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ISSUES &

BOOK EXCERPT

Dusting Miss Gracie

In a new book, Canadian author Heidi Kingstone describes the odd and awkward relationship between Afghanistan’s local population and well-meaning Western visitors

HEIDI KINGSTONE

I inherited Dunia. But not in the way one might expect, like an indentured labourer, as the roles were reversed. I was the one tied to her in perpetuity.

I was the typical *kharagi* (foreigner), suffering from the kindness-of-strangers syndrome. I wanted to help people. Any people. People less fortunate than myself. Afghans. Any Afghan. And especially any Afghan woman.

We were all so keen to help our Afghan cousins and so many of them were keen to be the recipients of our largesse. They were hardly stupid. We had big, easy money, and they wanted big, easy money. If we were going to give it to them, why shouldn’t they take it?

But that wasn’t really Dunia’s *modus operandi*. She wasn’t greedy; she was heroically lazy — in a league of her own, I like to think. Paid to be our housekeeper, she took the art of doing nothing to a new level.

I blame Gracie Belle.

The first time I met the willowy Gracie at the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in Kabul, she struck me as hostile and frightening. First impressions, as I discovered, can be greatly misleading. Gracie Belle possesses a rare spirit of generosity and while she may be brutally amusing, she is rarely, if ever, hostile. And because she wanted to help Dunia in any way she could, I did, too.

Dunia had so much potential, which we saw and tried to encourage. She was smart and funny. She had a warm and lovely personality, and was hard to dislike. She had flair, and loathed cleaning. We knew she hated what she was doing, and because of that Gracie did everything she could to try and help her. She paid for Dunia to learn English in the hope that, with improved language ability, she would be able to translate her skills into a better job. That would bring much-needed security for herself and her family.

Dunia, for her part, put up with all of us poking and prodding her to do what we wanted her to do with her life. She magnificently and skilfully resisted all our efforts with good-natured aplomb.

We had agreed that she would come in to work every day, but whether she showed up or not would depend on a variety of things, including the state of traffic, if it was too muddy to wear her new shoes or how many of her relatives had died the previous night. Work was a loosely defined term.

“Oh, Miss Gracie, she would say, over her Bollywood glitter-covered mobile phone, “last night my cousin’s brother’s sister’s best friend had to go to hospital and I must stay home.” I’m pretty sure, had I bothered to keep track, the entire nation would have expired by the end of my time in the country.

Of course, Dunia was always able to come to work on the days she was paid, and her salary was guaranteed whether she worked, didn’t work or might work at some point in the future. It never occurred to her it might be otherwise. Dunia also expected to be paid extra for Eid, for Ramadan, for Christmas, for the anniversary of her father’s death or to buy new clothes for any cousin’s wedding — and those always took place during the working day. It was a great gig and one that I was pretty keen on getting myself.

She more or less got away with all this for a very long time — her story was classic, and so the dance of the great white saviours and their needy beneficiary played out between all of us brilliantly.

In a culture in which the vast



ARABELLA DORMAN

majority of the population is thin and quite short, Dunia was tall and round and large. She was also Hazara, making her a Shia Muslim, loathed by the majority Sunni Pashtuns from the south of the country who believed in their own superiority.

With the death of her father, Dunia’s prospects of marriage had diminished: Not only was she poor, she also had little in the way of a dowry. While not considered attractive, she had a lovely face with beautiful features, and a personality that shone through. But she was getting old (though still only in her early twenties) and she had eight brothers and sisters to care for. Her mother had had a nervous breakdown on becoming a widow and couldn’t work; the task of supporting the family had fallen to Dunia.

All the elements were there to claim our sympathy and our help, although what good sympathy did her I’m not sure.

And Dunia didn’t make it easy. Gracie and I would spend hours looking for clothes that were supposed to have been ironed or, if we were expecting guests, for tablecloths or place mats or napkins which we could never find. They disappeared for weeks. It was a constant riddle. Where could they be? The house in Kabul wasn’t that big and there weren’t that many hiding places.

