Chapter One:
The Awakening Shock
1980s

"Sardar Mohammad Daud, the last despot of Nader Khan's lineage, one of the most treacherous in history, is no longer among us. The sovereignty, thus, lies in your hands, noble people of Afghanistan. It is incumbent upon each of us, the noble people of Afghanistan, to safeguard the achievements of our revolution and eliminate the supporters of that savage tyrant."

— First public announcement of the Military Council from Radio Afghanistan, Thursday, 27th of April 1978

1
Coup D'état

We are often first awakened into real life by a single incident. An incident whose importance we might not even recognize until many years have passed, and the lessons from many other experiences have been gained.

For me, that incident happened on a hot Spring Thursday: The 27th of April 1978. I was 9 years old. I was busy playing with my friends when we saw a neighbor running down the street, shouting, "It's a coup D'état! Coup d'état!"

Before I had the chance to register his words my father arrived, as hurried and excited as the neighbor, and ushered my cousin and I into the house with unusual vehemence, locking the house door behind him.

Something unusual was happening, this much I knew. My father found his small transistor radio and began adjusting the knob, all the while muttering "coup d'état; coup d'etat." All the family members including my mother and I were taken aback—no one had any idea what was happening. Except, it appeared, my father. And he wasn't explaining.

Moments later, we saw a helicopter maneuvering in the sky, and then heard the sound of an earsplitting explosion coming from somewhere near the presidential palace, and I could see that my father's excitement grew. He dashed around, nervously spinning the radio knob. The next thing I remember was at dusk, when the sound of a military fanfare broadcast over the radio.

It was followed by the booming voice of a man making forceful pronouncements about things like "revolution", "treacherous;" "savage;" "vicious family." I'd never heard these words before, I didn't understand these words, but clearly something huge was happening, and I began to understand when after this speech my dad brought out a photo of Daud Khan and began stabbing and tearing at it with a pin until it was ripped to shreds.

And that's when everything in life began to change.

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The excitement continued through the night. The sounds of explosions, and of tanks and other military vehicles passing the 8th Garrison continued until morning.

The next day was a Friday, the weekend. As people went out to explore, it was clear that the atmosphere had changed. I recall vividly that there was a kind of excitement on the faces I saw, that I knew was somehow different from what I would feel when beckoned by friends to come out and play, to run along the walls of the city, or go steal fruit from the gardens.

On Saturday, school resumed as usual. I was in the 3rd grade and my school was in the west of Kabul, in an area called *Qala-e-Kashef*. The events in the city had clearly affected the school as well, because everywhere I looked something was different. Everyone seemed confused, unsure what to make of the previous few days' events, the students all eager to share what they had seen or heard during the coup, many of them exaggerating their claims.

The headmaster, a stout, ruddy-faced man, appeared to be happier than everyone else. Clapping students on the back, and ruffling their hair. Just one year before, this headmaster had lined us up in front of Paghman highway to greet a high-ranking official from the government. I didn't recognize the man who came, but later, my classmates said that he was president Daud Khan—the same man whose demise our headmaster was now celebrating.

A few days after the coup, the new regime opened the presidential palace to the people. Thousands came downtown to visit what had until then been a frightening, mysterious place, but which the new regime was now calling *Home of the Masses*. No one took me to visit the palace, perhaps my family thought I was not mature enough to understand the stories that had taken place in this sinister palace. However, from relatives who did visit, I heard spine-chilling stories of human flesh on the limbs of trees outside the palace, and blood on the walls inside. It was as if with its first gesture to the people, the regime was planting in their minds seeds of violence that would soon grow into the new norm in my country.

The day the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) raised its flags all over the city was one of the most entertaining memories I have from my childhood. The school arranged for some of the students to attend the celebration. We all held in our hands the same red flags which were now blanketing the entire city. Later on, a relative of mine who had climbed to the top of a mountain in Kabul described the view from above: the city looked like a prairie of red flowers, he said, rippling in the breeze. Everyone said it was the most festive event Kabul had ever seen.

