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“The Photo” by By Rah’nawar Zariab

Written by Farhad Azad on December 9th, 2011

Translated from Dari (This translated story was first published in the late 1980s in the Kabul based magazine "Afghanistan Today".)

I was seven years old. Everyday when I crossed the road I used to see his fading camera placed on its stand on the road along the wall and he himself sitting on the ground, brooding. His camera was a box-like contraption with three long legs.

On one side of his box, there was a hole covered with a glass always protected by a black paper hood. Opposite this hole, there was a tiny window. To the right of the box, hung a black sleeve-like cloth.

Occasionally, I saw the old photographer working– taking someone's picture. At such times, the man who wanted to be photographed had to sit on a bench near the wall, with a black curtain in the background.

The old photographer would weep through that tiny window, take the paper hood off the hole glass and tell the person to be photographed: "Keep your chin up...A little lower...No, no. A wee bit upward...Look at my hand...right. Stay as you are..."

I watched all his Operations with amazement and said to myself: "What is inside that box?"

However much I thought, I could not get an answer. A few moments later, when I saw the old photographer take a damp paper out with a picture of the person who was sitting opposite the hole with the glass, my wonder and amazement knew no bounds.

One day, I went to this photographer and asked: "Would you take my picture too?"

The old photographer grinned and replied: "Why not?"

I inquired: "How much would you charge?"

"You want a portrait or a whole picture?" , he asked. I answered:

"A whole picture."

Photographer: "You want one copy only?"

I replied: "Oh yes. One copy."

He replied: "10 afghanis"

I began to collect the money from that day onwards. I wished to possess 10 Afghanies to have my picture taken. It took days for me to collect this sum. At long last, my savings amounted to 10 afghanies.

I put the money into my pocket and went to see the old photographer. When he saw me, he inquired as if he were expecting me: "You've come?"

I handed him the money, and said : "It is 10 afghanis."

Without counting it, he put the money into his pocket and said: "Well, now come and stand here."

I stood in front of the black curtain. He took off the black hood from the glass-covered hole and began to peep through the aperture. I gazed at that hole. Enthusiasm filled my heart. I could hardly control my laughter.

I told myself: "I am being photographed...My photo..."

I heard the old photographer saying: "Look to the left...No. A little...to the right...A wee bit.....That is enough."

I thought: "How would my picture turn out to be?"

The old photographer said: "Bring your legs closer."

I could not control my laughter any longer.

The old photographer thundered : "Don't laugh."

I pressed my lips tight. And I kept looking at the glass-covered hole, but I could hardly control my laughter.

I heard the photographer command: "Don't move."

In order to control my laughter, I pressed my lips tighter. The photographer took off the black hood. The glass-covered window was visible. Then he covered the hole again, saying : "It is all over."

I heaved a sigh of relief. I was eager to see my picture now. Eventually, he wrapped the photo in a paper and handed it to me. After going a few steps, I opened the wrapping and burst into laughter. It was me. It was me all over!

The cloak, the small turban and the turned-up footwear. I saw myself standing. My turban was tilted upwards, showing my hair. I was standing straight, like a statue, pressing my lips so tight that it was apparent I could hardly control my laughter.

At this juncture, there was a feeling of wonder and amazement in my eyes. My cloak was too long for me and the tips of my footwear looked ridiculous. Not withstanding all this, I liked myself. I tossed the picture into my pocket and ran home to show it to my mother.

On my arrival there, I told her: "I have had my photograph taken."

My mother asked: "Give it to me. Let me see."

I put my hand into my pocket. In my excitement to run home and flaunt the picture, I lost it somewhere on the way. I changed color.

My mother inquired : "What's the matter?"

Without saying anything, I ran down the street. I searched hard on the road I had taken home. But I failed to find the picture. When I came back home, I started crying.

Then my uncle came and consoled me: "Don't worry...I will get your picture taken..."

My mother combed my hair and made me change into clean outfits. My uncle took me by the hand, to be photographed. He didn't go to the old photographer, but said: "I shall take you to a photo studio."

He took me to a beautiful studio where I was photographed. And I saw the picture. It was me. But it didn't satisfy me. There was nothing special about it. I remembered the picture I had lost.

A small boy standing straight like a soldier, his cloak too large for him. His turban tilted backwards and his black hair visible. The tips of his turned-up foot-wear looked ridiculous. The boy pressed his lips tight to control laughter. But in his dazzled eyes I saw only eagerness. I was transported to the past . This made me laugh.

The photograph was captioned "The Most Attractive Picture of the Week". And underneath, these words were inscribed, "Happy Village Boy". It spontaneously crossed my mind: "Is that old photographer alive or dead?"

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