

<Intro music: "This Is My Town"

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<April>

This is a podcast about family: who we were then, who we are now, and who we are becoming.

My dad was born in 1940 and times back then were different in a lot of ways,

<Vernon >

...and my mother said, "You better put that gun down. If you shoot me I'm going to spank you like you've never been spanked before."

<April>

...and then again not that different at all.

<Vernon>

...still picture us walking down the street looking at the windows, looking at those travel brochures, looking at the diamonds, and the little coffee shop and all that, and it's something I'll never forget.

<April>

My dad is a geologist and I grew up on stories of his early career, about riding elephants to work in Thailand, mine collapses, and how a Polaroid camera saved his life.

I know these stories by heart, but it's time to share them with my own kids.

Let's see what they have to say.

<Afghani drum music fades in and out>

<Vernon>

I studied everything I could about Afghanistan and I put a proposal that maybe we should go to Afghanistan, look for some potential mining opportunities there. And I was surprised when they said, "Go ahead." The year before they had overthrown the king and now they had a quote "a republic." The Russians were there to help them along, although we still had communism at that time.

So there's no war going on yet at that time. So I flew into uh Pakistan peshwa I think it was, and at the airport there, the Army was practicing Army Maneuvers, and right off the edge of their runway there, they were throwing hand grenades! And this was all to be practicing and all this, and I thought, "Gee, what a hell of a place for them to be practicing..."

And they had live bullets and they had, you know, mannequins up there that they were shooting at, and this is right along the side the runway. Oh my God, kind of glad that um uh I'm not staying here

So that would be my only true experience in Pakistan.

So I had to switch over to a um to an Afghan Airline, and we flew into Afghanistan, and the pilot had to make several passes over to get. I don't know what the conditions were - looked pretty normal to me, And uh we were getting there late in the evening, so I didn't get to really see much.

What I did is I found a taxi, and I went to the um the only real hotel that they had, in fact it was the tallest building in um in Kabul, it was three stories high or four stories high, so maybe five stories high, and didn't recognize at that time, because they had all the earthquakes and all, that they didn't have any tall buildings.

I got up in the morning, and I had breakfast, and went to have eggs. And I had since they're Muslims, they don't eat pork, had some kind of um meat for breakfast and eggs, had uh the Afghan bread, which is kind of unleavened bread, which I really did like.

And I went outside, and I looked out to the window there, and I could see the Himalayas. And I looked up and up and up and up and up, and I could not believe how big the Himalayas were. I meant they are the biggest mountains that I had ever seen.

Of course in here these things were around, you know in the high 20s here.

They were called the Hindu Kush, or the Hindu Killers, so that when the Hindus tried to cross it with their pilgrimages in the older days - because they remember, there was a big Buddha that was uh in Afghanistan, that was uh the Taliban uh destroyed it, because they thought it was Pagan, which is too bad, cuz it was a thousand years old.

So I was just super impressed by how large that those mountains were.

Well I was to spend a week there so what I did is I went to to the US Embassy to establish myself. And I did that and got some notice that there were US Marines that were there, and they had weapons, and of course all the embassies at that time had weapons. And so I went and talked with the US ambassador there and then he arranged for me to have some meetings with the various mining ministers. So then I went to the building that had all of the government offices, including the ones associated with Mining, and I got to meet with the minister of mines. And amazing, everybody that could speak English which I found was, which is absolutely amazing, Uh since it's Afghan, Peshwa, uh is is a native language there

So I would I would go and I would talk with the various people trying to get information and pamphlets, and I noticed that there were secretaries everywhere.

I asked the guy, "Is that, is she an Afghani?" "No she's Russian!" So the Russians they were since they were funding the things they provided all the secretaries. And there was this big heavy set Russian woman there, and well we had a stereotype, there are Russian women, you know, that they worked at tractor factories, and and they were big clumsy oaf women.

And I said, "Hi, there," to her and she turned red, and the other Russian women noticed that, and they started teasing her.

And I said, "Oh how you doing? I'd like to introduce myself!" And she was just absolutely embarrassed. And for the next few days, when I would come there, I'd make a habit of going right by her office, "Oh

how you doing there? Maybe we ought to get together and have some coffee or something like that,"
And she would go running right, and I tormented that poor woman there, because she was Russian.

I didn't like Russians, and the other women, they just really gave her a really hard time.

