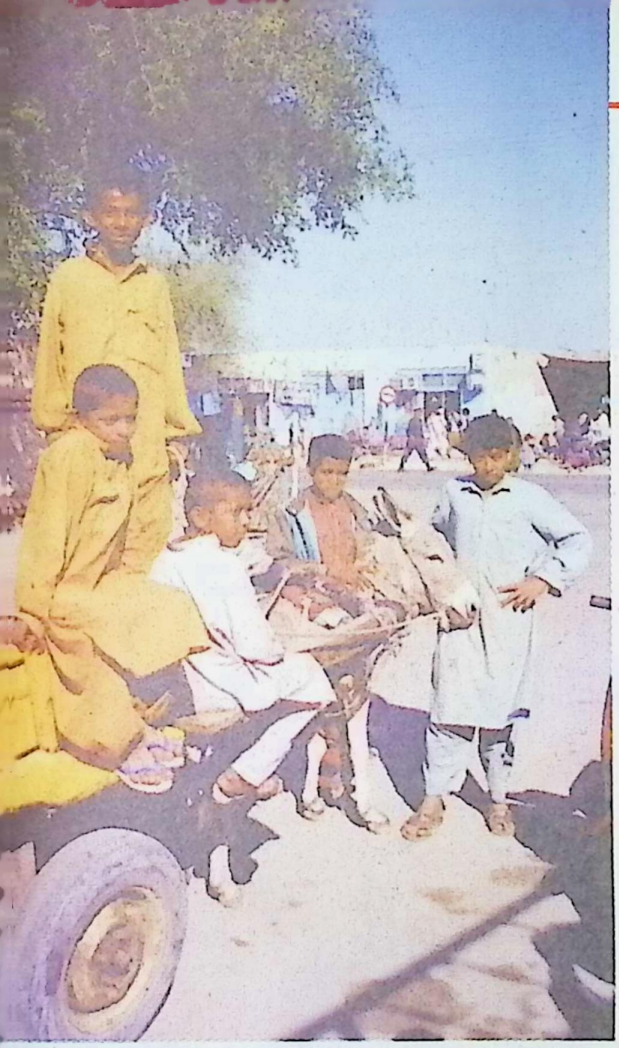


A donkey cart in Chah Bahar, Iran.

last of the day's chat winding down, when I heard one of the strangest sentences ever. We were finally asking Iqbal why he was in Iran. Through the darkness I heard him say, "I lost my jeans. I've come to find them."

Politeness says a small reply is in order, something along the lines of "oh, that's nice" or "I hope you find them." I don't recall if I managed to squeeze something out, but I was entirely grateful for the darkness – nobody could see me biting hard on my lip to prevent laughter from bursting out. It was helpful that I couldn't see Lachlan's face at that stage, because I knew he would be having great difficulty holding his own laughter back. But the silence – it was no longer a negative waiting to be filled – it was substantial, unbearably heavy and with the force of a category five cyclone. That silence couldn't be resisted.

I heard the first busts from Lachlan's closed mouth – and then we roared laughing, both of us – unseemly, rude and for several minutes, unstoppable. Iqbal didn't understand what was humorous.

There were some obvious questions – why would a man lose a pair of jeans in a neighbouring country – had he been there before or were they somehow smuggled over the border? How regularly is it that people travel abroad in search of missing trousers?

When the laughter eased and we sought explanation it became apparent we'd misunderstood. It wasn't his jeans he'd lost but his jinns. He'd sent them to Iran and they'd not returned. Of course, the concept of losing one's jinns also raises some obvious questions – but it was better not to ask. It was time to sleep.

We took the plane on to Zahedan, the capital of Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province and not very far from the border with Afghanistan. Iqbal was with us – he was going the same way – and he was still a rather good and likeable guy. So we stayed at the same hotel.

If you ever happen to get shot in the leg, it's certainly no excuse for interrupting a dinner party. Particularly if it's a family birthday party and others are in high spirits in the hope of an entertaining night over a meal, then it's better not to mention the shooting. As for the blood that's dripping on the floor under the table, a fistful of napkins can help, and if it's done discretely nobody need know. Then, once the meal is completed, it will possible to drive the wife and children home before quietly continuing on to check into a hospital.

It was the first moments in Zahedan that I started to consider that Iqbal might indeed have some kind of superpower. Lachlan and I had gone to buy water and I was discussing Iqbal's flourishing communicativeness. I said, "He can talk on any topic. He could talk for an hour about his socks!" Socks was random; yet minutes later, back at the hotel when we went to find Iqbal to go sightseeing, he was just putting on his socks.

The best socks are made with thicker wool by Afghans. You can buy them at the Afghan market and other socks simply won't compete – Afghan socks are warmer and more comfortable and never get holes in them because they are hand-knitted. Once you've worn Afghan socks you'll never wear others. If it's not Afghan the socks aren't worth buying.

Zahedan is picturesque with its backdrop of jet black hills. We took to the city's photogenic suburbs with their mud brick houses. It was inevitable that in the mix of buildings we'd end up standing on somebody's roof. What was unexpected was that the householder came rushing out and asked us not to stand there because it might collapse. Instead, he invited us to come in for tea.

We chatted with the Zahedani and he was rather impressed by our Farsi. For some reason, maybe his accent, we could understand him well while Iqbal struggled. "These two have come from the other side of the world," said the Zahedani, "and their Farsi is good, but you come from a neighbouring country and you can't understand."

Yet he really was nice guy, Iqbal. So what did it matter if he'd lost his jinns? It could happen to anybody.