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Afghan Mountain

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We are on the road to the border straddling the mountains. I'm a *mujahedin* – from a distance you can't distinguish me from the rest of the bearded fighters in traditional Islamic garb. I have naturally dark hair, classed as ash gray, but I added a few touches of black dye to the beard to make me look fiercer. The traces of amber in it betrayed my Baltic features and would set me too far apart from the craggy wild looks of the men surrounding me. Otherwise our thinking is the same – we have a common enemy, though we worship different gods.

They clutch the usual assortment of Kalashnikovs and RPG 7 anti-tank grenade launchers. All Russian weapons, some made-in-China clones. But I don't carry a gun, though I will shoot. That is to say, with a video-camera. But it's hidden. I can only take that out when we are in enemy territory, in Afghanistan. For that we have to get across this mountain range and past the Pakistani border guards. You don't get past if you are a European. That's why I am disguised as an Afghan. Arabs are alright, though. They carry the Koran with suitcases full of dollars.

It's a good thing I'm in a four-wheel drive, a rare privilege. The road exists only on the map. It's really just a dirt track, with treacherous curves, where, if the driver is not careful, he could spin one wheel off the edge and have the car come bouncing down the slope of a rocky ravine. *Inschalla* - God-willing – we will safely make it to the compound nestled high up in the mountain. There we will rest for the night and then proceed early in the morning on foot across the border where ponies and donkeys are the only means of transportation.

I need to hold the top of the seat in front whenever the Toyota swerves, which is often. I'm squeezed in the back in the middle perched on the edge wet from sweat, so my right hand is almost always gripping the seat in front of me. This allows me to observe the seat more closely. It takes my mind away from the possibility that the four-wheel could miss a curve. The car is not old, but the seat's rear surface betrays that many of God's soldiers – this, no less, is what *mujahedin* means in Arabic - must have held on to it as I am

now. It's shiny black – the coarse dark green fabric has been polished smooth by skin from many human hands.

Did any of them die when they got to the top? If they did get into a skirmish, then there is a good chance that not all came down again alive back to their families and friends camped below in the refugee havens. If so, were the unlucky ones buried up there, or were they driven back to the camps in Pakistan quick enough for funeral rites? The Moslems have to bury their dead by sundown next day. I wonder if this is because of the hot weather. What if I die? Where will I be buried? Strange, I never discussed this with the commander taking me up the mountain. Maybe I should ask him when we get to the top? My family has only a vague idea where I am.

No. I'm not a fighter, so I should come back alive. I'm on a special mission, which redeems me from death. Only soldiers die, if they go to war, because that's their lot. I'm just a disguised soldier, a virtual soldier of God, so a soldiers' fate does not apply to me. I will be alright, as always, I comfort myself. Come to think of it, I never thought of death when driving on the fast American and European superhighways, though everybody knows it could be dangerous. Traffic accidents happen. Guess it's war that changes everything. Here you get killed on purpose. You are also allowed to kill.

Staring at the black spot on the back of the seat I startle to see streaming from it bullets at ferocious speed at me again! But they fly only at me and I am conscious that the car is still driving up the mountain. I am back in the battle fought three weeks ago, and I have to pin down my head behind a pile of rocks. The lead pellets are joyfully singing a high whining tune as they whiz just inches above me. They've spotted my camera, or are they thinking it's a rocket launcher? My *muj* – that's the *mujahedin* - are spitting back fire at them no less ferociously with every weapon they have in their arsenal.

I'm sweating and my heart is pounding like an African drum as I struggle with the thought whether to raise my head in order to see the field of battle and take the video footage! I can't go back to Stockholm without it – otherwise why am I risking my life here? Go back home and say it was too dangerous to film? Not a good story. I must decide when to pop my head up and quickly press the record button on the video camera. Now, when there is one of those mysterious lulls in the firing, or when the bullets are not directly racing at me?

I must do it! The enemy is blazing away with anti-aircraft guns – the Russian *Dashaka* - bullets as thick as thumbs. Isn't this what Hamlet was asking? To raise - or not to raise one's head?

I got it right. Maybe there is something to that saying about being born under a lucky star. That's why I'm gripping the seat now and staring at the black spot, which has morphed back into its natural composition, and I'm getting a bit sick from the lurching of the land cruiser. But I can't quite convince myself that everything will be alright again. A creepy undercurrent nags at me - the footage I shot in the previous battle will be of no use if I die now on the other side of the mountain.

Why did I join this expedition? It's only the usual patrol. I know it's too late to change my mind because the car is climbing ever higher and soon we will be there, but in a months time I am to go on a truly grand operation that will take me right through Afghanistan to the very border of the Soviet Union. And into it!

