

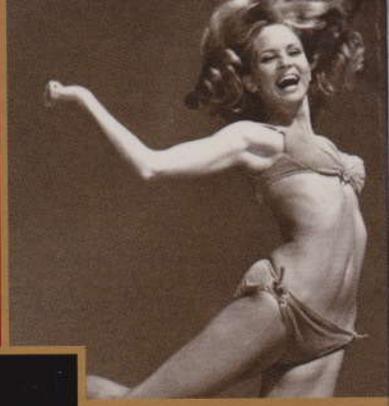
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DAVE EGGERS

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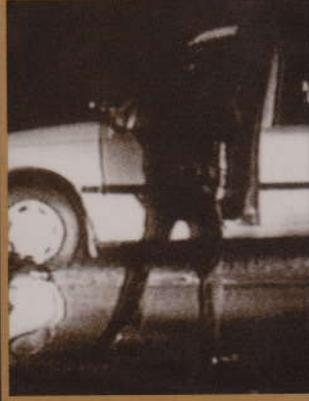


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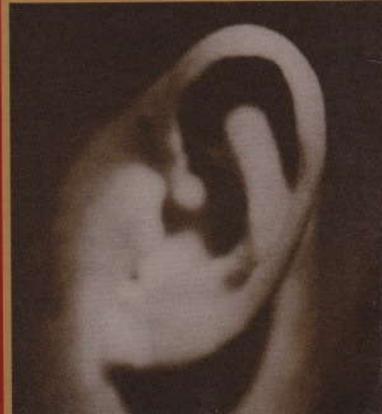
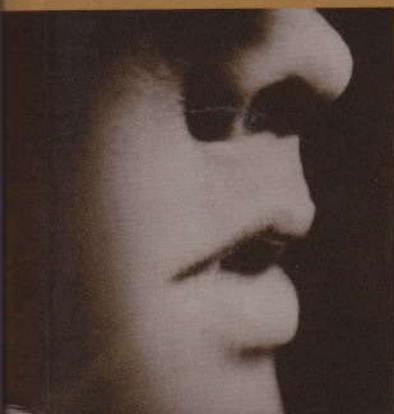
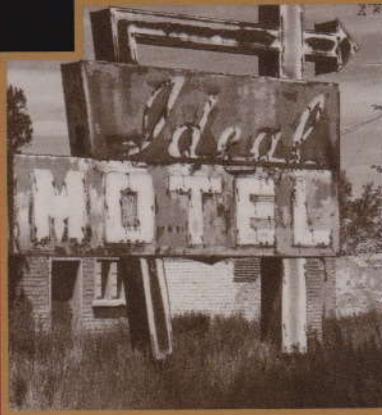
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A Rumor of Resistance

PHILIP CAPUTO

On the Pakistani side of the Khyber Pass, along the road that climbs and twists to Torkam on the Afghan frontier, painted stone tablets add splashes of color to the brown Khyber hills. They stand singly in some places; elsewhere, they cluster like tombstones in a crowded graveyard, odd-looking symbols chiseled on their facades: crossed sabers and crossed rifles, wreaths, crowns, and banners bearing names like *DORSETSHIRE* and *GORDON HIGHLANDERS*. The tablets are not tombstones but markers commemorating the exploits of the British regiments that played in the rougher innings of what a nineteenth-century English officer called the Great Game.

There is another kind of memorial on the Afghan side of the border, at a place called Gondabak. It is a stark beige-colored hill, no different from all the other stark beige-colored hills except for the extraordinary number of human bones that have been found under its rocks by the people who look for such things. The bones are all that is left of the 44th Foot, which formed the rear guard of a British and Indian army retreating from Kabul in 1842, the last year of the First Afghan War. At Gondabak, the regiment made one of those last stands that later provided raw material for historical novelists and the Hollywood illusion factory. But it was the real thing for the 44th on that winter's day nearly a century and a half ago: Afghan tribesmen overran the regiment, massacring forty-five hundred troops and twelve thousand camp followers and sparing only a handful. One of them was told to return to India and inform Her Majesty's

colonial government that the Khyber Pass could be very hazardous to an Englishman's health.

News of the disaster stunned the British; a punitive expedition was mounted and the defeat avenged; but Afghanistan never became part of the empire upon which the sun never set. That is why the Afghans still sing about the battle, why they talk about it in such detail that you would think it had been fought only yesterday. It was their best inning of the Game, the time when they played the opposition to a shutout.

What was the Great Game? The officer who coined the phrase did not live long enough to explain precisely what he meant by it: an Uzbek emir beheaded him while he was on a diplomatic mission in the area now known as Soviet central Asia. Rudyard Kipling, who died in bed at a respectable age and who popularized the phrase, portrayed the Game in terms of intrigue and high adventure in his novel *Kim* and his short story "The Man Who Would Be King." In these and other tales, Kipling created literature from an idea the British politicians of his day regarded as axiomatic: that an expansionist Russia, pushing south through Turkistan, meant to use Afghanistan as an invasion route to the subcontinent and the warmwater ports of the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. In that sense, the Great Game was understood to mean the rivalry between two imperial powers battling for control of central Asia.