<Song, "This is My Town," fades in and out>

<April>

So that was fun - some history, some geology, some body shaming and xenophobia.

<Kivan>

Yippee!

<Branwen>

What's xenophobia?

<April>

Xenophobia is when you judge people based on what country they're from.

<Branwen>

That's a a lot of that happened in the 1970s ,Mom.

<Kivan>

Racism, it's like but not racism. Not racism, country-based racism basically.

<April>

So like I almost didn't want to include it, Cuz I'm like oh no, this is going to paint my dad in a bad light.
And I'm like but this is who he is.

<Kivan>

And it's kind of hard to get mad at your average American in the 70s for not liking Russians, because like literally the entire Cold War stuff was going on, and there's a strange line between judging someone based on standards of now versus standards of then.

<April>

Yeah that's sort of a thing I think that's probably going to be, something we have to look in the eye several times while we're listening to these stories.

Yeah but it's funny cuz I was reading about it, one of the reasons that Americans portrayed Russian women as being like all like butch, you know, unfeminine, was because they were communist, and because women were looking for equality, and there's this idea that equal women are not feminine enough.

Wonderfully feminine American women who would never work in a tractor factory.

<Kivan>

Didn't, like, what in World War II there was like a huge push - they're like yeah let's women to the jobs and then immediately after that they're like how do we how do we make communism look bad um what if we just like you used our misogyny to make communism look bad.

<April>

Yes, okay so it's funny.

<Branwen>

Misogyny?

<April>

Misogyny is whenever you like think that dudes are superior cuz...

<Branwen>

Oh, that.

<April>

So is there anything else from the story that kind of stood out to you that you were like...?

<Branwen>

I like how when he said he went to Pakistan at the very start he literally went they were just throwing grenades and shooting mannequins and no one was batting in eye no one cared and they're wasting all that ammunition.

<Kivan>

They're not wasting ammunition, bro, they're training. I'd say the real waste of ammunition is shooting actual people.

<Branwen>

I don't disagree either but it was in 1970s. Yeah can you imagine just right next to like DFW Airport, just to have, like, people throwing grenades. Just getting out of your... Imagine going to your airplane like you're about to land you just see a giant explosion in the distance just on the ground you're like, "Oh well, that would be..."

<Kivan>

...I guess we're not using that Runway oopsy.

<April>

I thought about when he talked about the Himalayas, it's not the same thing but it kind of remind me the first time I saw the Coliseum.

<April>

Okay well then, Branwen, what have you seen that when you were traveling that made you go, "Holy jamalama"?

<Branwen>

The Grand Canyon. Cuz I was four or five.

<April>

You still remember that?

<Branwen>

Yes I remember going on like horses in the Grand Canyon and being completely afraid I was the mule was about to just throw me off and I would just go into the hole.

<April>

You know what's funny is we weren't even anywhere near the rim whenever we on, so we were like in a pasture like a mile or so from the rim.

I remember from the Grand Canyon you throwing giant temper tantrums

<Branwen>

I remember throwing giant temper tantrums!

<April>

So Kivan you remember a time that you specifically just kind of had that moment of just awe?

<Kivan>

So there was this moment I believe it was in Spain, where we went up a like 60° Gondola 60° incline Gondola for a while and ended up at the top of this massive, like 90° cliff, and I just it was gigantic.

And I mean we've seen bigger things before but for some reason the magnitude of the cliff just was in like incredible to me.

And there was also like a sort of cultural moment that was kind of like that and not really like a physical component and more of a cultural component.

Uh in uh the British Isles and the Orkneys, I believe it was Papa Westray we went to see a like 5,000 year-old house called Knap of Howar.

And I guess the reason it was so impressive to me is that you could see the entire house instead of just seeing like a foundation.

You could see the furniture and you could touch it and interact with it and then sit in a house that people had been in for like 5,000 years ago it was just insane to me.

<April>

Awesome . But yeah I feel like that's definitely something we can all like once you travel, or even if you haven't traveled, there's moments that just kind of take your breath away and you're like, "Holy mackerel, this is something."

<Afghani drum music fades in and out>

<Vernon>

Yeah, after I got a lot of information from that, I realized that this isn't very much. So, I hired a taxi. What I was going to do is, I was going to go — if you look on the map — there's a place that's called Salang Pass, and it has a very long tunnel, it must be a mile or so long, that goes through the Himalayas. You go to the other side, and there were supposed to be some mineral deposits there.

