

HOME

A short-story by aman mojadidi, 2007

We leave the house in Peshawar early, right after morning prayers, before the sun becomes an amber disc filtered through layers of thick brown haze. I climb into the back seat of a Toyota Custom Pick-Up and am immediately flanked by two AK-47 wielding mujahideen, rebels from the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF). Aql Khan and Baznoor stand their Kalashnikovs between their legs, and smile at me while another mujahid in the front seat whose name I don't know coordinates with the other vehicles through a high-band walkie-talkie. A minute later, six vehicles carrying 20 mujahideen and me pull out in a cloud of dust onto the main road heading towards Torkham; a lawless zone nestled between this stretch of the North West Frontier Province and Afghanistan's border. It's barely seven a.m., but the streets are already filled with people as they spill out of overcrowded buses and climb into three-wheeled rickshaws. Within the hour we pass through Torkham, my eyes falling upon stall after stall with names like "Ahmed's Arms Store" selling large bags of Chars-e-Mazari and a range of popular weaponry from landmines to rocket-propelled grenades. The perfect one-stop jihad shop; where you can get sweet, sticky Afghan-made hashish and cheap Russian-made AK-47s before crossing through the Khyber Pass.

The driver picks up speed and we all sit in silence for much of the way. I look out the window as the dry, barren landscape passes by in a dusty blur. One of the vehicles behind us radios that they're stopping at a fruit stall to buy a bag of kinos, so we pull off to the side of the road to wait. I get out of the truck and not far from the roadside my eyes fall upon what must be hundreds of tents. But not the kind of tents I'm used to; waterproof, with windows, screens and zippers. These are a patchwork of different colored materials and old clothes sewn together into makeshift shelters with a certain tragic beauty in their design. I ask Baznoor who they are and he says they're Afghans that have fled their villages due to the war and set up camp here where it's calm. I walk a ways towards the tents and by this time our presence along the road has attracted the attention of several of the camp's children, who have begun excitedly running towards

us. “Hello Mister,” “Hello Mister” is the first thing that comes out of their mouths, not thinking that I am Afghan. I reply in Dari, “Your English is very good, tell me more.” One of the older children, his clothes dirty and much too small for him, says, “How are you?” and “What is your name?” Behind the caked on dust and smeared grease, his face is aglow at the opportunity to use his language skills. “My name is Amanullah, what is your name?” “My name is Kanishka,” and at this point he stops, those four phrases having exhausted his knowledge of English. I think of his name and how easily it flows when spoken. Ka-nish-ka, tolerant king of the Kushan dynasty largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism throughout Central Asia, including what is now Afghanistan. I stare at the gathered children for a moment and am overcome with an uneasiness I can’t quite define. I wonder if I’m the only one uncomfortable. Aql Khan calls out that we’re leaving. The children walk with me to the truck, and looking back as we’re pulling away, the mujahideen who had purchased the fruit toss a bag out the window. The kids are wrestling over who’ll carry it back to camp as dust clouds envelop them and the tents in the background slowly disappear.

We’re a good hour and a half inside Afghanistan now. We’ve been driving straight and fast for the last thirty minutes, heading in the direction of Jalalabad. The road is slightly bumpy but still well paved, although every fifteen minutes or so we have to swerve around a crater left in the road by any of a variety of mortars and rockets fired in this war. The bumps and swerves make me drowsy, slowly lulling me to sleep despite my attempts to stay alert. My head banging into the ceiling of the truck abruptly wakes me to find that in veering away from one rocket crater, the driver inadvertently drove into another shallow hole in the road. In between laughs, my co-passengers ask if I’m okay and rubbing my head I can’t keep from laughing myself at the thoughts that had gone through my head when I was so rudely awakened; ‘Were we fired on?’ ‘Are we hit?’ A few minutes later, we’re pulling into our first stop on this journey, an ANLF mujahideen training camp in the middle of a field of tall, yellow grass by a swiftly moving river. We’re greeted by maybe 80-100 rebels of all ages. Some come forward to hug and shake hands, while others hang back with looks of curiosity mixed with suspicion on their war-weathered faces. I shake hands with a boy who couldn’t be older than 12, equipped with