Whatever the Game was—intrigue, adventure, geopolitics, or merely subject matter for celluloid spectacle—its main arena was Afghanistan, a country almost as big as Texas, half of it desert, the other half covered by mountains so high you can look down on thunderstorms from the peaks and passes. In response to real or imagined threats, the British invaded the country three times—in 1838, 1878, and 1919—and fought enough skirmishes in between to keep several generations of generals in medals, to make journalistic and political reputations (Winston Churchill was a war correspondent in one Afghan campaign), and to give Kipling plenty of background for his poems and stories about the North-West Frontier.

For the Afghans, the wars against the British were just another chapter in a very long history of resistance to foreign domination. They

have fought any number of men who would have been their kings: Greeks under Alexander the Great, Mongols, Scythians, Arabs, Englishmen. The Russians had a go at it in the early eighteenth century and were stopped by the Afghans at a place called Darband in 1725. They made another attempt in Napoleon's time, but their army could not conduct such a long-range campaign and was withdrawn. From then on, the Russians relied on subversion, avoiding direct conflict with the Afghans, whom a Western military analyst described to me as "the most ruthless practitioners of mountain warfare in the world." As any newspaper reader now knows, that long-standing policy ended in December 1979, when a Soviet army of nearly one hundred thousand men began rolling into the mountains of the Hindu Kush to crush a rebellion by Moslem tribesmen against a Marxist government that had taken power in Kabul with considerable help from Moscow.

The invasion revived the Great Game. If Kipling were to return to the North-West Frontier today, he would find enough similarities in the situation to give him a sense of *déjà vu* and enough dissimilarities to leave him a little bewildered. The old fear of a Russian thrust toward India and the Persian Gulf has been reawakened, but that fear now resides in Washington, not London. Afghan rebels are again sniping from the hills (often with weapons their grandfathers carried in Kipling's day), but they are sniping at an enemy equipped with the lethal technology of the late twentieth century—Mi-24 helicopter gunships, MiG-23 jets, and T-62 tanks. And from what I saw during the two weeks I spent with the guerrillas, the Afghans don't stand a chance of doing to the Soviets what they did to the English at Gondabak; they stand a good chance of losing this time around.

I went to Afghanistan in early May, a few days before the Soviets opened an offensive in Kunar and Nuristan provinces, which lie just over the Pakistani border. I landed in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan's North-West Frontier and the city where the eight major Afghan rebel factions maintain their headquarters. My object was to cross the frontier clandestinely with one or another of the insurgent groups. "Doing a Dan Rather" is what it's called by the newsmen covering the war, although the CBS newsman was not the first correspondent to slip into Afghanistan, just the most famous and the

most photogenic. A reporter's dolling himself up like a Moslem tribesman and sneaking over the border sounds like something out of a bad movie, but with Afghanistan closed to Western journalists it was the only way I could get into the country.

I learned in Peshawar that the Afghans are very liberal when it comes to punctuality. They have elevated the late arrival and the broken appointment to an art form, so I was not just surprised but delighted, stunned, amazed, when Tamim knocked at my door in the Khyber Inter-Continental at 7:20 P.M., only twenty minutes late. He was wearing baggy trousers, sandals, and horn-rimmed glasses that made him look not so much like a guerrilla as like what he'd been before the war began: a student of civil engineering. He looked around the room with a nervousness I thought was caused by the atmosphere of the hotel, a standardized plastic palace that wouldn't have looked out of place if it had been moved to Dayton. Walking in, Tamim began to examine my dresser like a man searching for a hidden microphone.

"Where is the *kibli*?" he asked, referring to the arrowlike symbol that points in the direction a Moslem must face during prayer. "All these rooms have a *kibli*. They're usually attached to this furniture."

That was the cause of his anxiety. It was time for the prayer before sunset, and my room lacked a *kibli*. I went to the balcony, saw where the sun was setting, and told Tamim to face the wall against which the couch stood. This he did, spreading a bath towel as a prayer rug.

Turning around, I saw Tamim in the mirror above the dresser, kneeling and bowing, praying with an unselfconsciousness no longer possible in the secular West. Faith is one of the few things the rebels have going for them. At its worst, it is a faith that can quickly degenerate into a mindless, murderous fanaticism; at its best, it is a force that gives the insurgents the spiritual strength to face Soviet planes and tanks.

"We have two choices: to become Russians or to fight," Tamim had told me earlier. "This is our way: to fight and become martyrs for our faith. We'll fight with or without the help of other countries. But if we lose in Afghanistan, eventually you will face the same problem: to fight or become Russians."

He was twenty-six years old, had learned his English while studying in Kabul, and was now a spokesman for his faction, which was called Jamiat-Islami. It was his job to answer questions from that curious, not always honorable fraternity of men who earn their living by covering wars in distant places. I had met Tamim two days before while making my rounds of the various rebel headquarters, trying to find a group willing to smuggle me over the border. A previous attempt with Hisbi-Islami, the largest insurgent group, had turned into a comic misadventure that was less the stuff of Kipling than of *Flashman*, George Fraser's spoof of imperial heroics in Afghanistan.