This is to be the big event for me this summer. I am to join a weapons convoy to the north of the country with a group of fighters. But because it would take at least a month for the *muj* to collect the weapons and make all the arrangements necessary for the expedition, I have to wait. But waiting another month in Green's Hotel in muggy Peshawar was not a very entertaining prospect. Even the waiters at breakfast manage to stop time before they get around to serving you. Waiting a whole month with nothing to do would mean dying of boredom. It may even take longer to get everything ready for the trip. That would be too much.

So I jumped when offered the chance to tag along on this reconnaissance trip north of the Khyber Pass into the last Afghan province that was Islamized only at the turn of this century. Maybe that's what attracted me. The Afghans tell me that there are still pockets of pagans living in the higher valleys, the descendents of one of Alexander's Greek army outposts, called the *Kalash*. This trip rescued me from Green's Hotel.

The *muj* trust me. It could have ended badly for me when I told them where I come from. They could have taken me for a secret agent of the enemy they were fighting. Stockholm is only a temporary home, my real home is Riga just a day's swim across the Baltic sea in a country that has completely

disappeared in the vast expanse of the Soviet Union. It was swallowed up by Russia after the Second World War and is no more.

The *muj* eye me steadily when I explain this. They know who Stalin and Hitler were. They asked me if we fought the Russians? I replied that our *muj* fought for seven years in the forests and countryside before they were beaten. I see the horror well up in their eyes – and understood in a flash the unspoken question – will the same fate befall them? I stare at them – nowhere, neither in Australia, America, or Sweden where I have related the same tale about my vanished country have I met the same horrified response. We become brothers.

They approve immediately when I say I want to stick a finger in the eye of the bosses in the Kremlin by crossing the border as a fighter from the war zone in Afghanistan. If they can send their armies across the border shooting and bombing, why can't we do the same in the opposite direction? I would join a hit and run party into the southern Soviet province of Tadjikistan and raise my arm high in the air in that victory salute made famous by Churchill in Britain's hour of despair.

We would swim across the Oxus, that famous river in ancient history, which Alexander the Great crossed twice to subdue the remaining desert tribes in the Persian empire. Well, we are coming back across that river again, only now it's called by a different name – the Amu Darya. I was amazed that the weapons would be trucked across Afghanistan! Like where was the Russian Army? Only at the end would the ponies and mules step in for the final leg of the journey.

This is stuff for a good movie – rattling away at night in battered vehicles without lights through the wild country with the moon above in the cloudless sky and – hoping a Russian special operations unit is not lying in wait! But is the risk worth it just to savor the moral satisfaction of crossing the border illegally into an empire from which I have been banished like a heretic from the church in the Middle Ages for not singing according to the prescribed psalm book?

I worry. Will my “V” sign filmed and recorded stop my countrymen who are fighting in the Russian army from killing the Afghan freedom fighters? If the *muj* could beat the Russian army into retreat will it not keep retreating until it retreats also from my country?

Have I jeopardized my place in this grand scheme of things by escaping from Green's hotel for a couple of weeks? I feel unease encroaching upon me. Of course I'm not superstitious, but in war you never know. Different rules apply. Strange ideas and uncanny sensations become more evident. You start pondering whether there is such a thing as a premonition, because subtle signals emanating from goodness knows where are felt that could be warning you are on the wrong track. That word *Fate* assumes sharper contours and I don't have to fall back to ancient Greek mythology – my own people have their folklore and beliefs which plainly state that *Fate* should not be tempted in vain.

The big jeep stops. I notice two farmers selling grapes loaded in boxes by the roadside in the shade of a gnarled pine tree clinging to the edge. We get out and stretch our legs as the commander buys several bunches of grapes. I watch him carefully wash them in spring water gushing from a hole in the rock in the mountain's side. Good, way to go, I say to myself and gladly accept a big bunch to munch. Green, fresh, and sweet! Heaven in this oppressing heat!

Then we climb back in again and roar off. The big red sun is setting when we arrive at the compound surrounded by high walls with guards peering down at us. It is still hot and I don't feel good after the ride. We are offered rice, onions, and meat broth, which I know I should eat, for tomorrow will be a hard day, but I decline. I have no appetite, in fact, I couldn't eat even if force-fed. I feel terrible. I refuse to believe I'm sick because I don't get sick, but I am sick, because I can't banish that rotten feeling away. I manage to gulp down a few mouthfuls of *chai sas*, because I know that tea is good when you feel bad inside, but even the tea wants to come back up. Now that won't do at all, tomorrow I'm on the march again. I have never felt worse in all my life, and I already have more than forty years behind me. I have to figure out something.