an AK-47 slung over his shoulder. I'm told by a mujahid standing next to me that the boy's family became shaheed, martyred, when the Soviets bombed their village. The young boy's eyes are hard, his face aged, and he refuses to smile. Maybe he's unable to. I'm taken on a tour of the training camp, a relatively bare fitness course with homemade pull-up bars, balancing beams, and old tires to skip through. Besides this there are several types of weaponry such as Surface to Air Missile (SAM) Launchers, what appear to be huge machine guns mounted on stands, and a sizable arsenal of other assorted small arms. After prolonged encouragement I agree to taking pictures with me holding an AK or perhaps posing with a three-legged machine gun. It's a strange feeling posing with weapons, and I feel uncomfortable in a way that's hard to explain. I consider myself a pacifist and wonder if this breaks some sort of non-violent code. It's after noon by now, and I'm told we have to get back on the road if we're going to make it to the base camp where we'll be spending the night by sundown. I give back the Kalashnikov rifle that still hung over my shoulder, only now realizing that I have been carrying it around with me for at least the last 1/2 hour.

It's not until we're driving again for about ten minutes or so that I realize why we had to leave in order to get to base camp by dark. All of a sudden, the asphalt road simply ends; slowly deteriorating and fading into what becomes a path comprised of jagged stones and river rocks. Although the distance is actually only another seventy-five miles or so, it takes us several hours to navigate over the terrain and arrive at our destination. At first I'm not sure what's happening when we turn off the main road and onto a dirt path lined with what look like eucalyptus trees but seemingly leads nowhere. Then we pass through gates under an archway of sorts, an entrance guarded by two rebels, and I notice the skeletal remains of a bombed-out village lying just ahead. We meander through the village and on to what appears to have been a masjid once, but is now part of a base camp for ANLF rebels. We're here. It's getting dark, and preparations are being made for dinner. The cook picks a karakul sheep from the herd and leads it behind the building where he will halal the animal and prepare it for cooking. I'm curious and would like to follow him, but Baznoor tells me we should sit with the commander of this camp as he's been waiting for our arrival. For the next hour, we sit and listen to the commander tell us

about recent skirmishes that his men have been involved in with the Communist forces around Jalalabad. By this time, 1990, the Soviet troops have withdrawn from Afghanistan and the war is now primarily between the Afghan resistance and the pro-communist Afghan army that is still receiving significant aid from Moscow. I become less interested in his stories, and more in tune with the chorus of hunger pangs taking place in my stomach. As I'm listening to what could be something from Bach in D-minor emanating from within my navel, we're summoned to dinner; a plentiful display of stewed meat and bread. Some vegetables and fruit are brought out in honor of the guest, but out of a natural desire not to get a running belly in the middle of rural Afghanistan, I stick with my meat and bread. Bananas, however, I'm told are okay to eat because the fruit is fully encased inside the skin; safe from the microbes that could wreak havoc on an untrained digestive system like mine. So for dessert I pick a couple from the pile and cautiously eat them both. In the end, the bananas are somewhat small but perfectly sweet. After dinner, as I'm leaning on a pillow drinking green tea, I begin to wonder where I'll be sleeping for the night. There doesn't seem to be much shelter around and there are by now probably up to a hundred mujahideen that have trickled into camp throughout the evening. Without electricity, and with a need to rise early and get moving again, bedtime arrives not long after darkness settles in. I follow the others to an outdoors area where several charpaey are set up with blankets, but no pillows. Our beds are ready. As I'm lying in the open air of this bombed-out village, looking up at the sky, the stars are closer and more reachable than I've ever imagined they could be. I reach out towards this celestial field and pluck one like a spring flower right out of its black velvety bed, secretly saving it for a future wish. Then I notice the wind as it approaches the village through the front entrance, proceeding down the tree-lined lane that leads to where we're camped. It begins quiet and distant, long detectable in the leaves of treetops before it can be felt on your skin. Growing louder as it comes closer, closer, a warm rush passing over you, through you, and on to the next bombed-out village. I wonder whether there will be anyone there to listen. The blanket of stars and soft lullaby of whispering leaves sooth me to sleep before too long, while the quiet voices of others in the camp slowly fade into the dark.