Dressed in my Moslem-tribesman costume (the disguise was necessary to get me through the numerous checkpoints the Pakistanis had set up in the frontier areas), I had ended up in an Afghan refugee camp at Miran Shah, a town west of Peshawar and about twenty miles inside the Pakistani border. My cover had been blown when I'd started photographing four Russian gunships that, by accident or design, were dropping bombs well inside Pakistani territory. It seemed a good story: the Soviets were attacking a neutral country. The Pakistani security men who'd spotted me didn't think so. They arrested me and, after finding that I didn't have government permission to travel in the frontier provinces, packed me off to Peshawar under guard. I was not returned to my hotel, which is the usual procedure the police follow when they catch a newsman mucking around where he doesn't belong. Instead, I was taken to the headquarters of the North-West Frontier constabulary, where two hard-eyed, no-nonsense young men said they suspected me of being a Russian agent who had slipped into Pakistan to stir up trouble among restive tribesmen. Like many American correspondents, I'd grown accustomed to accusations that I was working for the CIA; but this was the first time I'd been charged with playing for the other team. It was only after hours of interrogation, during which I answered questions of the how-many-home-runs-did-Babe-Ruth-hit variety, that I convinced them I was a patriotic American with no ties to the KGB.

Next day, like a salesman calling on his clients, I paid visits to the seven other guerrilla factions, which are grouped loosely—very loosely—under the umbrella of an organization named the Islamic

Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan. Most of the rebel headquarters are near the old city, in the shadow of a gloomy fifteenth-century fortress that rises above a chaos of bazaars and narrow streets exotic and sinister enough in appearance to convince you that you are indeed in a dangerous place. I found Jamiat-Islami's offices in a row of storefronts on a street where horse-drawn rickshaws jostled with Hondas and Toyotas. At the entrance, a sentry carrying a Kalashnikov rifle gave me a body search. Another escorted me down a gangway to a courtyard surrounded by rooms where guerrillas recently returned from the front lay on straw mats, their feet dirty and callused, their rifles stacked in a corner. (One look at those Mausers and Lee-Enfields told you that if the CIA is arming rebels, as Tass would have us believe, it is doing so by raiding antique gun shops.) *Mujahedin* is what the guerrillas call themselves; depending on who is translating, it means either "freedom fighters" or "holy warriors."

I was ushered into the political information office, where several men lounged on the floor. Removing my shoes, I walked in and joined them. They served me tea, for the Afghans, like most Moslems, put great store in treating guests hospitably. One of the men asked whom I wished to see. I told him I was looking for Tamim, whose name had been given to me by another correspondent. He said to wait; and while I waited, men drifted in and out of the room or sauntered aimlessly in the courtyard. The place had none of the snap and bustle you expect of a military headquarters. The general atmosphere was the same as that in the other offices I'd visited—casual disorganization.

That is, in fact, one of the weaknesses of the Afghan resistance. To this disorganization, add disunity. The mujahedin are, for the most part, feudal warriors who value personal honor and bravery but who have almost no comprehension of the fact that success in modern warfare requires collective action. The Islamic Alliance for the Liberation of Afghanistan is an alliance in name only; it suffers from the fragmentation that afflicts many revolutionary movements, though not for the usual ideological reasons. As far as their political philosophies go, you can say of the rebel factions what George Wallace said of Democrats and Republicans: there isn't a dime's worth of difference between them. They all espouse some

form of fundamentalist Islam. The splits in the resistance have been caused by its leaders, gray-bearded chieftains who have lived long enough to acquire enemies lists longer than Richard Nixon's and who have found in the war a good reason for raising private armies with which they can settle old scores. To put it another way, the Afghans have a penchant for blood feuds, and they often tangle with one another when they aren't fighting the Russians. The day I arrived in Peshawar, a bomb exploded in the building occupied by Jamiat-Islami, killing fourteen people. The guerrillas blamed it on Soviet agents, but Western and Pakistani intelligence sources said a rival Afghan group had set off the bomb.

Tamim entered at last. Folding his legs under him, he sat down. After we'd exchanged courtesies, he made a plea for help: "We are not like the Vietcong. They had assistance from two superpowers, China and Russia. We're alone. Why doesn't America help us?"

I couldn't answer him, beyond saying that America wasn't helping because it had a President who seemed unable to decide what color socks to put on in the morning. Tamim responded with a vow that the Afghans would fight to the last man and the last bullet, regardless.

"Our faith is the strongest barrier against Communism," he said. "The Russians have good weapons. We don't. But we have it in the heart, and we capture weapons from the Russians. And when they get out of their tanks and fight us man to man, we always win."

Tamim neglected to mention that the Russians seldom leave their tanks for that very reason; but he was obviously sincere in his belief that bravery, faith, and the Enfield rifle are a match for the T-62 tank and the Mi-24 gunship.

With all that said, I asked Tamim about the chances of slipping over the border with some of his men. After reflecting a few moments, he suggested a trip to Kunar Province, which would require five to eight days' travel. A party of guerrillas was planning to leave for Kunar the day after tomorrow. He would contact me at seven o'clock on the following evening.

Now, in the hotel room, Tamim finished his prayers and sat on the couch. Lighting a cigarette, he announced rather dramatically: "You will be leaving for Kunar in the morning. A Pakistani security

man is always outside our headquarters at seven, so you must be there before then to change clothes. Do you have everything?"

I said I did and showed him my kit: the long shirt, baggy trousers, round Chitrali cap, and capelike blanket worn by Afghan tribesmen; a canteen, hiking boots, a camera and camera bag, and a small, light-weight mountaineer's pack containing a sweater, a change of socks and underwear, notebooks and pens, a Swiss Army knife, and a first-aid kit. Tamim approved of everything, the medical gear especially. "You might need that," he said. "We don't have any doctors."