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It wasn't long before these images were overcast by darker ones. My childish world was soon strangled by words like "march"; "PDPA"; "scouts"; "treacherous"; "revolutionary"; and dozens of new strange, exotic concepts I didn't understand. I would see the fear and apprehension on the faces of my father and other elders of the family. I would see that the curtains were drawn and the doors locked, when they never had been before. I would hear the elders uttering words into

each other's ears that they didn't want us to hear. And I would learn I was not allowed to be in the room with them when my father's transistor radio was turned to the news.

I was told stories about people who were abducted and taken to the city's prisons. My uncle was an employee of the Ministry of Interior Affairs, and talked of his colleague who was a driver. This driver looked more and more emaciated as time went on, my uncle said. The driver finally told my uncle that one of his jobs had been driving an excavator at the prison trenches, into which dozens of prisoners were dumped every night—living prisoners. The soldiers would then refill the trenches with soil and run steamrollers on them. He could see movement in the trenches, the driver said, and blood squirting up when the rollers went over.[1]

There was a man named Asadullah Sarwari who lived at the end of my street. Before the coup, I had not heard much about him, and his children never came to play with the other neighborhood kids. However, during the first days after the coup, we could hear his name being whispered around the houses in the neighborhood. We learned that our parents feared him. He was the head of AGSA[2], the terrifying intelligence agency of the PDPA regime, which later became KHAD. It was said that in all its history, Afghanistan had never known anyone as vicious as Asadullah Sarwari.[3] And he was my neighbor.

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Kabul was gradually turning to a city of nightmares for me, a place that poisoned my sleep, swallowed my childhood aspirations, and replaced them with harsh realities. My father, who was a well-connected real-estate agent, and whose anticommunist sentiments were well known, soon fled the city to a village in Afghanistan's remote central highlands, leaving his business in the hands of his brother, my uncle. He would return to visit us in Kabul only occasionally, after

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[1] In his "Afghanistan in the Last Five Centuries", Mir Mohammad Sediq Farhang quotes a runaway soldier with a similar story:

> I was assigned to dig trenches around Pul e Charkhi by bulldozers, everyday. Every night after 8 p.m., shackled prisoners would be brought there. Three commanders then tied their feet with short ropes and threw them in the trenches. I would then refill the trenches with the soil I had dug and would bury them alive. (Afghanistan in the Last Five Centuries, 963)

[2] PDPA intelligence agency was called AGSA *da Afghanistan da Gato Satanie Adara* (The office of protecting Afghan interests) in Pashto. This name was later changed to KAM *Kometaie Amniat e Meli* (national intelligence committee), and finally to KHAD *Khadamat e Amniat e Meli* (governmental security service). Hafizullah Amin, Asadullah Sarwary, Asadullah Amin, Najibullah, and Ghulam Farooq Yaqoubi were the heads of this gruesome office from 1978 to 1992.

[3] Asadullah Sarwary was one of the air force commanders of PDPA. He had studied in Soviet Union and had an active role in Daud Khan's coup against Zahir Shah and Communist Coup against Daud Khan. In the beginning of communists' rule, he committed many heinous atrocities as the head of intelligence. In the inner party conflict within PDPA, he supported Noor Mohammad Taraki against Hafizullah Amin and was therefore fled to Soviet Union during Amin's rule. He returned back with the Red Army and was appointed as the deputy prime minister during Babrak Karmal, and then the Afghan Ambassador to Mongolia. In 1992, he was captured by Ahmad Shah Massoud and was put to trial during Karzai's government. In the court he was sentenced to death, but his execution never took place and in 2009 he was released from prison.

many months away, and only during the night. He would stay for a few days hidden inside the house, lest he be seen. This secrecy had also affected my relationship with neighboring kids; I stopped visiting my neighbor's houses or talking to other children, because I was directed by my elders to not talk to anyone about anything. I was being taught the concept of secrecy, which I would later learn is the twin brother to deceit, to hypocrisy, and to duplicity.

