



Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By Kim Barker

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Editorial Review

Review

“Remarkable. . . [Barker] has written an account of her experiences covering Afghanistan and Pakistan that manages to be hilarious and harrowing, witty and illuminating, all at the same time.” —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

“*The Taliban Shuffle* isn’t like any other book out there about Afghanistan and Pakistan. It’s witty, brilliant, and impossible to put down.” —Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*

“*The Taliban Shuffle* is part war memoir, part tale of self-discovery that, thanks to Barker’s biting honesty and wry wit, manages to be both hilarious and heartbreaking.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“What you’d hear if the reporter never turned off the voice recorder between interviews—brilliant firsthand outtakes that wind up telling us more about the Afghan debacle than any foreign policy briefing.” —*The Seattle Times*

“At once funny and harrowing, insightful and appalling. . . . *The Taliban Shuffle* will pull you in so deep that you’ll smell the poppies and quake from the bombs.” —*The Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“If you’re looking for a window on the challenges facing Afghanistan and Pakistan today—from a resurgent Taliban to American incompetence to Afghan and Pakistani corruption and nepotism—Barker provides a sterling vantage point.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Kim Barker gives a true and amusing picture of hellholes and the reporters on assignment in them. But she breaks the journo code of silence and reveals a trade secret of the hacks who cover hellholes: The hell of the holes is that they’re kind of fun.” —P. J. O’Rourke

“*The Taliban Shuffle* gives us an insider’s perspective of Afghanistan and Pakistan—their fascinating cultures, unstable governments, and burgeoning terrorist groups. . . . With dark, self-deprecating humor and shrewd insight, Barker chronicles her experiences as a rookie foreign reporter and the critical years when the Taliban resurged amidst the collapse of the Afghan and Pakistani governments.” —*The Daily Beast*

“Politically astute and clearly influenced by Hunter S. Thompson, Barker provides sharp commentary on the impotence of American foreign policy in South Asia after the victory against the Taliban. . . . Fierce, funny and unflinchingly honest.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Reveals many enduring truths. . . . Novel both for its humor and for its perspective . . . it rises (or sinks) to levels of seriousness that will be remembered long after the po-faced analysis of other writers has been forgotten.” —*The National*

“Brilliant, tender, and unexpectedly hilarious.” —*Marie Claire*

“Candid and darkly comic. . . . With self-deprecation and a keen eye for the absurd, Barker describes her evolution from a green, fill-in correspondent to an adrenaline junkie.” —*Publisher’s Weekly*

“*The Taliban Shuffle* is *Scoop* meets *Dispatches*, remixed with a twenty-first-century Bollywood soundtrack. Laugh-out-loud funny, it is the true story of what it is like to be a female journalist in one of the world's most exotic war zones, while telling the reader much about what is really going on today in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” —Peter Bergen, author of *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda*

“[An] immensely entertaining memoir.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Yes, there are bombs. And there is carnage. And all sorts of mayhem. But mostly there are people, human beings even, with appetites—for life, for adventure, for riches, for love. Ms. Barker offers this world—the human world caught in the crosshairs of history—with a vitality rarely seen in accounts of the war. A compelling read that offers readers a glimpse of the goings-on behind the byline.” —J. Maarten Troost, author of *The Sex Lives of Cannibals*

About the Author

Kim Barker was the South Asia bureau chief for *The Chicago Tribune* from 2004 to 2009, based in New Delhi and Islamabad. Her book about those years, *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, a dark comedic take on her time in South Asia, was published by Doubleday. The movie version, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, was released in 2016, starring Tina Fey, Martin Freeman, Alfred Molina, Margot Robbie and Billy Bob Thornton. Barker is now a metro reporter at *The New York Times*, specializing in investigative reporting and narrative writing. Before joining *The Times* in mid-2014, Ms. Barker was an investigative reporter at *ProPublica*, writing mainly about campaign finance and the fallout from the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision.