We were seated beside a dirt path, gazing at the mountain marking the frontier we had just crossed into Afghanistan. Mahmud Hezrat rose, adjusting the pack he had fashioned by wrapping a blanket around his belongings and supplies, then looping and knotting the tag ends into shoulder straps. It weighed thirty or forty pounds, but the thinly built Mahmud carried it with the ease of the old mountain man he was.

"Yusef, stand," he said, meaning that our rest was over. Except for certain military phrases, *stand* and *sit* were the only English words he knew. He did not call me by my first name because he could not pronounce it; I'd told him to address me by my middle name, Joseph, which comes out "Yusef" in Pashto, the primary language of the Afghans.

I stood slowly, as did Steve Bent, a twenty-one-year-old British freelance photographer who had decided to come along. We were both wiped out after climbing over the mountain that stands between Afghanistan and Bedjauer, the Pakistani border town where we'd spent the night. Six thousand feet up, six thousand down.

Ten of us had crossed the frontier that morning: seven teenage mujahedin, all unarmed and carrying sacks of flour, clothing, and rifle ammunition; Bent and I; and the nominal leader, Mahmud Hezrat. He was about fifty, with the large nose and high cheekbones of a Pathan (the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan and northern Pakistan) and a vague moustache that made him look like a taxi driver who cheats on fares. He wasn't like that at all but utterly trustworthy, the only fighting man in the bunch. The other seven, as far as I could tell, had never seen action.

Below the mountain, our small column moved down a dirt track beside a riverbed that was dry except for a trickle of brown water idling down its middle. Terraced wheat fields rose in alternating bands of green and gold on both sides of the river; mud-walled villages stood atop the hills above the fields, these hills climbing toward still higher hills that rose to meet the Hindu Kush, a great blaze of white far in the distance.

It was beautiful country, but the fields and villages were nearly deserted. You didn't need to be a military expert to figure out why: Kunar Province, this part of it anyway, was a free-fire zone. Mahmud described the destruction in the tone of a park ranger naming species of plants for nature-lovers. Pointing at a huge hole blasted out of a mosque, he said, "Roosie tank." At two craters yawning in the middle of the road: "Roosie bomb." At a house with its roof blown off, its timbers charred: "Roosie rocket." At a row of smashed houses on the far side of the river: "Roosie helicopter." Then, sweeping his arm back in the direction from which we'd come: "*Majer, majer. Pakistan,*" meaning that the people had fled to the refugee camps across the border. My immediate impression was that the Russians were playing the Great Game with new weapons but in the same old way. Give the wogs a whiff of grapeshot and make 'em run.

By midafternoon we had been on the move nearly eight hours, and an old bullet wound in my leg, which I'd suffered four years earlier while covering the Lebanese civil war, was hurting like hell. Bent and I were parched, hungry, drenched in sweat, and exasperated by the language barrier, which made it impossible for us to find out why we were sailing off into the wild blue without a rifle among us, where we were going, and how long it would take us to get there. We felt a little like captives being led off to an unknown destination.

Sensing our mood and our exhaustion, Mahmud took us to a mud-brick house owned by a tall, strongly built mujahed named Posli Akhbar. I dubbed him "the gay guerrilla" because, to abbreviate a long story, he showed an extraordinary, indeed an unnatural, affection for Bent and me. Put up in Posli Akhbar's guest room, a dark, dirty hovel abuzz with flies, we were fed a lunch of bread,

goat's milk, and tea. Then we collapsed on beds made of woven straw and slept through the afternoon.

In the evening, we made a determined effort to find out from Mahmud where we were headed. The conversation was conducted in pidgin English, pidgin Pashto, and sign language. An hour of this produced some answers. Mahmud showed us an envelope with Pashto script on it: it was a sealed message from Jamiat headquarters to a man named Shair Rahman, whom he described as a *turjoman*, a field commander. Mahmud was a courier. Rahman's position was less than two days' march away, at a place called Kattar. After the message was delivered, we would spend a day or two with Rahman's men, see a bit of the war, and then hike back to Pakistan. I felt reassured; there was a purpose to this expedition, after all. I was also taken with the idea of delivering a message to a guerrilla chieftain. Shair Rahman. It was a grand name, something out of Kipling. We never did find him.

The rain clouds sweeping down the mountains made the Kunar River look like a ribbon of liquid lead. Flecked with the white of the rapids, it swept past us with a low, steady roar. Some distance to the northwest, where the sky was still clear, a squadron of Russian gunships skimmed over a ridgeline, then nosed down out of view. A few minutes later we caught the rumble of bombs and the short, sharp bursts of rockets. Crouched among the boulders on the riverbank, we listened to the bombardment, scanned the skies for helicopters flying in our direction, and waited to board the raft for the river crossing. That, not the Soviet gunships, was my immediate concern. The current boomed along at a good ten or twelve knots, but the raft was the sorriest jury-rigged lash-up I'd ever seen—nothing more than a few logs and lengths of scrap lumber tied to inflated goatskins and steered with two oars made of flat boards tied to poles with old rope. But it was the only way the guerrillas could get to the other side; the ferries downstream at Chigaserai and upstream at Shegul were in Russian hands.