The biggest, most dreadful massacre in the history of contemporary Afghanistan took place in Western city of Herat, the ancient home of our greatest poets and mystics. It was the 15th of March 1979. The people were demonstrating against the brutality of the PDPA regime, when the regime asked for help and the Russians dispatched tanks and soldiers from the garrisons, and planes from Turkmenistan, to put down the protest. More than twenty four thousand people were killed and their corpses left on the street.

The uprising in Herat and the regime's brutal response overshadowed all other conversation among families. Till then, my father and relatives had refrained from talking about these events in front of us; however, after the revolution in Herat they seemed to have resigned themselves to the fact that there was no point in trying to hide what was happening. Now, they would talk openly about all that was happening.

And many things were happening. The Chendawol uprising was only a few months later. On the 23rd of June 1979, my uncle took me downtown to my father's office. Since my father had gone my uncle was managing his office, just two kilometers from the presidential palace. It was near midday that the uproar caught our attention. My uncle, who had seemed on edge since the first days of the coup, immediately closed down the office and dragged me out with him. We ran down the stairs and then down the road to our home. We would later learn that the residents of a neighborhood called Chendawol had launched a protest against the government and now the government army had brutally put it down.

At that time, most of the people who lived and worked in Chendawol were members of one of two minorities, the Qezlbash, and Hazaras—the group my family and I belong to—and later, Afghan historians recorded that on that day, thousands of 'flat-nosed' were captured and executed without trial.[4]

Then less than a month later, came The Revolt of Bala Hesar, when a group of devout Muslim officers from the previous regime who were against the regime's communist ideology, protested in southeast Kabul. The government against reacted brutally, using tanks and planes to put down the revolt. More than 1,200 soldiers and officers were killed that day. It is said that in both uprisings, the new regime's vice president, Hafizullah Amin, had authorized his army to use lethal force to put down the protestors.

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[4] Mir Mohammad Sediq Farhang describes Chendawol revolution, "After the incident, government's vengeance started. Security forces were positioned along Maiwand Road and inspected every person, and separated Hazaras, or as they called it "Flat-nosed"s, from others and slaughtered them…. The total number of people killed either during the revolution or hung afterwards is estimated to be around 10,000, mostly Hazaras and Qezelbashes in Kabul. (Afghanistan in the Last Five Centuries, 992)

Hafizullah Amin, came from a district in northwestern Kabul, and held an M.D. in education from Columbia University, and a doctoral degree from Columbia University Teachers College. He was the chief architect of the communist coup. The PDPA would later say that there was a coup was planned for several months later, but when the president launched a surprise roundup of senior PDPA members, they realized they had to act. Amin, with police already in his house to take him away, just moments away from his arrest, managed to dispatch a message through a house servant to two army officers, ordering them to initiate the coup. The next day, they did.

Hafizullah Amin was brutal and ambitious. A little over a year after the coup, he killed the first president of PDPA, by smothering him with a pillow in one of the presidential palace rooms, and then[5] secretly burying him in an area near eastern Kabul. Right up until killing him, Amin publicly regarded himself as Taraki's "loyal student."

Later, his opponents inside the communist party, led by the future president Babrak Karmal[6] accused Amin of spying for the CIA, citing his stay in the United States. According to documents revealed during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, the KGB used the same allegation against Amin, to justify his assassination. For the Soviets, who were sending an army to Afghanistan, Amin was too ambitious, too unruly, and too difficult to work with.

