever-patient driver is waiting, so I head back to the office to meet up with my dinner partner. We head over to the staff house and spend the rest of the evening there. We run into a couple of other volunteers who are trying to satisfy their beer cravings, and have a fun evening. There aren't any night clubs, so we stay at the staff house until a taxi takes us home. I fall asleep immediately dreaming of that pile of paper on my desk and how it's going to grow.