It is just an old rented house with no sign on the front gate, outdoor pens full of yelping puppies, and indoor rooms full of snoozing cats. The water pump often breaks, and the power shuts off without notice. There is a refrigerator to keep vaccines cold and a woodstove to keep puppies and kittens warm. There is no fancy medical equipment or computer, just stacks of files with scribbled entries like “Brown dog with white feet, brought by storekeeper, high fever, won’t eat” or “Three puppies arrived in truck, very thirsty, driver doesn’t know name of American soldier who sent him.”

Yet this modest shelter and clinic is a small miracle in a harsh, war-ravaged society where people struggle to survive and pity is scant for the hungry and homeless creatures who wander the streets.

When I moved to Afghanistan in 2001, I was an international affairs writer who had lived in more than 30 countries. I’d fed stray animals from Argentina to India and found homes for the ones I could. Afghanistan was the first place I’d lived where there were no vets, no clinics, no shelters, not even a store that carried pet food.

It was also the first society I had encountered with such widespread hostility toward dogs. In Afghan culture, dogs are routinely shunned as dirty, diseased, and dangerous. Children are taught to throw stones at them, and even educated adults repeat the common proverb that angels will not enter a home with a dog inside.

After a short time in Kabul, I discreetly began taking hamburgers to garbage dumps where hungry dogs and cats gathered each night. I saved a few of these strays, stashing them in my office until I could find a more permanent solution. But without a shelter, medicine, or veterinary skills, there was little I could do for homeless cats with crushed legs, puppies with sawed-off ears, dogs suffering from chronic mange, or desperate mothers trying to raise litters in the gutter.

Finally, in 2004, I rented a house on the outskirts of the capital, had a carpenter build pens and cages, and hired an Afghan veterinarian from a Western facility that trained imported military shepherds to sniff out land mines. I named the shelter Tigger House after a determined little cat I had once saved.
Clockwise from opposite page: In a tent colony of war-displaced families outside Kabul, a boy presents his puppy to the camera; Tigger House’s assistant veterinarian administers eye medication to resident dogs; Shadow perches on a ledge in one of the shelter’s two cat rooms.

We often pay cabbies and cargo truck drivers to venture into the war zone, rendezvous with soldiers outside camp gates at dawn, and race back to Kabul. We coordinate with military convoys and sympathetic helicopter pilots who drop off terrified, queasy pups in wire cages and homemade wooden boxes. We provide these four-legged refugees with a secure sanctuary while working to ship them to the soldiers’ homes back West.

These happy endings keep me going, and I like to think about dogs we were able to save: Charlie, a puppy who almost died from eating gravel. Smoke, a pup adopted by an injured soldier; we sent her to board near a U.S. military hospital so she could comfort him. Rascal, rescued from Afghan soldiers who were using him as a soccer ball. Mocha, who gave birth under fire and was in shock when she reached us. Aslan and Rufus; Snowball and Rex; Pepper and Patience; Whiskers and Lumpy—all now living as beloved family companions in places like Texas, New Jersey, and Toronto.
Finding Peace and Promise

What we cannot do, unfortunately, is change the way years of poverty and conflict, illiteracy and superstition have caused many Afghans to treat stray animals. When our staff tries to rescue injured dogs in the street, they are often ridiculed by passers-by. Western pet lovers are mocked as “dog washers,” an epithet capturing the tragic gulf of cultural misunderstanding that persists between many Afghans and their Western partners.

Once in a while, though, we see a glimmer of compassion and hope for change. One day in fall 2011, some Afghan shopkeepers hesitantly approached our assistant vet and told him there was an injured dog in a vacant lot. He found her lying there with a crushed leg and carried her back to the shelter. We named her Lola and sent her to Pakistan to have her leg amputated. Today, she is a happy, healthy three-legged dog living in New England. When I sent a photo from her new home, the assistant vet showed it to the astonished shopkeepers, and they blessed him.

I no longer live in Afghanistan, but every few months, I return to visit the shelter. I especially like to sit on the porch in the early morning. Outside, the first calls to prayer rise from the mosques and the first donkey carts clip-clop by on the way to market, but the clatter and stress of the day have not yet begun to intrude. Inside the shelter, a guard lights the stove to heat the animals’ breakfast of soup and bread, then checks the dog pens and cat rooms to make sure everyone is all right.

At these moments, I am filled with a sense of peace and satisfaction, of having helped at least a few creatures among the hundreds of thousands who are still out there, facing another day of scavenging for garbage, dodging kicks and stones, and trying to be invisible in the shadows. At Tigger House, the animals begin to wake and stir, looking forward to another day free from hunger and fear.

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