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[5] Peter Tomson, former U.S. ambassador and special envoy to Afghanistan, describes the last moments of Taraki's life, "……………………………………………………………" (The Wars of Afghanistan, 158-59)

[6] Babrak Karmal was the leader of "Parcham" faction of PDPA. PDPA was divided into two factions: "Khalq" and "Parcham". In the Decade of Democracy, Khalq and Parcham were the names of two journals, published by these two factions. Later, each of these factions was called by the name of its respective journal. The leadership of Khalq Faction was mainly constituted by Pashtuns of south and southeast Afghanistan, while Parcham was led by Farsi speakers and urban dwellers. Babrak Karmal eneterd Kabul with Red Army and was the president of PDPA from 1979 to 1986. He was one of the most formidable rivals of Hafizullah Amin, one of the prominent leaders of Khalq faction. Babrak Karmal fled to Moscow after he was ousted from power in 1986. Later, he lived in the border city of Hairatan for a few years and died in exile in 1996 when he was 67. He was buried in Hairatan. Taliban exhumed him body and dropped it in the river.

"I, Babrak Karmal, extend my congratulations to you—anguished comrades and fellow Muslims of Afghanistan, who lived under the yoke of barbarians like Hafizullah Amin and his followers—for the collapse of the fascist regime of Hafizullah Amin, this cruel and deceitful dictator; this spy of American imperialism."

— First public radio announcement of Babrak Karmal, 27th December 1979

2
The Incursion

On Thursday, the 27th of December 1979, there was a battle at Darulaman Palace[7]. That night was a dreadful night. The spectacle of it all—bullets exploding like thunder and the sight of them flying back and forth like fire—tempted us to come outside, but the terror kept us in.

Later than night, Babrak Karmal's distinctive voice emerged from the radio. He called Hafizullah Amin vulgar names, a bloodthirsty monster. We later learned that the broadcast came from a Soviet military base in Uzbekistan, and was relayed on Afghan radio station waves so that we all could hear. For two straight hours, the state run radio station was in a state of total mayhem. Some of the prerecorded programs had yet to be removed, so they continued as usual, extolling the virtues of Hafizullah Amin as president and commander in chief; then Babrak Karmal would come back on to celebrate the end of Amin's tyrannical regime. Back and forth the conflicting messages went, until 9:30pm.

By dusk the next day, the streets of Kabul were full of Red Army tanks and soldiers.

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A fog of fear and doubt settled over the city, growing thicker and more ominous each passing day. People were filled with suspicion, and avoided each other on the streets. All seemed to dread something unknown. As days and weeks passed, we began to see signs of displeasure with the new regime. Soon, leaflets filled our driveways, left by unseen messengers; these leaflets came to be known as "night letters." We would collect them and give them to our elders, who would quickly pass them on to others. Then the letters would be torn apart and burned.

Sometimes, we would secretly read these letters before handing them on. They contained updates about new uprisings against the new communist regime, and about secret operations by militant opponents known as the Mujahedeen. Other times, the night letters invited people to join the resistance against the communist invaders.

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[7] Darulaman palace is situated in the southwest of Kabul. Ordered by Amir Amanullah, the palace was built by German architects in 1920. Hafizullah Amin relocated the presidential palace here. It was also in this palace that he was slain by KGB Special Forces. The palace was used as the Ministry of Defense in the 1980s. Later, General shahnawaz Tani organized his unsuccessful coup against Najibullah from this palace. The palace was completely destroyed during the civil wars.

There was news about jihad, rebellion, and soldiers defecting to the Mujahedeen on a daily basis. Outside on the streets, there remained a fog, menacing and frightful, as suspicion and apprehension continued to pervade the city. Inside the houses, however, things had changed. Fear among family members had been replaced by trust. Family members once again chatted compassionately and shared their stories and concerns. They no longer hid what was happening from the children. And everyone had similar stories to share—be they factual or embellished—about government abuses, the Mujahedeen heroics, and the Red Army brutality, and since everyone needed to hear these stories, no one had reason to doubt them.