It's just before dawn and the camp is already stirring. I try to go back to sleep but fail miserably, so I sit up in the charpaey and put on my new black Chuck Taylor Converse low-tops. The mujahideen have already begun loading the vehicles for our trip forward to Jalalabad and are preparing breakfast. Breakfast, it turns out, is several cups of sweet milk-tea in cheap 'Made in China' porcelain, bone colored with little pink roses around the rim of each teacup, and some stale sweetbreads and cakes that someone brought back with them from their last trip to visit their family in a Peshawar refugee camp. And then there are the flies. The sweetbread and cake is covered under a blanket of flies, while the rim of my teacup is invisible beneath their bristling fur as they fight frantically for the sweet, milky residue left behind from each new sip. I refuse to just turn my breakfast over to the insect kingdom and so simply follow the others; fan away the flies before each sip or bite, allow them to settle in again, and repeat this ritual until I'm done. After breakfast I team up with Farid, a young mujahid with shoulder-length hair and dark kohl around his eyes, and help load up the last of the supplies that are being taken to the front-line base camp we'll be visiting. Farid tells me he's twenty-one years old and after his parents were killed in a Soviet bombing raid when they first invaded in 1979, he dropped out of school and joined the mujahideen. At the age of ten, he began as a kind of servant-boy, wiping down weapons, serving tea and water, carrying ammunition. Now, eleven years later, Farid can drive a tank, break down and reassemble a Kalashnikov AK-47 "in less than three minutes," and is particularly skilled with firing SAMs. But he can't read, and the only words he can confidently spell are his name and Allah. Farid's staying behind at this camp, and before leaving I notice he's wearing a pair of old, worn, brown sandals. It looks as though our feet are about the same size so I take off my right sneaker and tell Farid to try it on. I ask him if he likes the sneakers and although he's older than me by two years he quietly replies "Yes sir." The sneaker fits so I tell him that I've been looking for some sandals just like his and ask him if he'll trade with me. All of a sudden, at least ten other mujahideen who have been observing what's going on immediately come towards me, waving one of their sandals in the air and telling me how much better their sandals are and what a better trade it would be. Laughing, I tell them all the deal's done with Farid, as he quickly puts on his new black Chuck Taylor Converse low-tops.

We're not on the road long before we pull into a large, relatively green area where the gray remains of several buildings sit quietly amidst shady groves of trees. I'm told that before the jihad, this used to be a lavish resort getaway frequented largely by foreigners, including Russians. In fact, I'm told that the place itself was part of a development project carried out with the cooperation of the Soviet Union. The project included a plentiful farm where orchards of pomegranates, olives, and almonds, among others, covered large parts of the property. Two of the larger buildings, including the one we're standing in, were a hotel and a movie theater. As I stand in the roofless rubble that was once a state-of-the-art, modern movie-house, I try and imagine the place filled with finely-dressed people as the latest Western film plays on a big screen. The image fades before it fully takes shape; the current reality of the place difficult to ignore. "Who bombed this place?" I ask. "After the jihad started, the mujahideen began to make use of the farm. They got food from the orchards and fields, water from the wells, and shelter from the buildings. When the Soviets realized this, they bombed everything to deny them that shelter, poisoned the orchards and burned the fields to deny them the food, and contaminated the water supply to deny them water. They even blew up and leveled the bigger trees so mujahideen couldn't hide in them with rocket launchers and shoot down helicopters." This was a skill, I had been told, the mujahideen had become quite accomplished in. I look over towards the mujahid who answered me and with a look of angry disgust in his eyes he says, "They burned our whole country." I think of the irony in the destruction of something you helped build, and am reminded of another development project where the Soviet Union built a well-paved road cutting down into Afghanistan from Tajikistan in the north; to facilitate trade, commerce, and travel was the reasoning. On Christmas Eve 1979, they used the same road to roll their tanks directly into Afghanistan as part of a full-scale invasion. I walk out of the theater and into what was once an almond orchard. The trees are bare and the decomposing shells of long ago fallen almonds litter the ground. I bend down and pick up a black, shriveled pod. Even after the poisoning, children came to the farm to gather nuts and fruits to eat; unaware of what that strange spraying over the fields meant. Dozens of people in the surrounding villages died before the cause was understood. After that, hungry children watched as what looked like perfectly good foodstuffs fell from the trees, shriveled up, and rotted.

