

A Rock Called Afghanistan

By: Lauren K. Johnson

I first saw Lady Gaga in the summer of 2010. She was staring at me from a photo teaser on a magazine cover; I don't remember her outfit, only that it was shocking. I wouldn't have been shocked had I seen Gaga's bedazzled performance with Elton John at the 2009 Grammy Awards; or her Stanley Kubric-esque "Bad Romance" music video, which had recently attained the status of most viewed YouTube video in history; or had I seen any of her videos, or appearances on major award shows, or photos in popular magazines in newsstands across the globe.

But I hadn't. And I was shocked.

Around the same time, I was introduced to a teenage phenom who had also been storming the music world. I don't remember if I heard one of his songs, or if it was a morning radio show announcement that he was threatening to dethrone Lady Gaga herself on the all-time YouTube podium that first alerted me of his prominence. I just remember feeling that I must be the last person in the universe to learn the name Justin Bieber.

Somehow, I had missed the fan-screaming, media-barraged, gossip-infused, multi-platinum rise of two of my generation's most iconic performers. Obviously, I had been living under a rock. A rock called Afghanistan.

I had lived under it, or around it, in a secluded training environment, for 349 days. As I emerged, my body adjusted faster than my mind. Within a few days, my internal clock registered the 12-hour time change. My feet settled on solid, paved roads they knew well. I gulped long, fresh breaths of American air and tuned my ears to a chorus of car horns, birds, sirens, and ocean waves. It looked like home. It sounded like home. It even smelled like home. But it was different.

The radio stations, previously stuck in a familiar top 40 loop, blasted music I'd never heard by artists I'd never heard of. Everyone could sing along. Everyone but me. The local string of Blockbuster video stores had been abandoned – I was redirected to a vending machine-type kiosk that was so simple and so brilliant I couldn't figure out how it operated. My cell phone was declared archaic. (So was my iPod. So was my laptop.) My brother could wiggle his finger across the touchscreen of his new Android phone and a coherent text message would magically appear. He laughed when, eyes widening in amazement, I asked, "How does it know what you want to say?"

I had had access to movies in Afghanistan, at least the grainy, bootlegged variety, but in America it seemed visual entertainment was no longer acceptable in two dimensions. From the Pakistan border I had attempted, through halting, unreliable internet, to maintain my connection to the world via the most modern medium I knew: Facebook. But suddenly, my homepage news feed wasn't sufficient. I didn't Tweet and wasn't LinkedIn. Did that make me unimportant, or just uninformed?

I had tried to remain informed. I kept the pulse of everything concerning Afghanistan; I monitored the politics, social issues and agricultural outlook, tracked counterinsurgency efforts through news reports in English and in the local Pashtu language with the help of our unit's interpreters. In my year-long obsession with war, however, I had missed news of other battles: against an earthquake in Haiti, a shooter at Fort Hood, Michael Jackson's doctor, Swine Flu, high gas prices, a new health care bill. Gaga versus Bieber.

My sister, whose barely-pregnant belly I had kissed before deploying, was mother to six-month-old twins.

My high school best friend was a wife.

My grandfather was on his deathbed.

There were physical changes, too. A multi-million dollar construction project had transformed the downtown area into a boardwalk of restaurants and souvenir shops that I wandered through aimlessly, not quite blending in as a tourist. I was a tourist in my own "home"; first as a guest in a friend's spare room, then in a corporate apartment, then finally house-sitting in a condo, where I unloaded my belongings from a storage unit into the garage, dodging cockroaches and spiders to dig out a favorite blanket or pair of shoes. The items never quite lived up to the memory.

On the Air Force base where I worked, my office had been relocated and re-staffed with a fresh crop of young Airmen. Perhaps they had heard of me – the enthusiastic lieutenant who loved to write, loved to run, and was usually the last to leave the office. Perhaps they hadn't. Perhaps they struggled to reconcile that image with the new me, the one who passed on journalism assignments, who stayed at the gym while they ran during morning workouts, or sometimes walked slowly behind, favoring a knee strained by 60-pounds of body armor. I still stayed late, staring at my computer, trying to figure out how to care about retirement ceremonies and community briefings instead of direct security threats, convoy missions and counterinsurgency operations. No rush to leave when all that waited off base was a transient home and talk of other things I couldn't make myself care about.

I was a year older, returning to a world that had also aged a year. But we had grown up separately. We no longer recognized each other.

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