Mysterious piles of undischarged laundry lay in darkened corners, collecting dust. Instead of ironing, Dunia would draw the heavy velvet curtains in the living room for privacy and, with the TV blasting, she would practise her best Indian dance routines, copying the glamorous actresses in the over-the-top Bollywood movies she loved. Much later, she would emerge and say with a flourish, “My work here is done,” before heading off home.

On the plus side, she did enjoy going to the market to do the weekly shop, which also provided her with ample opportunity to top up her own family’s groceries. And she enjoyed flirting with the two guards at the house, with whom she held long conversations.

She liked to torment the hard-working chala (auntie), who cleaned the house next door, boasting how much more money she made, which was true. The woman who lived next door paid well above local rates, but not the vastly inflated wages so many foreigners overcompensated with, distorting the real economy.

On those rare occasions when Dunia did actually arrive at the house, she would take off her long, dark chador to expose some wonderfully colourful outfits. She had great taste, and if I couldn’t decide what to wear, or figure

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out if something was appropriate or not, she would go through my clothes and match things up, giving me good advice.

The house had one bedroom, a small kitchen, a living room and what we referred to as the winter palace — a glass-room extension where I slept, which was freezing in winter and boiling in summer. In the end, there is only so much dancing you can do, and so after a quick circuit round the single-storey house, Dunia would make her usual pronouncement, and I, the stunned foreigner, would just say, “Sure, OK, fine. See you tomorrow.”

Far less sympathetic were Afghans and friends familiar with Afghanistan, who would not only roll their eyes in despair, but get

angry at our indulgence in allowing Dunia to get away with her exploitation of us — a couple of poor, dumb foreigners. Lots of deserving Afghans needed work, like the chala next door for one.

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When Gracie’s new job required her to move out of our shared home, responsibility for Dunia, along with her family, the future of the country and the entire universe fell on my shoulders. I tried to keep my cool with her, thinking that I should be a better person, be more sympathetic to what a rough time this poor Afghan woman had to cope with in all other areas of her life. But my ranting phone calls to Gracie expressing absolute exasperation became more and more frequent, requiring her to calm me — and the situation — down, which she somehow always managed to do. Patience and grace were two of her great qualities.

Predictably, Dunia got on with doing what she did, and I resigned myself to her continuing presence in my life. For Gracie, Dunia was like a family member. This wasn’t time-limited. Gracie’s commitment to Dunia and her family was, she felt, for life, for better or worse.

Before leaving for a three-week break, I discussed with Dunia the need for her to clean the house during my absence. I wasn’t asking for miracles, but Kabul is incredibly dusty ... I wanted to know I’d be returning to a habitable environment.

Gracie reinforced the message with Dunia when I handed her my phone. “So you know, Miss Dunia,” Gracie said, “Miss Heidi likes the place clean. So you must go every day while we are away. If you have to bring your sisters, you know that’s fine. They can watch TV and there is always food.”

“Oh, yes, Miss Gracie, of course. I will be there every day. Please, have a good holiday and Merry

Christmas. My family sends you their love.”

In those three weeks, while Gracie and I were in India, I am quite sure Dunia’s dancing ability improved exponentially, as did her flirting with the guards. If she did iron at all, each stroke would have glided to the Bollywood beat. In truth, however, I don’t believe she ever bothered to work at the house — although she may well have visited to get some respite from her family.

When I returned, the door creaked open, like in those old-fashioned movies, and I entered a dustbowl. It was a house of horrors and I turned into a witch. The electricity didn’t work, the gas for the bukhari had run out and the credit on my phone had finished — which was exactly the way I felt. It was freezing, late at night, I was miserable and a layer of thick dust covered everything.

Early the next day, when I had calmed down a little, I spoke to Gracie. I told her I was at the end of my tether and that I couldn’t stand it any more. Although I had always felt torn, not wanting Dunia’s family’s demise on my conscience, my beliefs now lay crumpled in the corner, along with the unironed laundry.

Gracie is a powerful mediator and could probably bring peace to the Middle East. She can smooth out the most sensitive situations and her wicked sense of humour charms her many friends and colleagues. Her patience and forbearance have undoubtedly preserved our friendship. But this time, even Gracie’s renowned negotiating skills floundered in the face of my frustration.

Gracie called Dunia to break the news.

Her work here really was done.

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