We're back on the road, still heading toward a front line base camp in Samarkheil, outside Jalalabad. Thinking back on the farm we just left, I realize how green it actually was there in comparison to the barren, dusty terrain surrounding me once again. A deceptive green, as everything from the treetops to the soil to the deepest roots is now dangerous. What once grew there and what could be grown, both equally rendered inedible for years to come. Even the ponds, surrounded by beautiful tall, green grasses where fish could once be caught are littered with metal, cylindrical canisters that leaked poison into the water killing all the fish. I wonder if life will ever return to the farm. Since we entered Afghanistan, all of the areas we have passed through, and continue to pass through, are controlled by the mujahideen. The city we're heading towards, Jalalabad, has been volleyed back and forth between the pro-Soviet government troops and the rebels for the last several months. Three days ago it fell to the government troops again, and the mujahideen retreated to their base-camp in Samarkheil on the outskirts of the city. The road is even worse as we approach Samarkheil, with huge bombed out sections that have us veering in large, wide circle-8s for the last half hour. The road we're traveling on is now an arrow straight stretch that leads directly into Jalalabad. But before the city is even in plain view, I see several dozen mujahideen standing around, on, and alongside the road with several Toyota Pick-Ups parked under the shade of a couple nearby trees. Once we reach them, we pull off the side of the road and I can now see that there is a very wide, dried out wash that intersects the road at a perpendicular angle. The now empty, dirt-bottom wash once flowed beneath the road through two side by side tunnels approximately forty to fifty feet apart from each other. Having stayed the previous night in a relatively nice camp with a wall surrounding the village, I don't expect what I see in Samarkheil. I get out of the truck and am led towards the tunnels. The one closest to the city has clearly been hit, and the road has collapsed into the wash leaving a pile of rubble atop which rests another Toyota Pick-Up truck. Camp is a makeshift shelter set up beneath the road inside the wash's other tunnel. Large stones are stacked into walls about chest high, creating an enclosure with a narrow space left as an entrance and exit. Inside, dusty but beautiful dark red rugs with traditional geometric designs cover the ground, a few pillows are strewn about the edges, and a small arsenal of

AK-47s, SAMs, and their launchers lean against all four walls. I am struck for a moment by the sheer number of weapons I have been around in the last two days alone, and feel as though I am given a glimpse of how it must be when weapons are a mere part of your day-to-day reality. They already don't seem as threatening to me as they did before, and I find myself perfectly comfortable being around, and carrying, a Kalashnikov.

"Agha saib, Agha saib!" I step outside to where someone is calling me and find several mujahids gathered around what appears to be a sort of rocket launcher with twelve hollow cylinders, slightly rusting around the circular edges, attached together forming a square, resting on a sturdy base at about a 45-degree angle. "Do you want to fire on them?" I'm asked. I respond, "On who?" and am immediately handed a pair of binoculars while someone points in the direction of Jalalabad. I look through the scopes and bring the blurry beige image into focus only to see several tanks lined up in a horizontal row facing the camp. I look without the binoculars and see nothing, then look back through the lenses at the potential targets. In the meantime, a couple mujahids have brought out three rockets and placed them next to the readied launcher in case I'm game. "Sure, let's fire on them" I say. I tell them I don't know how the weapon works, and without warning one of the mujahids takes the first rocket and places it into a cylinder. The rocket is ejected out of the launcher with a roar and flames come shooting out the back of the cylinder in a rush, kicking dust and dirt up and around us all. The mujahid responsible is doubled over laughing as are several others, a prank that is apparently often played and yet never gets old. Much more nervously, I pick up a rocket, slip it into the cylinder, and run hunched over from the launcher with my fingers in my ears as the rocket is catapulted by fire towards the army tanks. A third person fires the last one and rather unceremoniously we return to camp beneath the road for a little green tea. "I just did jihad," I think to myself in half disbelief, as the tea burns its way through my throat and into a slightly upset stomach. "You're a mujahid now" Baznoor is saying, his words filling me simultaneously with a deep sense of belonging and betrayal. I think about the war, and the hell it unleashed upon my family. Assassinations, disappearances, and beheadings were a common occurrence. Whether monarchy or mujahideen, the Soviets saw them as the enemy and they suffered as a result. For that, the one rocket fired upon a