I see two men who, with the crickets still making a racket, have still not retired for the night sitting by the table on the veranda with the fan cooling them and savoring their last cups of tea. They had beckoned to me earlier to join them but I declined – the fan gave me chills. I'm leaning against the house when I spy the outhouse by the wall of the compound across the garden. Of course, I need to empty my bowels, flush out my insides, and then I will recover by daybreak! I set myself in motion though I hardly feel

the earth beneath my feet but on the way I try to recall the day's events - what could it be - certainly not the grapes, I saw them cleaned, and I'm the only one sick!

For a fleeting moment I feel better, but then the nausea overtakes me again. What I need now is some fresh air and then things simply must get better! I lurch out of the smelly outhouse and lean against the mud and stone wall encircling the compound gulping fresh air – the air was beginning to cool somewhat – and while waiting for the first signs of improvement, manage to take note that the two *mujahedin* on the veranda are eying me strangely.

But that doesn't matter, not in the least bit. I forget them immediately as I soar through the universe of a million stars at a speed that was so fantastic it was incomprehensible to even begin to understand how fast it was. Absolute joy, never before experienced – I was traveling at the speed of light! Where to? Ah – I saw it! There in the distance past the maze of stars more brilliant than diamonds was something gently black and soft, smooth and velvety, radiating a peace so absolute that I can't wait to get there and I try to increase the velocity of my flight. It seems as if I have managed to achieve this miracle, but then a hindrance occurs, which begins to disturb me. At first it's only an annoyance, to be shrugged off since nothing can stop me now from reaching the perfect happiness, but soon I am obliged to acknowledge that it persists and, furthermore, is growing into more than just an annoyance – it is developing into a threat that could jeopardize my amazing flight. In desperation I summon all my strength and put up a fierce struggle to escape it, shake it off, it seems that some horror is clutching at my body and pulling me back. What is it? I have to see it, so I can get rid of it!

And I did. After what seemed to be a bang, like the sound of a particularly stubborn cork that is finally yanked out of a wine bottle, only more subdued, I see it. I stare, not comprehending. I can't recognize it. I'm looking at strange forms. They make weird noises. Then it occurs to me that the forms are faces, but what faces, whose faces, and where had they come from? Slowly it dawns on me that I know these faces, and I must be on my back since the faces – now attached to bodies – are looking down at me. Then I realize who I am and, after a while, even where I am - back in the compound by the wall.

The *muj* gently lift my head so I can sip some tea, and help me come to my senses by explaining what had happened. I had fallen face down like a comet to the ground while standing upright against the wall. The alarm was raised and a whole body of Afghans rushed to wake me. Solicitously one of them hands me my glasses, wiping off the dirt from them. Amazingly the glass had not broken! Then, after swallowing two aspirins from my medicine bag, I am helped to bed where I fall into the sleep of the dead.

Next day they announce that they will take me down the mountain. It must be expensive, the Afghans had not banked on going down so soon. But they rightly figured that I needed a doctor quickly. This time I had the whole back seat to myself so I could recline, which was just as well, since I didn't have the strength to sit up. I couldn't see through the window, and my gaze, whenever I was jolted out of my fitful slumber, found the same black spot on the front seat that held me steady on the way up. I looked wistfully at my right hand and comforted myself that at least it was easier coming down. My hand could now hang freely by my side.

Descending, I became aware that a thought was developing in me, but I was too weak to urge it to come forward. Occasionally I felt faint, erratic impulses from somewhere inside me indicating that the nascent thought might have something to do with my planned raid into the Empire. The impulses remind me of the beeps emanating from the monitor in hospitals becoming ever fainter as the patient gives up the struggle for life. I sat up with a jerk! Had I dozed off, too long?

I kept my eyes wide open now watching as we descend into the foothills and finally reach the great Asian plane of humanity stretching across Pakistan and India. The driver and his companion offer to show me a *madrass*. Though my only wish was to get back as quickly as possible to – well, yes, the Green's Hotel – I couldn't offend them by declining. They were extraordinarily proud that, despite the war and squalor of the refugee camps, they were educating their children in schools. I float along half in a daze “inspecting” the school, but care mostly for the tea at the end which I gulp down cup after cup. I was given to understand that there would be no lack of fighters in the future either. I did note that the kids – boys to be more precise – were certainly eager and bright-eyed in their recitation of the Koran.

When we reached the front door of the hotel, I had already decided that I would, despite the added expense, this time round order an air-conditioned

room. Now if no such room was available, I would be done for before they found out what was wrong with me. It was then that the thought, which I couldn't bring out on the way down from the mountain, gelled into definite shape and most irreverently made an announcement in the form of a question – shouldn't one wash one's hands before devouring grapes, especially the right hand? Of course, the black spot! I am so sick now I know I will have to wait until the next summer to paddle across the Amu Darya with God's soldiers in the dead of night, if ever.

END