So, I hired a taxi driver, and it was several hours' drive there. He had enough gasoline to go back and forth because there were no gas stations. So, we get into Salang Tunnel, Salang Pass, and go through the tunnel.

This would be when the Russians would come in with their tanks. One of their tanks would backfire, and they thought it was the Taliban that was after them. They would stop there, and with all the tanks running, they had all this carbon monoxide and would end up killing a large number of Russian soldiers.

Then, the ones near the entrances, they thought there was a battle going on, so they started firing on both ends. It was a state of confusion. All it was was, it turned out to be some of the tanks that were backfiring. Quite a few Russian soldiers lost their lives in that tunnel.

This is way up in the Himalayas, and I am just amazed. I am in the middle of Afghanistan, and we get on the other side of it, and there's a big desert out there. We drive along the road, and he stopped for a minute, and there was a big pile of rocks there. He said, "Well, let's — there's a camel caravan coming. They're obviously smugglers." This guy, you know, he could speak English, "And I don't want them to see us."

What we did is we parked the taxi behind some rocks, and we got on the rocks and hid. There was some brush there, and we were watching them come through. There were about 40 or 50 camels, and it was a true caravan. They were traveling through the area, and they were obviously smugglers. They were bringing stuff in from China. No telling what they were bringing in.

I got to see an actual caravan, and we watched them as they came in and went past us. They were about a half a mile away, and then they went out to the distance, and we went on. So that particular drive was uneventful, didn't really see much there.

I went into the hotel the next morning, and there was a guy that looked familiar to me. I said, "Gee, I think I know you."

It turned out that when I was working on my Master's Degree, I was mapping the Bishop Cap Hills in New Mexico, right next to Las Cruces. While I was mapping, there was somebody in a truck that came by. Since I was mapping, I went over there and started talking with him. It turns out — I forget what his name is now — he was with the U.S. Geological Survey, and he was doing a fluorine analysis to see how much fluorite was available - you need that to smelt iron ore - what kind of resources New Mexico had. He was there to try to evaluate the hills there.

We got to talking for a while, and I told him when I was doing my Master's thesis, I was doing very detailed work on it and all this sort of stuff. He made a proposal for me. He says, "Well, I tell you what. You can save me a lot of work. If what you will do is, you will take 100 samples that we can do geochemical analysis on and 100 samples that we can make thin sections of, and it won't cost you anything. We'll do it for free. That way, I don't have to come out here and work in there." I thought that was absolutely amazing.

That's the only time I ever saw that guy until he walked into the hotel in Afghanistan. So that would be the second time I see him. I'll tell you about the third time I would see him.

We had a long talk and had breakfast together. He was on his way to Central Afghanistan where they had these big volcanoes. I have a picture of it. They have these gigantic lakes, and the lakes are over a thousand feet deep. He was going to go diving there to see if there was anything along the edges of the volcanoes. We had a really nice long chat, and he told me about the samples that he got from my thesis, and all that. He was just as surprised as I was.

It's getting to be the 4th of July. This is during about the 4th of July time. So I decided, well, I'm going to walk down the streets of Kabul and see what it's like. I was just amazed. Remember, there's no building that was at that time taller than two stories because I realized later it was earthquakes. It was like I was back 400 years ago.

They were — you know, people wearing turbans. The men there, surprisingly, wore suit jackets that were donated, and apparently, they would get huge supplies of suit jackets or, you know, sports jackets. That's what the men wore. They wore sports jackets, and they had a turban, and they had beards. Some of them had the full Arabic dress, and they were just absolutely amazing to look at.

By the way, I also went to Kabul University to see if I could get any information from there. There, you saw men and women — the boys and the girls — and the women there were absolutely stunning. They were Anglo — and they had blue eyes and blonde hair and all of that. It turns out, I find out later, Alexander the Great had conquered Kabul and had set up a kind of a feifdom in there, and these were actually descendants from Alexander the Great. So they were the Aryans. They actually had Aryans there in parts of Afghanistan, and the women there were just, like I say, blue eyes, blonde hair, just as beautiful as you could — you know, as a person could look. So I was really surprised by that.

<Song, "This is My Town," fades in and out>

<Kivan>

What I find kind of goofy is the fact that he was talking about seeing this caravan, like this gigantic caravan of smugglers. After he finishes the talk about the drive, he's like, you know, the drive wasn't very eventful, so we kept on going, blah blah blah. Like it wasn't very eventful, which means to him he is in that much drama that a smuggler caravan is, you know, apparently an everyday occurrence.