distant tank hardly even seems enough to satisfy my desire for retribution. And an armed resistance seems like the only way to truly pay my respect to relatives lost at the hands of the invading Soviets. But engaging in an armed struggle goes against every belief I have in the power of non-violence to bring about change in the world. It becomes hard to swallow and my head begins to hurt. I close my eyes for a moment and gently pull myself out of the ethical maelstrom that's been triggered inside of me. Opening my eyes, I take another sip of tea and distractedly engage with the group that's sitting with me beneath the road.

After several minutes of small talk about what's been happening with the front line, what predictions are for regaining control of Jalalabad, and the need for replenishing the ammunitions stockpile whose current level has become a point of concern, I hear a distant boom and feel the ground beneath me rumble softly. We stand up and look out the 'window' of the camp into the seemingly endless barren field beside us. Someone points, and in the distance I can barely make out a cloud of dust slowly dissipating into thin air. The tanks surrounding Jalalabad, the ones I fired on maybe a half-hour before, are returning fire. Return fire, a concept that just happened to escape my mind when I had the bright idea of firing on them. "Of course they'd want to shoot back," I think to myself now as another explosion of dust, this time closer, billows into the air. "Don't worry" a mujahid says to me "they always miss." I think of the other tunnel next door filled with road rubble serving as a parking space and ask him about it. "Oh, they got lucky once" he says smiling. I watch as the tank shells steadily make their way closer to the camp, the last blast having shook it enough to topple over a few of the rifles leaning against the wall. Then, suddenly, there's a strange noise directly above our heads; like a heavy weight grinding deeply into the road, followed by a more distant blast that seems to come from behind us. "Where did I pack that star from last night?" I think to myself, "time to make a wish." Next thing I see outside the camp is a pick-up truck overloaded with young mujahideen racing out into the open field, drawing wide figure-8s and other erratic moves, kicking up a storm of dust and hollers. They're drawing the tank fire away from camp, making themselves a moving target out in the open; like a game of cat and mouse except the cat is a tank and the mouse a truck full of teenagers. Playing by the

rules, the tanks fire a couple of unsuccessful rounds towards the truck and then seem to tire of this game. It's silent once again and the truck returns to camp. Stepping out from under the road to see what had happened above where we had been sitting, a short, narrow, deep gouge in the asphalt stares back at me from the road; like a giant finger came down to taste the gray, gravelly frosting that protected us. Some mujahideen had gone down the road to investigate the blast we heard earlier and noticed remnants of a tank mortar resting in the bottom of a fresh crater. That mortar was what landed above us, except that it didn't hit nose first. Rather, it belly-flopped its way over us and on down the road, where it left its proper mark. Had it done so on first impact, it would have surely collapsed the road in on those of us standing beneath it. They almost got lucky again. With what resembles cynicism a mujahid asks, "How does it feel to be home?" The question sounds as if it has come from miles away, traveling on the breeze, and slowly blowing across my ear. I look around me at the group of armed rebels, their faces dusty and war-scarred. The wind is whipping sand into earthy spirals that disappear into a sky that, though calm and blue, feels heavy above me. Dizzy, I sit on a rock to steady myself as an uneasy feeling of my own privilege washes over me. And slightly nauseous, I lay my AK-47 on the ground and think, "*I am* home, and I can't wait to get there."