Though I was only nine years old, with such an atmosphere of intrigue, I was gradually, but perhaps inevitability, drawn away from childhood hobbies and games, and pushed into the world of politics. I no longer played marbles, ran kites and snuck through the gardens in our neighborhood. Now, just like the adults, I was consumed with rescuing my country from invaders. One of my classmates, Naqib Shirzad, whose brother was politically active, would secretly write poems against the Regime and Soviet Russia on the blackboard. When the class would see his writings, there was always chaos, teachers coming to curse and beat everyone. Even though he wrote in secret, I knew it was him. He was a close friend of mine, and we shared our naïve observations about what was going on around us. It was as though we were both proud members of the resistance movement. We whispered poems under our breath, insulting the Soviets or their puppet regime in our country: "O' *Rusa* get out of our land, or may you drown in your own blood"; "if you take one step forward, I will crush your feet", and....

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Naqib's brother was a tall young man. I don't recall whether he was a high school or university student, but I remember that he was animated and dynamic. I liked him personally, and admired him for his courage. The last time I ever saw him was on a highway near my house. He had pulled his Chinese bicycle over when he saw my uncle and I, gave us a spirited update on the resistance. He waved his clenched fist in the air, as if he might drive us to join the resistance by the very fervor of this monologue.

The next day we heard of his arrest—Naqib told me coolly, as though he had turned into a full-fledged combatant himself and regarded his brother's incarceration as something natural.

A while later, my uncle Wahid, who was about to graduate from medical school, quit his studies to live a clandestine life. At the same time, my aunt's husband Ali Khan went into hiding, staying in a secluded room in our house. Both Wahid and Ali Khan had been forced into these new, hidden lives, because of their opposition to the current regime. Wahid and Ali Khan would meet secretly in our house, chatting quietly for a while, then parting, and doing it again the next day. I didn't know what they were discussing, so I had no way of knowing what was about to happen.

On the 19th of February 1980, the city reverberated with the shouts of "Allahu Akbar". My cousin, I, and other children joined them, shouting "Allahu Akbar" and slogans such as "A Muslim's silence is his betrayal of Quran!" from the roofs. We shouted and shouted until we lost our voices. When I look back, I realize this was the moment I learned a lesson that would be

relevant again and again throughout my life: how a simple message can mobilize masses of people, but that doesn't mean they really understand the meaning of what they're up to.

For three nights this went on, until the 22nd of February, when thousands of people rallied on the streets of Kabul against the Red Army and its puppet regime. The response was ruthless. Both the Red Army and regime soldiers came out to crush the protestors, planes flew over head and soldiers fired upon the people from bases all around the city. The people were suppressed on that day, but news of the uprising and the brutal crackdown ignited subsequent rebellions around the country, spread around the world, and set in motion a new phase of resistance which would continue for nearly a decade, and eventually, after many lives were lost, end with the Red Army leaving Afghanistan.

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That spring, my father brought horrible news from Ghazni: Our cousin, despite being a very powerful man and the head of a clan, had been attacked, stabbed, and bludgeoned to death, along with his brother and two sons, by a mujahedeen commander named Sayed Qasim. My father had learned from shepherds about the attack, but he told us that it had taken him several days of searching for the dead bodies, and finally, some villagers helped him find the corpses on a mountain more than twenty kilometers from the house where they'd been attacked. My father and some villagers had to carry the bodies back to the village on donkeys and horses, and buried them in the village cemetery.

Once we heard of how Sayed Qasim had so brutally murdered our family members, we began hearing more and more stories of the carnage he was responsible for. I heard stories of him slaying dozens of people who had sought refuge in the countryside after fleeing the brutality and oppression of the Communist regime. Then there was Mullah Kaka, another person who butchered anyone he even suspected of going to school, being a Communist. People wearing pants, people being clean shaven, or any sign that they were urban people was evidence enough that they were communists and therefore atheist. He killed countless numbers of them without a second thought. All these stories painted an image of the Mujahedeen as terrifying, brutal monsters. In my mind, I saw them with always with serious expressions, carrying deadly weapons.