One of the boatmen—actually a boy of no more than fifteen—finished blowing up the goatskins with a bellows and waved us aboard.

"*Bismillah ar-rahman, ar-rahim,*" Mahmud said as we shoved off and spun into the current, the fast water lapping over the skins, the boatmen heaving on the oars. Now the other mujahedin joined in the chant. "*Bismillah ar-rahman, ar-rahim.*" The words mean "In the name of God the all-merciful, the all-loving-kind," and are spoken by Moslems before any important or dangerous undertaking. They are the equivalent to the Christian sign of the cross.

The boatmen got the better of the current and swung the raft at an angle across the river. When it bumped against the opposite bank, the rebels opened their arms wide and cried, "*Allahu akbar*" ("God is great").

We scrambled up a cliff to where a dirt road ran through a mile-wide stretch of flat, open country broken by stone fences. It was the closest thing I'd seen to an actual battlefield since we'd crossed the border. Fresh tank tracks corrugated the road. There were old Russian foxholes ringed by rock parapets, a few burned-out trucks, and scattered bits of spent flares and ammunition. Warning that the fields were sometimes shelled and that armored columns often patrolled the road, Mahmud told us to move quickly. Move quickly we did, Bent loping on his long legs while I hippity-hopped on my gimpy one. Mahmud led us on, running in short sprints, then dropping low to look around, then running again. The other seven, by contrast, sauntered along behind us, filled with the ignorance of death that is one of the privileges of youth.

When we stopped to catch our breath, I told Bent, "I'm sticking close to the old man from now on."

"Why's that?" the Englishman asked in his tough Manchester accent.

"Did you see the way he moved? He's not interested in dying for Islam. He wants to stay alive. That gives us a lot in common."

Getting to our feet, we half-ran, half-walked into a gully, then climbed a trail to the outskirts of a village named Shinqaluq. It was an Edenic spot, with pink wild flowers growing at the trailside, wide-spreading chinar trees for shade and concealment, and a cold spring from which Bent and I could fill our canteens. Three mujahedin armed with collectors' pieces were sitting near a small cave they used

as an air-raid shelter. It came in handy a few minutes later, when two gunships appeared over a low ridgeline a quarter mile away. They came on not with the rapid *wap-wap-wap* of American huesys but with a throaty growl, flying straight toward us at low speed and at an altitude of no more than five hundred feet. We scrambled for cover. The cave could hold only two or three men; the rest of us crouched or lay flat under the trees. We could hear the measured throb of the rotor blades as the helicopters flew directly overhead, their slowness suggesting the leisurely confidence of predators with no natural enemies.

It was obvious that these Russian pilots weren't afraid of anything the mujahedin could do to them. And with good reason. The guerrilla beside me was aiming his rifle at the aircraft, and I thought, *Jesus Christ, don't shoot that damn thing and draw their fire*, when I saw that his gun was a breech-loading Martini-Henry. Stamped on the receiver were the initials V.R.—“Victoria Regina”—and the date of manufacture, 1878. Happily, the choppers flew on. The pilots either did not see us or, if they did, decided we weren't worth the waste of ammunition. We waited for several minutes to make sure they had gone for good; then Mahmud shouldered his makeshift pack and spoke the words I was already tired of hearing: “Yusef, stand.”

At Kattar, which we reached a day and a half later, a band of guerrillas told us that Shair Rahman had packed his bags. He had been blown out of his position by the Russian bombardment we had heard while crossing the Kunar, and had fled into Nuristan, on the far side of a mountain with the haunting name of Nungalam Tangasaar. It rose some ten or fifteen miles away, all eleven thousand feet of it, its peak white above the timberline. Nuristan is the modern name for Kafiristan, the land where Kipling's Daniel Dravot would have been king; and though a small part of me was curious to see it—its inhabitants are a fair-skinned people who, according to a legend too marvelous to be true, are descendants of a lost legion of Alexander the Great—the larger part of me was not so curious as to want to undergo an eleven-thousand-foot climb.

The march from the Kunar River had been an ordeal for Bent and me. There seemed to be only two directions in eastern Afghanistan:

up and farther up. The Russian troops owned the roads and they owned the river valleys, forcing the mujahedin to stick to the high country.

From Shinqaluq we traveled up a ravine to the foot of a dark mountain called Pandasaar. There we rested in the house of a bearded elder and again ate flat, pie-sized loaves of bread washed down with goat's milk.

It was a killing six-hour trek up the eight-thousand-foot Pandasaar. Through chinar and wild mulberry trees on the lower slopes, through walnut and hazel higher up, we climbed a trail that was steep enough in places to make our thigh muscles quiver. At sunset we reached the summit, too drugged with fatigue to appreciate the view, then slogged down a short distance to a wretched little village of pine-log huts.

Our night camp was the local mosque, a drafty shack with an open doorway and paneless windows. While Bent and I stretched out, our thin blankets not much protection against the wind, Mahmud and the others sat around the fire talking to a few local guerrillas, men whose faces had the color and texture of the leather bandoliers that crisscrossed over their chests. The mujahedin seemed indefatigable. I saw then how smart the Russians were to fight this war with helicopters and tanks. The toughest infantry in the world would be no match for the Afghans in these mountains.