<April>

I'm just picturing him being there with like these camels and just thinking, like, this is not something that's going to be happening for another hundred years. What a special moment, a special opportunity to get to see something like that. Have you ever kind of had that experience where you felt like you had that special moment that maybe you wouldn't be able to have if you'd been there into the future?

<Kivan>

Yeah, um, I think if you remember back to when we were in Morocco, and the tour guide guy stopped on the side of the road and took us to the Bedoin tent. It was just like this Nomad person family who just lived in a tent tending to their livestock. Then we just went in and sat in their tent, and they gave us tea and cookies.

<April>

I know what you're talking about 'cause I was also sitting there thinking, like, man, I wonder how much longer these people are going to be allowed to travel and live like this.

Because, so, I love the idea that my dad is here in Afghanistan seeing these women going to school, doing these amazing things and not realizing that their daughters aren't going to be able to go to university.

<Branwen>

Or live by any means

<April>

Or live by any reasonable means that we might expect to.

Yeah, it's pretty crazy. What's crazy is that Afghanistan women got the vote before U.S. women. I just think it's interesting because you think about Afghanistan, and you think about oppressed women. But actually, at this time that my dad was here, Afghanistan was actually kind of a, "Look how these women are going to school."

<Kivan>

Afghanistan was decently liberal until the Taliban started doing standard Taliban things.

<April>

Yes, I think essentially

<Branwen>

What's the Taliban?

<April>

Oh, that's a great question. So basically, the Taliban is a religious government, like a religious political party that says, "You know, we're going to just follow the laws of our very, very narrow view of how this religion should be practiced." And in their view, women shouldn't basically exist outside the role of whatever men expect them to be.

<Kivan>

Women are sex objects to make babies, to make more men.

<Branwen>

They're stupid — well, really, yeah.

<April>

They were in charge of Afghanistan officially for, like, five years. But a lot longer actually. And then, the Taliban was basically behind the World Trade Center bombings, and... well not exactly behind it, it was Al Qaeda, but Al Qaeda was working inside Afghanistan with the Taliban's blessing. And we were like, "Hey Taliban, stop Al Qaeda from doing stuff," and Taliban was like, "Whatever, you can't tell me what to do," and we're like, "Okay, we're done now, Taliban."

<Branwen>

“World Trade Center Bombing?”

<Kivan>

"World Trade 9/11?"

<Branwen>

I thought it was 9/11, but I've never heard of a bombing...

<April>

Well, there was actually a World Trade Center bombing, and then there was 9/11. So I think I just conflated those two in my head.

<Branwen>

Yeah, no one really talks about the bombing that happened.

<Kivan>

I never even heard of that.

<April>

There was a parking garage bombing, like, years before.

<Branwen>

Oh, years before—years before.

<April>

But, like, it had been a target. Like, that was a thing. We went to Afghanistan, and we got rid of the Taliban, and there was this really great thing, and we're like, "Oh, look at all these women voting," and they had, like, you would dip your thumb in ink, and you would show it to show that you had voted, so you couldn't vote more than once. So, like, I remember the magazines had all these, like, photos of, like, women with their thumbs dipped in ink, and it was really awesome.

<Branwen>

Isn't that just bad because isn't ink kind of like — it's not expensive, but it's not easy to...

<Kivan>

It's expensive. Well, printer ink is the most expensive fluid in the world, like, genuinely. It's like twice — it's like ten times the price of human blood, something like stupid. It's so expensive.

<Talking at the same time>

What have you—like, I don't know. This is a tangent that I will go on. Give me a second. You guys can—so, isn't it kind of bad to dip their ink—lose ink color on their fingers?

<April>

Also, it'll go away. It'll go away. It was just a way to make sure the elections were secure.

Why are we getting stuck on this tangent?

<Branwen>

Because it's stupid. Strange.

<April>

Well, anyway, we pulled out in 2021, and basically, as soon as the U.S. pulled out, the Taliban went back in.

<Kivan>

Okay, so here's the chart. HP black ink number five is about twice the price of human blood and about ten times the price of penicillin.

Yeah, printer ink is the most expensive fluid in the world, basically.

<April>

Let's assume they didn't use printer ink.

<Branwen>

Let's assume they didn't use—we've just gone on this giant tangent about printer ink prices. It's so interesting.