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CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO THE TERRORDOME

I had always wanted to meet a warlord. So we parked our van on the side of the beige road and walked up to the beige house, past dozens of skinny young soldiers brandishing Kalashnikov assault rifles and wearing mismatched khaki outfits and rope belts hiked high on their waists. Several flaunted kohl eyeliner and tucked yellow flowers behind their ears. Others decorated their rifle butts with stickers of flowers and Indian movie starlets. Male ethnic Pashtuns loved flowers and black eyeliner and anything fluorescent or sparkly, maybe to make up for the beige terrain that stretched forever in Afghanistan, maybe to look pretty.

Outside the front door, my translator Farouq and I took off our shoes before walking inside and sitting cross-legged on the red cushions that lined the walls. The decorations spanned that narrow range between unicorn-loving prepubescent girl and utilitarian disco. Bright, glittery plastic flowers poked out of holes in the white walls. The curtains were riots of color.

We waited. I was slightly nervous about our reception. Once, warlord Pacha Khan Zadran had been a U.S. ally, one of the many Afghan warlords the Americans used to help drive out the Taliban regime for sheltering Osama bin Laden and his minions after the attacks of September 11, 2001. But like a spoiled child, Pacha Khan had rebelled against his benefactors, apparently because no one was paying enough attention to him. First he turned against the fledgling Afghan government, then against his American allies. In an epic battle over a mountain pass, the Americans had just killed the warlord's son. The Pashtun code required

revenge, among other things, and now, six days after the battle, here I was, a fairly convenient American, waiting like a present on a pillow in Pacha Khan's house, hoping to find a story edgy enough to make it into my newspaper—not easy considering it was March 2003, and there were other things going on in the world. But Farouq told me not to worry. He had a plan.

Pacha Khan soon marched into the room. He certainly looked the warlord part, wearing a tan salwar kameez, the region's ubiquitous traditional long shirt and baggy pants that resembled pajamas, along with a brown vest, a bandolier of bullets, and a gray-and-black turban. The wrinkles on his face appeared to have been carved out with an ice pick. He resembled a chubby Saddam Hussein. We hopped up to greet him. He motioned us to sit down, welcomed us, and then offered us lunch, an orange oil slick of potatoes and meat that was mostly gristle. I had no choice, given how strictly Afghans and especially Pashtuns viewed hospitality. I dug in, using my hands and a piece of bread as utensils.

But just because Pacha Khan fed us, didn't mean he would agree to an interview. The Pashtun code required him to show us hospitality. It didn't force him to talk to me. Pacha Khan squinted at my getup—a long brown Afghan dress over black pants, an Indian paisley headscarf, and cat-eye glasses. I kept shifting my position—with a bad left knee, a bad right ankle, and a bad back, sitting on the floor was about as comfortable as therapy.

Farouq tried to sell my case in the Pashto language. The warlord had certain questions.

"Where is she from?" Pacha Khan asked, suspiciously.

"Turkey," Farouq responded.

"Is she Muslim?"

"Yes."

"Have her pray for me."

I smiled dumbly, oblivious to the conversation and Farouq's lies.

"She can't," Farouq said, slightly revising his story. "She is a Turkish American. She only knows the prayers in English, not Arabic."

"Hmmm," Pacha Khan grunted, glaring at me. "She is a very bad Muslim."

"She *is* a very bad Muslim," Farouq agreed.

I continued to grin wildly, attempting to charm Pacha Khan.

"Is she scared of me?" he asked.

"What's going on? What's he saying?" I interrupted.

"He wants to know if you're scared of him," Farouq said.

"Oh no," I said. "He seems like a perfectly nice guy. Totally harmless. Very kind."

Farouq nodded and turned to Pacha Khan.

“Of course she is scared of you,” Farouq translated. “You are a big and terrifying man. But I told her you were a friend of the *Chicago Tribune*, and I guaranteed her safety.”

That satisfied him. Unaware of Farouq’s finesse, I proceeded with my questions about Pacha Khan’s deteriorating relationship with the Americans. Then I asked if I could have my photograph taken with the warlord, who agreed.

“Make sure you get the flowers,” I told Farouq.