In the morning, peppered with tick bites, we started down the other side of Pandasaar, walking quickly over an upland meadow into the shelter of a pine and cedar forest when two Mi-24 gunships buzzed close by. A few miles off, ten more choppers were clearly visible against the white of the distant mountains. One by one, they dipped down to strafe some valley far below. We could not see the bombardment, but we heard it—a low, rolling rumble.

The trail led us through the pines, then past empty villages where water coursing down chutes made of hollowed logs turned mill wheels that creaked on uselessly because there was no one to put grain into the mills; past fields where goats grazed with no one to herd them; past files of refugees, the children carrying chickens and teakettles, the women burdened with infants slung papoose-

style over their backs, the men bent double under enormous bundles of rugs, blankets, and odd bits of furniture. One very old man hopped along like a crippled bird, using two tree branches for crutches. The Russian bombardment kept echoing through the mountains with a sound that made me think of oil drums rolling through a tunnel.

"*Khali*," Mahmud said, using the Arabic word for "empty." Then, "*Majer, majer*. Pakistan."

His reaction to what the Russians were doing—emptying Afghanistan of Afghans—wasn't clear from his flat tone of voice. It was very clear when you looked into his dark, deep-set eyes, in which the tension between fury and sorrow created an intensity that seemed capable of burning holes through a man.

On the trek down Pandasaar, we not only saw the effects of Soviet methods but felt them—in our guts. We had eaten nothing since the previous night. So when we reached Kattar and heard that Shair Rahman had fled to Nuristan, Bent and I hoped Mahmud would give up the chase. He didn't. We went on, into a deep gorge where a river flung itself against the rocks, roaring so loudly that we had to shout to make ourselves heard, then up and up a narrow trail until the sound of the river diminished to a whisper.

Small bands of guerrillas, who seemed to be wandering the countryside aimlessly, passed us along the way. They greeted us with calls of "*Salaam aleikum*" ("Peace be unto you") and fed us a mishmash of contradictory information. Shair Rahman had been killed in the bombing. Shair Rahman lived. Shair Rahman had fled to Kabul, not Nuristan. No, Shair Rahman was still in Kunar, in the village of Gumbier, with an army of four thousand mujahedin.

Off we trekked to Gumbier, where we found not four thousand rebels but four. They were sitting outside the house of a local commander, a proud, dignified-looking man with a thick black moustache, a bullet-studded bandolier, and bad news. Shair Rahman had definitely gone to Nuristan; he had established a new outpost at Amirat, a village in the Waigul River valley on the far side of the mountain called Nungalam Tangasaar. To reach Amirat, we would have to scale the mountain by way of a pass below the peak; we would reach the village late the following afternoon, Allah willing and all that.

The mustachioed chieftain put us up for the night. Bread, goat's milk, tea. Bent and I were hungry to the point that we could hardly eat, tired to the point that we could not sleep. Lying on the wicker cots, we listened to some distant shelling and to the guerrillas talking among themselves. We understood very little, of course, but a few words from the English lexicon of war kept cropping up in their conversation. And it occurred to me that these isolated mountaineers had been talking about other things not long ago—about marriages and tribal disputes and crops and livestock and local scandals. Now it was "helicopter," "bomb," "tank," "rocket."

The pass over Nungalam Tangasaar stood at nine or ten thousand feet, where the air was thin and cold. Even with the sun high, we could see our breath and the steam rising from our bodies. Looking down past a meadow covered with yellow wild flowers and Parnassus grass, down to the dark-green timberline, I felt rather pleased with myself for having made it up the mountain. More than pleased—exhilarated. We had begun the ascent at four in the morning and had finished it around noon, Bent and I sucking the air as greedily as thirsty men drink water.

From atop the pass, where the summit pointed upward like a huge white spike above us, we gazed down on Nuristan, on all the wooded ridges, steep ravines, and glass-clear streams tumbling into the Waigul valley, beyond which more ridges rose toward mountains whose peaks were almost as bright as the sun. It was the kind of country that does the same thing to your heart as the sight of a woman you love passionately; but just to remind us that we weren't on some "Valderee, Valdera" hike in the Bavarian Alps, a formation of Mi-24s appeared, silhouetted against the white mountains. The helicopters swooped down and began to strafe the river Waigul.

This attack did not end after an hour or two; it went on all afternoon. Around four, after we had passed through forests where the pines looked a thousand years old, we started down a steep hillside toward Klaigul, a Nuristani village of flat-roofed houses built in tiers against a cliff. A stream rushed beneath it toward the river, above which helicopters circled and dove. Smoke from their bombs rose in

columns over the villages hugging the banks of the Waigul. We could hear tank cannons and the helicopters' miniguns, which fire so rapidly that a single burst sounds like the explosion of a drag racer's engine when the starter's flag goes down. Sometimes a guerrilla's machine gun fired five or ten rounds in reply; this told me that the mujahedin had great fire discipline or, more likely, did not have enough ammunition. Even if they had had enough, it would have been virtually useless against the Mi-24, one of the wonders of late-twentieth-century death engineering. The gunship's armor plating makes it a flying tank, invulnerable to all but the heaviest antiaircraft fire; it is armed with a conventional machine gun in the nose, an under-nose minigun (which shoots six thousand rounds per minute), one hundred twenty-eight rockets, as many as four bombs carried in wing-tip pylons, four air-to-surface missiles, and electronic sensor packs for accurate rocket firing in bad weather or rough terrain.

