

my search

for the friend I left behind

a magazine article by Tony O'Brien

The last time I saw Nader Ali, he was behind bars, watching me walk to freedom. I never thought I would see him again, never thought I would go back to Afghanistan. But now I am on a plane taking me from my home in Sante Fe to the place I spent the most terrifying weeks of my life. Nader Ali is a man I need to thank.



Reading this magazine article will help you:

- read a map
- work with a partner
- write about a reunion

The flight attendant slides a tray in front of me. I stare at the radishes in the salad, and I'm back in prison in Afghanistan. "Eat, Tony, eat," Nader Ali is saying. "Radishes are good for your digestion." I eat my radishes, worrying over what I will dis-

cover about him and about the newly liberated nation.

In the beginning I went to Afghanistan because of the danger; news photographers chase wars. In 1986 I slipped across the Khyber Pass from Pakistan with the *mujahedin*—guerrillas fight-

search flares to evade the Soviet-backed regime's security ring around the city. From a safe house, I was passed to other contacts. One was a traitor.

I was sipping tea one evening when the door flew open and men I'd never seen before burst in. I raised my hand to say *salaam alaikum* (peace be with you). But when I looked into their eyes, I knew I was finished.

They jerked me to my feet, slapped me, threw me against a wall, and chained my hands behind my back. *I'm never going to see my mother again*, I thought. Pulling a blanket over my head, they dumped me into a car.

A stop. I heard screams and knew we were at a prison. *Torture*, I thought. *I won't be able to endure torture*. I was stripped, searched, and led through stinking corridors. A metal door closed behind me. There were two people in the eight-by-ten-foot concrete cell. A large man with bulging eyes, shaved head, and dangling arms lumbered toward me, giggling, and squeezed my arm. *On, my God*, I said to myself. *I'm locked up with a psychotic sex maniac*. That was Nader Ali.

When I woke up the next morning... I began to do sit-ups, push-ups, knee bends. My cellmates sat against the wall, watching incredulously. I kept going until guards came to take me to

a room where for weeks I would spend most of my time with a KGB-trained interrogator.

"How did you get into this country?" he demanded.

"How strong are the mojahedin?"

"Who are you working for?"

When I returned to my cell, Nader Ali was there, and I found out that he spoke a little English. He said he had been worried for me. What had happened the night before, he explained, was that he was trying to welcome me to their world by making a little joke. Now I was their guest, he said, and he took bread and shared it equally among the three of us.

Nader Ali, a Shiite Muslim, said he was a bookkeeper who, before his imprisonment, had been a spy for an antigovernment group. "Tell the interrogators the truth, and everything will be all right," he urged me. "God will take care of you." I wondered if he was a plant.

As I got to know him, though, I saw he was genuine. We talked about everything—politics, our families, even the best kabob cafés in Kabul. He did sit-ups with me, and we prayed together five times a day.

"You must eat something, Tony," he would insist, pushing at me the breakfast bread, the rice and radish at lunch, the greasy-water soup that was our dinner. "You have to stay healthy."

ing to drive the Soviets out of their country. I spent months in the mountains, sleeping under the stars and Soviet rocket fire. *I'm going to die*, I thought. *What am I doing in this place?*

Yet in 1989 I took another assignment to cover the expected fall of the capital city, Kabul, after the Soviets pulled out. In Pakistan I asked a guerrilla commander of a clandestine operation in Kabul to get me in. "It's all set," he told me. "You go at 6 a.m."

With his troops I travelled through the hills by foot, mule, and truck. On the last leg, we crawled in gullies and dodged

Every night he would say, "The *karkhana* is open." Karkhana means factory. Ours was contained in a matchbox: carved matches, a tiny piece of wire salvaged from a broom, a pop-top from a soda can. With those tools and the food we had saved, we "manufactured." With great patience Nader Ali would knead soft bread, mixing it with tea and sugar. We made prayer beads striped with dough darkened by cigarette ash. We strung the beads on thread unravelled from our bedding and baked them near the overhead light bulb.

One night the mojahedin fired rockets that landed all around the prison. Nader Ali crouched against the wall, tears in his eyes, terrified for his family. He cried out, asking Allah to watch over his children while

their father was locked away. "Why are they doing this, Tony?" he cried desperately. "How can they kill their own people?"