In one picture, Pacha Khan peered sideways at me, with an expression suggesting he thought I was the strange one. I snapped Farouq’s picture with Pacha Khan as well. Souvenirs in hand, we left. But we still had two more hours of bumpy, unforgiving road south to the town of Khost, an experience similar to being flogged with baseball bats. Farouq taught me the numbers in the Dari language and told me about the real conversation he had with Pacha Khan.

“I don’t think it’s ethical to say I’m Turkish,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s safe to say you’re American. The Americans just killed his son. Trust me. I know Afghans. I know what I’m doing.”

I shut my mouth, but I still didn’t see what the big deal was. I had glasses. I was obviously harmless. And Pacha Khan seemed more bluster than bullet.

As we wandered around Pacha Khan-istan, calling me naïve was almost a compliment; ignorant was more accurate. This was only my second trip to Afghanistan as a fill-in correspondent for the *Tribune*, and I was only supposed to babysit a war that nobody cared about while everyone else invaded Iraq. With my assumed swagger and misplaced confidence, I was convinced that I could do anything. Meeting a warlord whose son had just been killed by the Americans was nothing but a funny photo opportunity. I felt I was somehow missing out by not being in Iraq, the hitter sidelined for the championship game. Like everyone else, I figured Afghanistan was more of a sideshow than the big show.

Back then, I had no idea what would actually happen. That Pakistan and Afghanistan would ultimately become more all consuming than any relationship I had ever had. That they would slowly fall apart, and that even as they crumbled, chunk by chunk, they would feel more like home than anywhere else. I had no idea that I would find self-awareness in a combat zone, a kind of peace in chaos. My life here wouldn’t be about a man or God or some cause. I would fall in love, deeply, but with a story, with a way of life. When everything else was stripped away, my life would be about an addiction, not to drugs, but to a place. I would never feel as alive as when I was here.

Eventually, more than six years down the road, when the addiction overrode everything else, when normalcy seemed inconceivable, I would have to figure out how to get clean and get out. By then, I would not be the same person. I would be unemployed and sleeping at a friend’s house in Kabul. Dozens of Afghans and Pakistanis I met along the way would be dead, including one translator. Other friends would be kidnapped. Still other people would disappoint me, sucked into corruption and selfishness precisely when their countries needed them. I would disappoint others. None of us would get it right.

When did everyone mess up? Many times, on all sides, but March 2003 is as good a start as any. From the

beginning, the numbers were absurd: Post-conflict Kosovo had one peacekeeper for every forty-eight people. East Timor, one for every eighty-six. Afghanistan, already mired in poverty, drought, and more than two decades of war, with little effective government and a fledgling army that was hardly more than a militia, had just one peacekeeper for every 5,400 people. Then the foreigners cheated on Afghanistan. They went to Iraq.

Had they known anything about the country at all, they would have known that this was a really bad idea. Afghanistan was the so-called Graveyard of Empires, a pitiless mass of hard mountains and desert almost the size of Texas that had successfully repelled invaders like the Brits and the Soviets and seemed amenable only to the unforgiving people born to it. Men learned to fight like they learned to breathe, without even thinking. They fought dogs, they fought cocks. They fought tiny delicate birds that fit in a human hand and lived in a human coat pocket, and they bet on the results. They fought wars for decades until no one seemed to remember quite what they were fighting for. The national sport was essentially a fight, on horseback, over a headless calf or goat. Over the years, whenever Afghan men would tell me that they were tired of fighting, looking weary and creased, I would have only one response: Sure you are.