One thing I find ridiculous is just strict dress code mandated for women.

<April>

Well, of course. How else can you control women unless you control what they wear?

<Branwen>

Dress code, like, for school?

<Kivan>

No, for, like, constantly. No, like, no matter what, you always have a dress code. Hey, bro, the Taliban is dumb.

<April>

I love that you thought dress code applied just to school

<Kivan>

Even though we literally just talked about the fact that they're not going to school at all.

<Branwen>

Yeah, that's why I was confused. I was like, "Then that law means nothing."

<Kivan>

The only time you've heard of dress code is in the context of school.

<Branwen>

Yes, my school had a dress code.

I think I would rather get killed for trying to be living than have to follow these rules.

<April>

And I'm not sure if we can top that, so let's see what adventures lie ahead.

<Afghani drum music fades in and out>

<Vernon>

Well, anyway, I was walking down the streets of Kabul, and, uh, this Arab came up to me. He said, "Are you an American?" 'Cause I was wearing my Western outfit, you know, Western shirt.

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Oh, good. Look, I haven't talked to an American in a long time. There's a coffee shop there. Would you mind if I bought you some coffee, and we could sit down and talk? Because I had been in America myself, and I'd like to talk with somebody about it."

I said, "Well, okay." So we went into the coffee shop and started talking. And would you believe it? He said that he was a mining engineer. I said, "Well, I'm a mining engineer too."

And he says, "Well, I'm the only Afghan that actually got his mining engineering degree in the U.S. All the rest of them got it from Russia."

I said, "Oh, what school did you go to?"

He says, "I went to Texas Western College."

I was stunned. "You're kidding."

"No," he actually, and it turns out that we had the same professors. Now, he was, like, 10 years before me. He had the same professors. We had the same geology teachers and everything else in there.

So what is the possibility of me walking down the streets of Kabul, and this stranger comes up and says that he wants to talk, and he's the only Afghan that actually graduated from Texas Western College at that time with a mining engineering degree? So we sat there and talked for hours. And it turned out that he was married. He was in charge of the lapis lazuli, which is a type of gemstone that comes from Afghanistan.

And when the Russians came in and started, quote, "running the country," quote, unquote, with the bureaucrats, and since he was an American mining engineer, they decided that, well, they're going to demote him, and they'll just have him come in and do office work. He was extremely bitter about the Russians. He hated the Russians. So I would have easily guessed that later on, when the Russians would come in and there'd be the long war with the Russians, I'm sure he was executed. I'm sure he did not survive, which is really too bad. But I just found it absolutely amazing that we sat there and talked about all these various things.

The next day, I think, was the 4th of July. And so I went to the American Embassy to see what — oh, by the way, it was about this time I was able to listen to a radio. The BBC in which Germany and Britain were playing for the World Cup, and Germany won. And I was really in favor of that because there was some Germans there that were — I was listening to them in a hotel. There was a bunch of Germans there, also.

I think they were East Germans, but they were still rooting for the West Germans. They won the National Soccer League Championship at that time.

All right, then I went to the U.S. Embassy for the Fourth of July celebration. What they had was a big picnic, and they invited, you know, the various Americans that were there. And they had this game that's called the buzkashi that the Afghans have. They're called the horsemen. In fact, there's been some movies made out of it.

And what they do is you have maybe 25 to 50 horsemen on one side of the team, and you have 25 to 50 horsemen on the other side of the team. And what they do is they take a goat or a calf, and they cut the head off of it. And the idea is they put it in the center of the field. You are to rush over and grab that carcass, and you have to go and throw it over. There's a circle that you have to bring it into. And whoever does that wins. And there are no rules. The only thing you can't use, you can't use knives, and you can't use guns. That was the only rule that you could have.

So they would go there, and, uh, let's say that, uh, Derek would pick it up. He would get there first and pick it up, and it looks like obviously he's going to win. So the game's going to be over with. So my team would come over there, knock him off of his horse because we wanted the game to last all day long. So what happens is they actually had socks with lead in it, and they would hit each other. And they would break their arms. They would knock each other. They would literally during a game of buzkashi, you would see two to three to five people that would be killed during the game. And they thought that was one of the greatest sports that there ever was. And I never got to see an Afghani version of it.