Watching those helicopters flying at a speed and altitude no American pilot would have dared in Vietnam unless he'd had a death wish, listening to the pitifully brief bursts from the rebel guns, I thought, *This isn't a war, it's a Russian training exercise.*

We did not see them at first; they were below us, lazing along almost at treetop level over the stream, their green fuselages camouflaged against the ridge on the far side. Rising as the stream bed rose, the two gunships appeared suddenly at our eye level and less than half a mile off.

“Kena!” (“Get down!”) Mahmud shouted. The others, Bent among them, ducked under a grove of mulberry trees a hundred feet or so downslope. Mahmud and I were caught on an exposed patch of ground where a few low bushes offered the only concealment. The two of us lay under these, keeping our eyes on the helicopters as they climbed toward the pass. They hung in the air for a moment; then—and I swear this is true, though I know it can't be—the lead chopper seemed to shudder in the excited way a man-o'-war bird shudders just before it swoops down on a school of fish. All right, I was imagining things, hallucinating perhaps—stress and exhaustion do funny things to your brain chemistry—but I can still see that tremor passing through the

helicopter the instant before it banked sharply and came down toward us, its rotors flashing in the sun.

Mahmud started to pray. "*Bismillah ar-rahman, ar-rahim.*" He gestured to me to cover my watch with my sleeve so that it wouldn't reflect the sunlight. Both gunships were closing in now low enough for us to see the barrels of both the nose gun and the minigun under the nose. "*Bismillah ar-rahman, ar-rahim.*" Mahmud's praying had become frantic, a desperate appeal, a garble of words in which I could only make out "*Allah.*" Allah, Allah, Allah. The gunships drifted overhead; any slower and they would have been hovering. Miniguns, rocket pods, bomb racks, sensor packs. The whole nine yards. Six thousand rounds a minute. A one-second burst would turn a man into something resembling dog food. And if it had to happen, I hoped it would happen that way—quickly. The only thing I wanted less than to be killed in Afghanistan was to be seriously wounded in Afghanistan. The mujahedin are waging partisan warfare on the thinnest of shoestrings. Not enough modern weapons, not enough ammunition, and, as Tamim had told me, no doctors. No medevacs, either. The injured are evacuated on muleback or camelback. Few survive the trip out. For most, it is slow death.

Mahmud continued to send up his fervent prayers. The choppers were straight overhead, their turbos making a pulsing whine. I don't know if Allah was listening, but the gunships abruptly made a tight turn and headed back toward the Waigul. That river was as far as I cared to go. Mahmud, however, remained faithful to his mission and led us on to Klaigul, which was a mile farther.

We saw our first Nuristanis there. Some were as dark as the Pathans, but others looked as English as the blond, six-foot Bent. Despite the helicopters buzzing nearby and the bombs falling only two miles away, the local mujahedin commander, a twenty-two-year-old ex-teacher who spoke English, took us into his house and treated us with the usual hospitality. We asked our host if he could help by guiding us to Amirat. He shook his head. The Soviet attack was concentrating on Amirat. It was much too dangerous to go there. If Shair Rahman wasn't dead, he was on the run to somewhere.

That was it as far as I was concerned. We had chased this phan-

tom Rahman for four days, often marching fourteen hours a day. We had gone far enough. Using the local commander as an interpreter, I told Mahmud that. Much to my relief, and Bent's as well, he agreed. Gesturing toward the Waigul, he said that the mujahedin there were finished. He had done the best he could; to go on would be foolhardy. In the morning we would start the return trip to Pakistan.

We ended up back on Pandasaar four days later, with plenty of company. Blankets wrapped around our shoulders against the chill, Bent and I sat awaiting our turn to move. In front of us, a file of refugees struggled up a trail toward the crest of the mountain. The men were carrying bundles of mattresses and sheepskins on their backs, bundles that looked big enough to crumple a mule. The women, their silver bracelets and amulets jingling, shambled along, some with infants held to their breasts. Those children old enough to walk walked, as they had been walking since they'd left Nuristan, on bare feet over rocky trails that bit and slashed their skin. They were all going up the mountain: men, women, and kids, the old and the sick, about a thousand people altogether. Bent and I watched, awed by their endurance.

We had left Klaigul and climbed for six hours to another village, where we spent a cold, unhappy night sleeping in a cave. Next morning, with Russian mortar shells thudding in the valley below, the villagers decided they would go with us. They packed whatever could be carried and left everything else behind. One headman ran up to me, pointing at a helicopter with one hand and waving a .303 Enfield cartridge in my face with the other. He shouted in Pashto, but I understood his meaning clearly enough: he and the others were fleeing because those .303s were no defense against the technology and the firepower that the Soviets were throwing at them.

Over the next three days, the original column grew from about a hundred people to a thousand. As far as I could tell, this mass evacuation had not been planned. It seemed as spontaneous as a flash flood, with refugees flowing in from the Waigul and an adjoining river valley, the Pech, which had also come under attack. Perhaps a fifth of the column were mujahedin, men who had been designated to guard

their clans and families on the long walk to Pakistan. Their presence made the evacuation look like a retreat, and in some ways it was.