But now, on this road trip, I didn't worry about any of that. I was like a child, happy with my picture, showing it repeatedly to Farouq, who repeatedly laughed. Hours of bone-crushing road after leaving my first genuine warlord, our driver, Nasir, pulled into Khost and the so-called hotel. It was a second-floor walk-up on Khost's dusty main street, a place that looked as if a gun battle might break out at any second, as if *High Noon* could be filmed at any hour. Khost was a small city just over the border from Pakistan's tribal areas, the semi-autonomous region where insurgents and criminals could roam freely. In Khost, as in the tribal areas, laws were more like helpful hints. Everyone seemed to have a weapon, even the two men sleeping on the hotel balcony, fingers twitching near their triggers. We walked past a room where two Afghan journalists had holed up. They were friends of Farouq, but they gently closed the door on us. I didn't pay much attention. Outside the window in my room, I tried to set up a satellite dish to make a phone call, but the power was out, as usual, and the sun was setting. The satellite phone didn't work. Nothing worked. I grew exasperated.

"Damn it," I announced.

"Kim," Farouq said outside my door.

"This stupid satellite phone won't work. There's no power."

Farouq walked in and tried to get me to focus. "Kim. We need to talk."

"What? When does the stupid power come on?"

"Kim. My two friends, the journalists you just saw, they were both held hostage for four days by Pacha Khan. He threatened to kill them because they worked for the American media, and the Americans killed his son."

This stopped me. "You're kidding me."

Farouq told me that the men had only been freed with the intervention of President Hamid Karzai. I envisioned returning the same grueling way we came, seven hours, most of which passed through Pacha Khan territory.

“Can we drive back to Kabul another way?” I asked.

Farouq thought about it.

“That would take eighteen hours. Through really bad roads and dangerous areas. I think we’ll be OK. You’re a foreigner. Pacha Khan would be afraid to kidnap you. I just thought you should know. For your story.”

Eighteen hours on punishing roads versus seven hours of slightly less punishing roads and the bonus potential of being kidnapped. That was a reality check, one of many I would have. I said I would think about the trip. The next day, we visited a man who had recently been released from the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. He was a taxi driver and happily showed us his stereo, music, and videos and talked of his love for the movie *Titanic*, proof he wasn’t a member of the Tali-ban, which under the guise of Islam had banned all such frivolities during their five years in power. He was oddly not upset at the Americans, despite being held in Guantánamo for more than a year in what all sides acknowledged had been a mistake. His family welcomed us. I sat in a room with the women, where no strange man, including Farouq, could go. With no translator, we smiled stupidly at one another. The women yanked off my headscarf and marveled at the state of my short brown hair, which resembled a 1970s home permanent gone horribly wrong. One tried unsuccessfully to brush it.

The family invited us to a homecoming party the next day. But I had made a decision. I would listen to Farouq and go back to Kabul through the land of Pacha Khan. No way was I driving eighteen hours on roads that were more like torture devices. As Nasir pulled out of Khost, I decided to feign sickness.

“I’m going to lie down,” I told Farouq.

“It’s really not necessary,” he said.

I lay down in the backseat for what seemed like hours. “Are we there yet?”

Farouq said we were just entering Pacha Khan’s stronghold. “There’s his truck with the anti-aircraft gun.”

“What are the men doing?”

“They’re waving at us. Why don’t you sit up?”

I peeked out the window. The small red pickup truck’s windshield was papered in giant mustachioed Pacha Khan stickers and had a large gun somehow strapped to the roof. They waved. I sat up and waved back. We made it to Kabul without further incident. Farouq clearly knew how to handle Afghanistan better than I did.

But the newspaper had no room for my story about Pacha Khan, which was deemed inconsequential compared to Iraq. Almost everything was. So Farouq and I didn’t so much work as hang out in the house shared by the Chicago Tribune and two other newspapers. Bored, uninspired, dwarfed by the unstoppable search for weapons of mass destruction nearby, Farouq and I played badminton in the backyard, below a trellis of barren grape vines. We had no net, so we just fired the birdie back and forth at each other.

We talked about our lives. The *Tribune*’s regional correspondent, now off covering Iraq, had hired Farouq the year before. His was a typical Afghan story of surviving a series of regimes by any way possible, usually by putting one relative in the ruling regime and one in the opposition. After the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Farouq’s oldest brother became a pilot under the Communist-backed government. The large

extended family shared a house in Kabul, but other villagers from their home province had joined the so-called “mujahedin,” or holy fighters, who fought the government with the help of the Americans, Pakistanis, and Saudis. The brother, the pride of the family, died, not in the fighting but in a plane crash along with his wife and children. Farouq was the youngest son in the family, and for days his family hid his brother’s death from him. He found out by accident. Afghans have an almost pathological need to avoid being the bearer of bad tidings.