But the U.S. Marines at the U.S. Afghan Embassy there decided they went and they rented, I think it was about 20 burros. Okay, burros. They were going to get 10 on each side with the Marines. And they had a stuffed teddy bear, and the stuffed teddy bear was going to be their buzkashi. Now, these Marines have never ridden a donkey before or burro, and they couldn't—some of them could not get the burros to move, and others could get it.

And during the excitement of it, there were little kids there and everything else. They were mostly male burros, and they got excited. So, you-know-what was sticking out all the time. And what would happen is that one would mount the other would mount the other. Sometime you had four or five burros trying to mount each other. And the Marines would be on there, and the burros would have their legs across their legs where they couldn't get off of it. And here they were trying to beat the burros — there.

It was the funniest thing you ever saw. After about 25 minutes of that, they realized that they weren't going to have a game of buzkashi. So that was the end of that. So we had a really nice picnic and all that sort of stuff. So that's what I remember about that.

<Song, "This is My Town," fades in and out>

<Kivan>

What, what even? What, donkeys were trying to ride each other?

<April>

Yes, they were overly enthusiastic donkeys.

<Kivan>

So last one was about, you know, a little trip with a few interesting things and some pretty girls, and then this one, he's just like, "Oh yeah, I met some Afghan guy who went to the same college as me, but then he probably died, and then they, there was this game where they, uh, just killed each other while trying to wrestle for a corpse. What, what, what?"

<April>

You never know what you're going to get.

<Branwen>

Excuse me, what, what?

<April>

I thought you guys might like this story in particular.

<Branwen>

So the donkey or burros, technically, were stupid.

<April>

That's what burros do, honey.

<People talking together>

They're, they're excited. They're excited. Jesus, excited. They are excited burros, for lack of a better term.

<April>

I like the idea that as they were mounting, they trapped the Marine's legs on top of the burro that they were sitting on, and the guys couldn't get off of the burros while they were on this little burro train.

<Kivan>

And I'm just imagining like a chain of burro on burro on burro on burro, poor Marine, poor Marine dudes just, hitting them really uncomfortably.

<Branwen>

I can't even imagine that. I'm sorry. I can't even imagine that would ever happen.

<April>

I thought maybe my dad was exaggerating about the buzkashi game in general, because, you know, every good story comes with a good exaggeration, exaggeration. But no, like legit.

<Kivan and Branwnen Talking at the Same Time>

How? Okay, so you're wrestling for one corpse. Mm-hmm. Just KO someone and take their, 50 people.

<April>

Wait, your solution was to kill someone else and take their corpse instead, Branwen?

<Branwen>

Yeah.

<Kivan>

Oh, yeah. Wow. Wow. Okay, that's genius. Anyway, so 25 to 50 on each side, wrestling for one corpse, all on horses. Mm-hmm. That's a lot of volume of organisms. How are you, like, how are you getting all these people? How do they all have space to do stuff? I...

<April>

That sounds like an excellent question.

<Kivan>

Like, I feel like this is going to end up like, you know, first-grade soccer games where it's just like magnet ball and there's just a clump of first graders running like five deep behind the ball as it occasionally gets punted a little bit. Everyone just chasing it. Like, that's what I imagine it like. And then, you know, of course, in first grade, I wasn't KOing people with lead socks, you know.

<April>

I would have got more interested. I would have been much more interested. Maybe we should do that with first-grade soccer.

<Kivan>

Let's keep all our first graders knives whenever they play soccer.

<April>

No, there's no knives.

<Kivan>

No knives. Just socks with lead in them. So you're... blunt force trauma. Blunt force trauma. So if I brought a mace,

<April>

Oh, a mace would be good. Or just mace. Pepper spray. You could pepper spray your opponents. That's...

<Kivan>

Oh, God. What about a crossbow? They never said anything about... How about a grenade launcher? Oh, look, there's the enemy starting area.

<April>

But yes, apparently, buzkashi is like, basically, the national sport of Afghanistan still. And I couldn't tell looking online, because sources are weird, whether or not there are official rules or not official rules. But I think it's believable that 50 years ago...

<Kivan>

Oh, 50 years ago, yeah,

<April>

That there could have just been a, "Hey, I'll play," and sometimes people die. Waaah.

<Kivan>

Imagine, like, you're rooting for your favorite team, and it's like, you got your favorite athlete, and then you just, like, watch him just... his head just get knocked off by something like a lead sock. Oh, imagine if

you're, like, "Oh, gee, darn, last game of World Cup, Messi just, you know, kind of just died." Like, like, what? Is the... How do you... I don't get it.

