

# THE CARETAKER

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A shabby van left tightly against the high wall sticks out. I spot it as I get out of the off-roader. The van is empty and without license plate. Acting casually I place my hand on the front; cold. Further down the narrow back street an upright burqa-clad blue figure is walking away. In the opposite direction two talking men leaned towards their bicycles are looking my way.

I nod to Hamid, the driver. He locks the off-roader and walks the few steps to the rough wooden cemetery gate; locked. He knocks and shouts something in Pashtu over the wall. A Friday afternoon in January, blue sky, freezing cold, shadows reach long in Kabul's Sherpur quarter. I squeeze the pine wreath under my arm, look around and take my time about it.

This is a detour. Two days ago I arrived from Copenhagen on a governmental delegation tasked to have talks with officials about repatriating some illegal Afghan migrants. They come in thousands for sanctuary. The call for visiting a Christian cemetery came in the last minute. Years back a prominent Danish explorer died and was buried in Kabul. A stopover at the site laying down a wreath was hastily included in the program.

There is a lazy stillness in the air; yet no reason to stay one second longer than required. I risk ending up as a permanent resident on the other side, laying on the back, mouth full of dirt. The cemetery is surrounded by a greyish eight feet tall brick wall. After the senseless turmoil in Afghanistan, someone seems to be ingenuously hopeful imagining the Danish grave is still preserved.

Slightly the left half of the wooden gate opens. Immediately Hamid starts to push words through the gap. I step closer giving the wreath a second squeeze. Hamid speaks to a boy about twelve years with fringed hair and crimson cheeks. After a few sentences he lets us in and locks the gate from the inside with a rusty iron hinge. Behind the closed walls the cemetery occupies the size of a soccer field. The light is sharp. Dry frozen grass struggles with a thin layer of snow to cover ground and pebbles. Three low trees stretching bare grey branches towards the sky seem

like the rest of the place to be in a dormant state. The scattered graves and their headstones are in a surprisingly good condition, considering Taliban ruled the country a long time, and that the place to this day by the locals are known as “the white cemetery”. To the right I notice a little stone shack with a single dark glaring window and a sloping tin roof. Close by two strutting chickens stretch necks to see what goes on at the gate.

The boy keeps both hands in his pockets as he talks in a soft but firm voice. He pretends not to freeze but his worn-out black jacket is thin and the blue jogging pants stuck into a green pair of rubber boots offer little comfort in the Afghan winter. He looks straight at my face as he states to be the caretaker of the cemetery; he wants to know the purpose of our visit, Hamid translates.

I hear my voice break the ensuing silence, telling the boy about the explorer and carefully pronouncing his name. As a clattering metallic sound breaks from behind the dark window of the shack; my throat goes dry. Then another boy in rubber boots appears, hardly nine years old. He has a blue, green and red striped kite in the hand and a skeptical look in his eyes.

Instantly the caretaker knows where the Dane is buried and takes us directly to the grave, some thirty steps to the left of the gate. A reddish headstone erected on the spot more than fifty years ago is dusty but entirely undamaged; the carved letters easily readable. Grey brick stones mark the size of the grave. The youngest boy steps closer dragging the kite in its string. His nose is running. My knee creaks embarrassingly as I bend down and place the pine wreath below the headstone. The green color lights up the grey dust. For a second my head is empty; then my lips whisper: “I guess none of us ever imagined a meeting like this.”

Afterwards the caretaker explains that the boy with the kite is his younger brother. They live in the shack at the cemetery together with an “uncle”. Can I see him? Unfortunately not, he is out on business at the moment; Hamid translates and shrugs his shoulders. On the way to the wooden gate I search my pockets; find a few local bank notes and a chocolate bar. The caretaker keeps his premature adult look at me as he with a measured bow accepts my meek donation. He folds the money and sticks them into his pocket. His younger brother’s eyes are fixed on the chocolate bar. The caretaker unwraps, takes a bite, and hands the rest to his brother.

As I bid him farewell, the caretaker quickly swallows the chocolate and ask, what is written above the explorer's name, at the head stone. I look towards the grave and to my mind comes the first line of a renowned Danish psalm: *Altid frejdig når du går* - always dauntless as you walk.

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