That time I was the one to soothe him. But the next day I was again in despair, slumped on my bunk. *Why had I been so egocentric about my work that I had risked capture, ignoring its effects on those I loved?* Nader Ali sat at the foot of the bed. "Don't worry, Tony," he said. "Everything will be all right. God will take care of us."

Nader Ali and I took turns standing on top of the toilet, looking out the tiny slice of window to the mountains outside. We repeated our home addresses to each other day after day, so we could believe that someday we would see each

other in freedom. I did not know that diplomats and colleagues back home were working to get me out.

One morning, six weeks after my ordeal had begun, the guards took me down the hall. "What would you say if I told you you would be freed today?" a stranger asked.

In my cell for the last time, feeling both elated and guilty, I said good-bye to Nader Ali. I was leaving, and he was looking at 20 years or possibly a death sentence. And yet he was genuinely happy. "You are going to be free, Tony," he said. "Tell your mother *salaam alaikum* from me."

The guard was waiting; I hugged Nader Ali one last time. "I'll never forget you," I said. At the bottom of the stairs, I turned back and saw him holding the bars of the cell, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Now, three years later, I'm in a plane looking down at the hills of Afghanistan. I have thanked almost everyone—those who got me out of prison, those who called my mother every day. Yet I never thanked the person who gave me the strength to live. Afghanistan is free now, but I am not.



Nader Ali and Tony O'Brien revisit the prison cell they shared.

I look out of the taxi, searching Kabul. Factional fighting is still going on for control of the city. Men strut about with Russian Kalashnikov rifles slung over their shoulders as casually as women carry purses. I keep looking into their faces, searching for Nader Ali. With more than a million people dead in the past fourteen years, I am hoping he isn't one of them.

I go to the headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which acts as a support system for prisoners. I explain my mission to the sympathetic receptionist, Malahat. She says she will keep an eye out for Nader Ali.

Meanwhile, I roam the streets. How, in a city of 1.5 million, with few telephones and crowded neighbourhoods that have few street signs, can I find one man?

Four days later, at nine o'clock in the morning, I go back to the ICRC. "You're a lucky man," says Malahat. "He was here, your friend. When I said your name, he even knew your address."

I've found him! I think. They have told him to meet me at my hotel. I don't know how to fill the three hours I have to wait, so I go to a mosque. Inside, in the stillness under the large dome, my mind flashes back to those six weeks in prison. The memory of Nader Ali's care

comes flooding over me. I thank God for reuniting us.

At twelve o'clock Nader Ali walks into the lobby, beaming. We rush into an embrace and laugh. Free just three weeks, he had stopped at the ICRC to inquire about assistance. All the emotions I feel and cannot express flow freely from him.

"After you left, Tony, they searched our cell and took everything," he says. "I scratched your name and address on the wall so I would never forget you. When I heard you were looking for me, Tony, I was so happy I thought my heart would burst. I feel you are my own brother."

We go to his home, a mud compound with a vegetable garden in the courtyard. His wife is cooking, his son stares at me, and his daughter plays with her doll. I am an instant uncle. We eat eggs, rice, and vegetables from the garden. Though I can talk to Nader Ali, whom I had helped with his English, it is harder for me to converse with his family, "How did we communicate so well?" I ask.

"When somebody's heart and mind are clear," he says, "there is always some way of understanding, heart to heart."

I give him T-shirts, a camera, and the prayer beads I have carried for three years. He hands me two dinner napkins embroidered by his wife, two pairs of socks, and the beads he made.

Later we visit our cell, and I ask if returning to the prison is difficult. He looks surprised and says: "No, Tony. I can walk. I can talk. I am free. I am very happy."

The night before my flight home, I sit on the hotel balcony and watch the tracer fire burn out the stars. I realize that the most important things of all—freedom and faith, love and family—were so clear in prison. But a few special people, like Nader Ali, carry that perspective with them in daily life.

Thank you, my friend, for everything you have taught me. I may never see you again, but I love you. I am a lucky man indeed. ■

Responding...

1. Find a map of Afghanistan and, with a partner, trace the route that the narrator covered as a journalist from 1986 to 1989.
2. In this essay, two friends are reunited. In two or three paragraphs or a short poem, describe what such a reunion might be like if you had not seen your dearest friend in three years.