<April>

Someone just decapitates Messi.

<Kivan & April talking>

Oh, it's just part of the game. That's part of the team strategy, is to take out the other team's star player. Oh, my goodness.

<April>

Okay, well, that was fun.

Mm-hmm. Yeah. And it started out, like, you know, I saw this guy, and he went to the same school as me, and I was pretty cool. And, yeah, had decapitated donkeys. And then he was probably executed by the... by the Russians.

<April>

I feel like the Russians is a recurring theme in these stories.

<Kivan>

So, that's... I mean, you're in Afghanistan, yes? Yes. Yes. It's the 1970s, yes?

<Branwen>

Yes. Everything is Russian.

<April>

Yes. All right, so we've got one more of these to listen to. You all ready?

<Kivan & Branwen>

Yep.

<April>

Let's do it.

<Afghani drum music fades in and out>

<Vernon>

Also, during that time, I had my movie camera with me. Would you believe that would be the trip that the camera would break? Something in the electronics died on it, and so, therefore, I didn't get to take a single movie of Afghanistan, which I thought was kind of sad.

Oh yeah, also while I was there, I was down in the marketplace, and I was looking at the various things. One of the things I was amazed at was that the guns that they had—they had rifles that, of course, they made there—looked like they were the blunderbuss, the muskets where they put lead in them, and they had the most incredible collection of guns there that went back in the 17- and 1800s. And I literally felt like I was actually back in the 1800s because they had the burros, and they had the ox carts going through there.

And the trucks that they had, I'll never forget the Afghan trucks. What they would do is they would take a typical American truck, and in the cab, they would take wood and extend it out so that the driver would be sitting kind of two people in, so there'd be two people to his left and maybe four people to his right. So they could have up to six to seven people sitting in the front seat of that truck. So whenever he had to make turns, he always had to ask the people to the left and right because he wasn't where he could look out and see.

And these trucks were highly decorated. Oh man, I mean, every truck was a work of art, and I just wish I'd had a camera and some movies to take care of that. I was just absolutely fascinated by these trucks that carried cargo from Russia and from Pakistan and from Iran. They were just absolutely incredible.

Also, when I was at the marketplace there, I saw a full-length fur coat, and I thought, "I wonder if I should get this for your mother." I decided that would not be an ideal situation because you know what that fur coat was made out of? It was made out of yellow tomcat skin from a pussycat, and it was a full-length fur coat with the arms and limbs, you know, and went all the way down to your knees type thing. I guess that's one of the things I should not buy in there.

Alright, from there, I had to fly to India to get back to Singapore, so I took the Afghan plane, went to New Delhi—I think it's called something else now—and it was just before the monsoon started, and it was in the hundreds, and it was just absolutely horrible as far as the heat goes.

But I was just absolutely impressed because I had a Jitney, you know, those motorcycle-type buses that they had. I had that take me from the airport to the Holiday Inn. I saw cows on the street, and they were eating newspapers. So just literally thousands of people in the street, selling all kinds of things. And by the way, this had to be in 1975 or '76.

Also, during this time, I will lose my diary of a lot of the things that happened in here, so I have to recall. I won't be able to go back and check a lot of these things to add things to these. I lost my diary. I lost it in the San Francisco airport. So we got to the hotel, and it was so hot. It had no air conditioning. All we had was the fans, and I remember laying on the bed with just my shorts on and just sweating.

Oh, so finally the sunset came, and I decided to go to the restaurant and get something to eat. So I was wanting a hamburger, and they had hamburgers there. So I ordered a hamburger and a salad and all that, and he said, "Okay."

So I came back. "Hey, come back here." I said, "What is your hamburger made out of? I thought, Y'all don't eat cows."

"Well, we don't."

"Well, what's the hamburger made out of?"

"Well, it's made out of sheep."

"Well, alright, I'll try a sheep burger."

I wouldn't say that it tasted that well. I wasn't that impressed because I had already gotten used to not liking sheep. That was not one of my favorite things. Got to walk around some of the stores in India and see all the people in there. And again, I felt like I was back in almost like in the 1800s because New Delhi was not modernized at that time yet.

Although, and by the way, when we took off, I saw the airplane that had crashed. The person that I replaced, what happened was that there was a man and a wife. I'll go ahead and tell the story here. A man and his wife and his two kids—they were going home for Christmas, and they took an Indian Airlines. They were going to go to Europe and then catch an American Airlines. When I was in Singapore, they did the Anatomy of an Airplane Crash, and it was on this plane that the geologist and his family were on.