Despite all the atrocities in the villages, my father still thought the city wasn't safe. Life under the Communists and the "the brogans of the Soviet invaders" was intolerable. In the summer of 1980, my mother and siblings joined my father in the Central Highlands. I stayed behind to finish fifth grade; I would join them after the school year.

I arrived in Ghazni just before the winter's first snowfall, and it turned out, just before the Soviets launched a massive military campaign in Ghazni. They deployed thousands of soldiers and hundreds of tanks, aircraft and pieces of artillery to crush the resistance. Though our village was more than one hundred kilometers from the main front, hundreds of people fled their homes for the surrounding mountains, for fear of the Soviet's by then well-known penchant for indiscriminate violence.

The Red Army quickly vanquished the front and marched towards us, sending fear through our village. They stopped before getting to us, though, having become satisfied that their destruction was so total the rebellion had no chance of taking root again. But it backfired. The carnage didn't dissuade the resistance but inflamed it. There was no doubt left that the Soviets could not be tolerated. Resistance movements began to sprout up all over Ghazni with more frequency even than before the Red Army's attack.

In the spring of 1981, the Soviet launched another attack on the Ghazni Front. Once more, they sent thousands of troops, hundreds of tanks, and bombers, crushing the resistance and killing and maiming hundreds of people. But again, the campaign lasted for only a few weeks, before the Red Army pulled most of its reinforcements back to Kabul. And again, the resistance against the invaders and their puppet agents persevered, in spite—or maybe because—of the Red Army's brutality. Anyone who was able would go to the front to fight, or send whatever money, food or supplies they could spare. And as the resistance continued, I was coming to realize that this new environment was defining my life, and would come to shape my future.

My family did not dare send me back to Kabul to continue my studies. It was as if there were a choice between my survival, and my education, and to them, the right option was obvious. My school routine was substituted with one of a shepherd; instead of spending my days worrying about schoolwork and pleasing my teachers, I became one of the dozens of kids in my village chasing sheep and cattle around all day long. However, there was one main difference between my peers and I. Although I was learning this new village life, I had come from a different world, one in which I'd had classmates from various ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian backgrounds. The fusion of these two different worlds—one full of different people and ideas, and one full of people who all believed the same thing, and looked the same way—had formed something strange and wonderful. It was the inception of a new worldview, one that would later allow me to move easily between villagers and city people.

My most indelible memories from the period were the times I would meet the Mujahedeen fighters. They came to our village in groups of twenty to thirty people, most wearing black and white stoles which they called "cherieky" [8] headscarves. They wore military uniforms and proudly held their guns either in their hands or on their shoulders. These groups of Mujahedeen were a spectacle for me, since back in Kabul, I'd heard many stories about their exploits. I did not fear them any longer, and had eventually grown accustomed to the strange way they acted, and the strange way they came up with names for themselves to celebrate their own heroism.

One night, my father invited a group of them to a feast at our house. I spent the whole evening studying their behavior. One of the group members, who, by the way he bossed the others around and the amount he talked seemed to be a commander, spoke excitedly of names that were entirely new to me; Plato and Aristotle were two that he repeatedly quoted. I didn't know anything about the two names; but I could tell that they were revered figures, so naturally I admired the people using their names in conversation. Later, when I myself joined the resistance, I came across this man I'd been so impressed with that night years before, and realized he was actually a simple-minded man, not educated beyond a first or second grade level.

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[8] Guerilla militants

The lower ranking soldiers had been even less educated than their commander, but they had all picked up a few words in their travels, and used them to ostentatiously distinguish themselves from their audience.

Once, my dad brought with him a very funny story. He had been on his way to the next village to see his uncle when he came across a group of Mujahedeen whose families he knew. He asked the men where they were coming from, where they wanted to go, and what their names were, but they responded in a bizarre manner: "Guerillas don't have one place; no one knows guerillas' destination; guerillas do not reveal their names."