Eventually, the seven main mujahedin groups and their splinters, militias run by powerful warlords like Pacha Khan, pushed out the Soviets in 1989. Peace did not follow. After years of squabbling and a brutal civil war among the militias, the Taliban and its harsh version of Islamic rule arrived in Kabul in 1996. Farouq and his family were all ethnic Pashtuns, like the Taliban, even if in their hearts they were nothing like the Taliban. But they had no choice; like most other Afghans, they kept their heads down and followed the rules. Farouq’s female relatives wore blue burqas that turned them into ghosts whenever they left the house. Farouq grew out his beard, although he occasionally got into trouble because his beard just wouldn’t grow to the proper length to signify that he was a good Muslim—considered a fistful of beard.

As the Taliban regime spread its reach, Farouq prepared for his future. He became a doctor. He learned anatomy by digging up skeletons in graveyards—the medical students had no other choice. They practiced surgery on the Taliban, repairing wounds earned fighting the militia leftovers now outside the capital, which had coalesced into a group called the Northern Alliance, dominated by ethnic Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley, just north of Kabul.

After living through all this plus the fall of the Taliban regime, Farouq behaved much older than I did. He seemed forty, even though he was only twenty-six. He took care of at least ten relatives, from nieces and nephews to his parents and a disabled sister. Farouq hadn’t planned to go into journalism, or to become a “fixer,” a foreign journalist’s paid best friend, the local who interpreted, guided, and set up interviews. He wanted to be a surgeon. But he would have earned a paltry \$100 a month as a doctor. With us, he made \$50 a day. All the young English-speaking doctors and medical students had started working with foreign journalists, who probably single-handedly eliminated a generation of doctors in Afghanistan.

Luckily, Farouq, a barrel-chested former weightlifter with a mustache and thick black hair, was a natural journalist. He was intrepid and resourceful. He was eager, probably because he was single, and a single young Afghan man had little in the way of entertainment. It’s not like Farouq could date or go to a bar. Kabul had no bars or dates, except for the edible kind. Farouq was also connected to the entire country—related to half, able to convince the other half to talk.

I told Farouq about my own life—kind of. I said I wanted to be a foreign correspondent—kind of. And at thirty-two, I wanted to get married to my serious boyfriend—kind of. Or maybe I wanted to do both. I was still working it out.

At one point, we wandered through the streets of Kabul—cold, gritty, fecal—to try to get some air. Afghans stopped us.

“What is she doing here?” more than one Afghan asked. “Didn’t all the foreigners go to Iraq?”

I figured that could be a story, so we interviewed Afghans near the top of TV Mountain, so named because the TV stations had transmitters on top. Kabul was a very literal city: Butcher Street was where the butchers were, where slabs of questionable meat hung, covered with flies. Chicken Street was where chickens used to be sold, but Chicken Street had evolved into the tourist market, where in the 1960s hippies shopped for fur

jackets, silver trinkets, and carpets. The market had tentatively reopened after the Taliban fled, selling the same fur jackets and silver trinkets and carpets from thirty years earlier, only to foreign aid workers and soldiers and journalists instead of hippies.

On TV Mountain, the Afghans almost spat out their rage about feeling abandoned. “Believe me—the Americans lost in Afghanistan as soon as they left for Iraq,” one man said. Or maybe he said “believe me”—I was learning that this phrase was one of Farouq’s trademarks, along with “I’m telling you.” I just smiled and nodded. Afghans were as sensitive as a teenage girl about the civil war that happened after the Soviets fled in the late 1980s, when the Americans left the last time around. I wrote a story, but the newspaper had no space. The indignities piled up. My computer keyboard started failing, letter by letter. My satellite phone was broken, and I had no way to get online except for Kabul’s Internet cafés. I had to fudge receipts for a new Thuraya satellite phone because we weren’t supposed to buy new equipment—all the money was being spent on Iraq. I was starting to really hate that war.