One of the things is that they didn't pay attention to the elevation. The last thing that you hear, no, it was a Japanese Airlines. I'm sorry, it was a Japanese Airlines that they were flying in, and the last words you hear from the black boxes are, "Pull up, pull up, pull up," and then crash. They were killed.

When we took off from New Delhi, I saw the plane. It was at the end of the runway, and they still had not moved it. That had occurred like a couple of years ago, and I'm sure they moved it by now. But I looked down there and thought, "Gee, there's the people that I replaced; their whole family was killed right there." As a result of that, I never ever flew in a Japanese airline. I just took it as a warning sign. If it had one U.S. Steel personnel killed in it, I'm not going to do it. The others can go and ride the Japanese airlines if they want to, but I'm not going to ride the Japanese airlines.

So I guess that the Afghanistan one was not as adventuresome as it could be. So, I will end that one.

<Song, "This is My Town," fades in and out>

<Kivan>

I like the whole hamburgers thing, where, you know, "Oh, they don't eat cows because of their religion." So why? What is a hamburger made out of? And now it's a lamburger.

<April>

It's a lamburger. And the previous place, they didn't eat pork. I think, if I couldn't eat pigs and cows, I would be the saddest person ever.

<Kivan>

It would be like if I couldn't eat waffles. You're not supposed to live without waffles and pretzels.

<Branwen>

I think that there wasn't very much to talk about in this one; it was kind of short. And he basically just talked about Burger not wanting to fly on the Japanese Airline because he was the replacement of the Thailand coworker.

<April>

Yeah, so I actually looked up the airline, and it was Japanese Airline Flight 471, and it crashed on June 14th, 1972. So if he was there in 1975 or six, he said they left the plane just crashed by the tarmac for three or four years. There were 89 people on the plane, and 86 of them died.

<Kivan>

That's not pleasant.

<Branwen>

Yeah, so it's a good reason to, I guess, not. What does it mean? Four people on the ground were also killed.

<April>

They hit people on the ground. The plane hit people who were on the ground just doing their thing, and then the plane crashed and hit them. I just can't imagine leaving wreckage out by the tarmac; that just sounds quite lovely.

Okay, so kind of listening to this, what are your thoughts? What are you thinking about? This is your first real Papa Vernon story you've listened to all the way through, besides just listening to him talk in real life, I guess,

<Kivan>

Which is quite a bit. We've talked about his old stuff a lot.

<April>

Maybe just hearing the whole thing in one...

<Branwen>

...and he's just being like, "Yeah, just saw him shooting some guys out in the yard, just a normal day." But let's continue on. So then I saw this lady, like...

<Kivan>

It's really just the amount of extensive stories that he has from just one lifetime is incredible to me. It seems like there's so many things that he's done that we haven't done; it's just kind of inspiring in a way. It's pretty fun.

<April>

But yeah, growing up on these stories, I always thought, you know, I wanted to have adventures like that, but there was a part of me where I was 33 and kind of disappointed in myself that I hadn't already been water-skiing on the Amazon with the piranhas trying to eat my toes. I know you, my darling, are an adventure every day.

<Branwen>

I think, no, my personal opinion, you would love to play a game with a blown-up pig stomach...

<April>

On a horse?

<Branwen>

On a horse, where you go hit people until you kill them, and then you can steal the ball and go win the game.

<April>

That sounds like a great, let's... okay, we have a plan. Y'all ready to go? Let's go do it, guys.

<Talking over each other as song, "This is My Town," fades in and plays in the background>

<April>

Thanks for listening. This was produced by Clever Fred Studios. Our intro music is "This Is My Town" from Slipstream. Special thanks, as always, to Kivan and Branwen for taking the time to listen to these stories again with me. And, of course, thanks to my dad for taking the time to record them in the first place.

Here's a sneak peek at what's coming up next time.

<Vernon>

And I would hear, whoosh, and I'd feel a puff of air. What in the world was that? Well, you know what it was? It was bats, and they were coming in, and they were picking the mosquitoes off of us. So that was after a while. I got used to it, you know? I'd go to sleep, and, whoosh, and, Oh, there's another bat. It took another mosquito off of me.

<Music "This is My Town" Finishes with a Soft Flourish>