New names were entering into our folklore, as we heard stories of fighters who had given themselves names like "Shirjang," meaning "War Lion," Paykarjo (Battle seeker) and Shahab (Shooting star). Some of these names became jokes when people gathered to share stories in the mosques. One reaction when one of these strange, overstated tk names came up in a story soon became a common joke that I never repeated, but which, for obvious reasons, stuck in my eleven-year old mind: "The Donkey's Cock is bigger than the Donkey."

Despite how people made fun of them, these names did represent portals into different worlds, beyond the traditional boundaries these people had always known.

However it was not just jokes, but also legends of war and resistance that had come to occupy people's minds, and inform their conversations. It was said that when Mujahedeen were martyred fighting the Soviets, their bodies wouldn't decompose for months, but instead were miraculously preserved. The most legendary mujahedeen stories came from "Sayeds," a name for people who claim to be descendants of Prophet Mohammad. It was said that after the martyrdom of Sayed Waiz, the leader who first started the armed resistance against the communist regime in Ghazni, a light from his corpse shined up to the night sky. And it was said that when the Soviet tanks fired, another prominent Sayed, commander Jaghlan would catch the bullets in his shirt and throw them back at the tanks, obliterating them all; that he appeared in several places at once, in Pajshir with an army of soldiers in uniforms colored the dark green of Islam, at the same time he was fighting the Soviets hundreds of miles away in Qarabagh and slaying infidel Soviet soldiers in Khost. We heard that when Russian bombers attacked the Front, their bombs went into the stoves and burned like firewood; others said that flocks of white birds would fly under the warplanes so that pilots couldn't see their targets. It seemed to us that both God and nature had aligned to protect and empower the mujahedeen.

Fantastic as these stories were, no one dared question their credibility. And I too, still in my childhood, was enticed by them, and dreamt to be alongside Mujahedeen someday, to witness all these amazing scenes for myself.

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Then came the day that would change everything. It was the beginning of summer, 1982 and I was jolted from my sleep by an earsplitting explosion. A rocket had exploded just ten meters from the room in which some my family members and I were sleeping. Then came a volley of more rockets and bombs, and the roar of aircraft engines just overhead. Our village was fenced

off from the outside world by tall mountains, and was more than hundred kilometers from the front—it made no sense that the Soviet army would attack this far south.

We ran out of the house full of confusion and fear, and all around us there was chaos. Stable doors had been busted open by frightened cattle that had broken free of their restrains. The shrill of children and wails of women came from every direction, and amidst all of this, my only memory is my father coming and yelling at my youngest uncle and I to leave the village as fast as we could.

Behind our village there was a creek that ran down from the mountains, and we waded upstream, hiding below the banks, until we had snuck all the way to the mountains, which we began to climb. The whole time, we could hear behind us the valley reverberating with the sound of military aircraft, explosions, and the thrum of helicopters settling down to let out troops. We had fled the house at five o'clock in the morning, and didn't stop until two in the afternoon, when we reached the top of the mountain and could see the village.

From that thousands of feet up, the village seemed calm; by then there were no more sounds of explosions, and no aircraft or soldiers in sight. We decided that now it was safe, so slowly, we began going back down the mountain. Back in the village, we found dead bodies, and injured people lying on the ground, still untended nine hours after the attack begin. Many houses had been totally destroyed by Russian bombs and rockets—one of the world's deadliest armies had come and gone, and here were the traces they'd left behind.

Soviet soldiers had gunned down two people from our neighboring village in front of their families. One of the victims was my father's cousin. His death was a calamity for his wife and children. Today, his family lives close to my home, and they still remind me of the atrocities the Soviet army and their Afghan colleagues carried out in those years. For months after that attack, shepherds and farmers would find unexploded mines that the Soviet army had scattered during their attack. Once, one of these mines detonated in a farm where my uncle worked and injured several farmers. We never found out what the Soviets hoped to accomplish by dispersing these cursed little things, which couldn't discriminate between a soldier and a civilian, or even a child.