We ran from the Russians, then almost ran into them. All during the three-day march from Nuristan we had heard the sound of the Russian bombing behind us. On the morning of the third day, as the column was beginning to climb Pandasaar, that same sound started coming from somewhere in front of us. We were nearing the pine-log village, the one where Bent and I had slept in the mosque a week before, when we passed a mujahedin patrol coming from the direction of the Kunar River. They gave us the worst possible news: Soviet helicopters were attacking the village of Shinqaluq and the ford over the Kunar River; a column of twenty tanks had also moved in to block the crossing point; the tanks' machine guns had opened up on the rafts and had sunk them, killing three guerrillas and four civilians. There were Russians behind us in the Waigul valley, Russians west of us in the Pech valley, and now Russians in front of us on the Kunar. The door out to Pakistan had been closed. We were cut off, trapped, screwed.

The leaders of the evacuation decided that we could do nothing but wait it out. It was midmorning of the following day when a young mujahed entered the stable where Bent and I were housed and squatted beside the fire we had built to ward off the high-country cold. He and Mahmud fell into a long conversation, after which the old man looked toward heaven and muttered a prayer. It turned out to be a prayer of thanksgiving. The tanks had moved, Mahmud explained in the usual mixture of pidgin and sign language. New rafts—launches, he grandly called them—had been brought up. There was, however, one Russian position upstream from the crossing point and another one downstream. The plan was to move the column through this opening and ferry the whole lot across under cover of darkness. The operation would have to be completed by dawn, to avoid being spotted by Soviet gunships.

Feeling relieved and anxious at the same time, Bent and I went outside to await our turn. The column was organized, more or less, into clan and village groups; along with Mahmud, we had been adopted by the family of a dark-bearded mullah named Gulzada. The

four of us idled outside the stable while, inside, Gulzada's youngest daughter baked loaves of flat bread for the trip ahead. His wife and his older daughters huddled nearby, veiling their faces with their shawls. Finally Gulzada shouldered his belongings, and Mahmud turned to me and said, "Yusef, stand."

The flat, upright boulders looked like grave markers in the light of the quarter moon. Led by Mahmud, we stumbled down a gully toward the Kunar. The sound of distant mortar and machine-gun fire punctuated the steady, whispering rush of the river. Moving out of the gully, we started over a stretch of flat ground crisscrossed by tank tracks. Gulzada and his family trailed behind. We clambered down a cliff toward the Kunar, its waters black except where the rapids caught the moonlight. Below, we found hundreds of people crowded onto a narrow, rocky bank.

The ferrying operation was already well under way. Those still waiting their turn raised their hands toward the sky and implored God to grant the others safe passage. It was moving to hear their voices rising in the darkness above the noise of the water, to sense the strength of their hard, simple faith.

The operation went on all night: a thousand people ferried over a wild river on rafts buoyed by inner tubes and inflated goatskins. Our turn came a little after five. It was now fully light, and we would be utterly helpless if any helicopters showed up.

The crossing took only a few minutes. When we got to the other side, I embraced Mahmud and thanked him. He, of course, thanked God. He then took a roll of Afghan currency and paid the boatmen. If courage, honor, and faith are the Pathans' principal virtues, greed is their principal vice. The boatmen were charging twenty *afghanis* per head to take the refugees across.

We saw another, uglier example of Pathan avarice four hours later, on the trail back to Pakistan. The river crossing had split the long column into small bands, and the group Bent, Mahmud, and I were traveling with was waylaid by bandits who lived in the Kunar valley. There were only three of them, led by a vicious young man armed with a Russian machine gun. They were levying a toll on trav-

elers passing through their territory. The mujahedin outnumbered the gang ten to one, and could have shot all three. They didn't because, as Mahmud explained, the bandits' kinsmen—dozens of them—would have come down out of the hills and wiped out the mujahedin in revenge.

Mahmud was the only one to ignore the machine gunner's order to move to the side of the trail. Cool-headedly he walked on, telling Bent and me to do the same. We hugged the embankment to stay out of the machine gun's line of fire. The young man kept yelling and we kept walking, until we rounded a bend to what I hoped was safety. Mahmud flopped down and, in gestures, said that his heart was pounding. From what I could understand of his sign language, he had defied the bandits' orders out of fear that they would have discovered Bent and I were foreigners and held us for ransom. I felt greatly relieved, and grateful, and disgusted. The resistance had enough strikes against it without Afghans' using the war as an opportunity to plunder other Afghans. But then, there are profiteers in every war.

We reached the border two days later, after a hard and happily uneventful march. The combined retreat-*evacuation* had been successful; no one had been lost or injured. Nevertheless, it was a defeat—a small and perhaps temporary one, but a defeat. Five months of fighting had already created a million refugees and a thousand more had been added, a thousand more people who would not be there to give the mujahedin shelter, food, and intelligence. It was, I thought, the Great Game in reverse. A century and a half ago, the Afghans had driven out one foreign conquerer; now another was driving them out.

And many of those primitive mountain people were leaving the terrors of war for those of a new and alien way of life. I recall Gulzada's youngest daughter, a girl of about ten or eleven, letting out a hysterical scream while we were walking down a road toward the refugee camp at Bedjauer. A pickup truck was coming toward us. The truck was what had frightened her. She had never seen one before.

—DECEMBER 1980