Like any journalist trying to push her way into the newspaper, I figured more action was the answer. Once again, Farouq and I hit the road. We flew to Kandahar, the onetime Tali-ban stronghold in the south and the second-largest city in Afghanistan, near where the fighting was the worst. We walked onto the tarmac and found our Kandahar driver near a statue that resembled a giant soccer ball. He took us immediately to a boys’ school that had just been burned down by members of the Taliban, who destroyed cookies sent by India and called the headmaster “son of Bush.” Then, with the sun sinking and our driver panicking about me wearing glasses in a dicey neighborhood, as glasses were a clear sign I was a foreigner, we drove to our hotel, where my bathroom had been defiled by someone days earlier.

“God, I could use a drink,” I muttered, staring at the petrified mess. As far as I knew, Afghanistan was a dry country. I hadn’t even tried to find alcohol.

We ate some kebabs. I worked on a story. And then, late at night, I heard a knock at my door. I hesitated to open it, even if it was Farouq. Like every female journalist here, I had suffered problems with overly friendly fixers, mainly in Pakistan, where one translator had pouted for three days because I refused to share a hotel room and a drink or four with him. I opened the door a few inches. It was Farouq, and he was bearing a gift—a bottle of vodka from Uzbekistan.

“I thought you might want this,” he said, handing it through the door. “Have a good night.”

Then he left, to go tell jokes to Afghan friends in a nearby room or to watch a Mr. Bean movie, both common ways for young men to pass the time here. The vodka was practically undrinkable, but at this point, it was clear—Farouq could do anything, and he was just the right kind of friendly.

The next day, he even found me an Internet café, the first to open in Kandahar. This was a revelation—the Taliban had banned the Internet and any depictions of people, whether in photographs or movies. For the uncensored Internet to be available, especially in Kandahar, represented a real change, definite progress. The café was in a house that looked like a cross between a bordello and a bomb shelter, with thick velvety curtains protecting the privacy of every so-called “cabana” and taped Xs on the windows protecting the customers from any explosions outside. I wondered what the young men of Kandahar spent their time looking at, so Farouq and I hopped from computer to computer, each cobbled together from old spare parts and, yes, duct tape, checking the lists of favorite websites and the recent surfing history.

“Most of them are about sex,” Farouq whispered.

“Most of them are about sex with animals or boys,” I corrected, clicking on ultradonkey.com before reaching for my hand sanitizer.

Apparently, freedom had arrived in the south. For now.

From the Hardcover edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Raymond Striegel:

The book *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* can give more knowledge and also the precise product information about everything you want. So why must we leave the best thing like a book *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*? A few of you have a different opinion about publication. But one aim that will book can give many details for us. It is absolutely proper. Right now, try to closer together with your book. Knowledge or data that you take for that, you could give for each other; you are able to share all of these. Book *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* has simple shape however you know: it has great and large function for you. You can seem the enormous world by available and read a reserve. So it is very wonderful.

Desmond Goforth:

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Deborah Browning:

A lot of people always spent their particular free time to vacation as well as go to the outside with them loved ones or their friend. Do you realize? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, as well as playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity here is look different you can read a new book. It is really fun to suit your needs. If you enjoy the book you read you can spent the entire day to reading a guide. The book *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* it is quite good to read. There are a lot of people who recommended this book. These were enjoying reading this book. When you did not have enough space to create this book you can buy typically the e-book. You can m0ore simply to read this book out of your smart phone. The price is not to cover but this book has high quality.

Lionel Gutierrez:

Are you kind of stressful person, only have 10 or perhaps 15 minute in your time to upgrading your mind talent or thinking skill also analytical thinking? Then you are receiving problem with the book than can satisfy your limited time to read it because all of this time you only find publication that need more time to be examine. Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (The Taliban Shuffle MTI): Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan can be your answer mainly because it can be read by anyone who have those short time problems.

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