On the day our village was attacked, my father began to think he would have to send me out of the country. He told me, "Here is no longer a safe place to live. You must go." My mother also preferred that I stay alive, even if it meant being far from her.

"One shall always love his country, but when living in the homeland stay costs his dignity, it is better for him to leave. His reasons for leaving the country shall not be condemned because it does not stem from callousness or cowardice but rather from a duty to be fulfilled."

— Pope Celestine V, quoted from *The Story of a Humble Christian,* by Ignazio Silone

3
Vagrancy

On the day I was born, my father wrote the date on the inside cover of an old Quran – 15th November 1969. That would make me only 12 years old when I had to leave Afghanistan alone, but for two distant cousins, Khan who also had to flee. "Khan will protect you, and will not let you fall prey to the Soviets," my father told me in order to comfort me, just as we were bidding farewell. Thus, I crossed the border into Pakistan, hoping for no more than to survive.

In Pakistan I would become a different person, with views and opinions foreign to my father, but even if he could have anticipated how this time would change me, I believe he would have sent me anyway without a second thought. To him, it was a simple choice: His eldest son could stay in Afghanistan and die, or flee to Pakistan and survive.

My father was a devout man and decisive in the face of risk, and I know these two things informed his decision to send me on this journey. He believed God would care for me, and anyway he had always, and *would* always, support action when facing risky circumstances.

Our destination on this perilous journey was a hotel in Mali Bagh, an area in the center of the city of Quetta. Khan was familiar with the hotel, because he was friends with the people who were living there—I would later learn that this hotel was a base for members of SAMA,[9] a political organization commonly known to be Maoist.

A heated discussion was going on in the room where we were cordially greeted. One of the people engaged in the debate was a clean-shaven man in his early 30's with bright eyes and striking features, named Qaseem Akhgar[10]—a man who would come to greatly influence my life.

[9] SAMA *Sazman-e Azadibakhsh-e Mardom-e Afghanistan* (Afghanistan People's Liberation Organization) one of the Maoist parties in Afghanistan, founded by Majid Kalakani and some of his peers in the first days after PDPA coup. This organization soon burgeoned in urban circles under the astute leadership of Majid Kalakani. In his "Afghanistan Under Soviet Domination" Anthony Hyman mentions the number of its members to be around 8,000 people. Hailing from Kalakan in Parwan province, Majid Kalakani had spent most of his life in exile or in prison because of his opposition to the monarchy. He was admired among many people for his feelings of freedom fighting. Due to the treason of one of his companions, Majid was captured in 1980 and was later executed along with 19 other central members of SAMA by Babrak Karmal regime. After Majid, his brother, Qayoum Rahbar assumed the leadership of SAMA. He too was killed in Peshawar in 1990 by anonymous attackers.

[10] Qaseem Akhgar is one of the few intellectuals who follow the thoughts of Dr. Ali Shariati, prominent Iranian writer, and is widely respected among Afghan intellectuals. Like other followers of Shariati, he

I was not introduced to him that night, but I was struck by the way he spoke fervently, and with a wry sense of humor he invoked frequently. His witty remarks were stimulating for me as a kid who had just fled war and strenuous life in the mountains. Not just his style of speaking but his appearance, his dark, olive-colored skin and his piercing eyes—set him apart from the others. He had the original Kabuli accent that I had not heard since I'd had to quit school in Kabul, two years before.

Besides Akhgar, there were others among our greeters, some of whom I recognized. They had come to a district close to us in the Central Highlands for a quick operation earlier that year. They had come to try and join the fight against the Soviets, but the Mujahedeen groups that ruled our area didn't want them there, so they fought against them, calling them "Sholayi"—followers of Mao Zedong, the leader of the communist revolution in China.

For me this was all unfathomable. I saw these newcomers as literate and knowledgeable people who were different than the rest of Mujahedeen in their clothing, behavior, and speaking. They were more refined, more polite, and to me, more impressive than the simple minded Mujahedeen I commonly saw in my village. There were eight or nine of them when they first came to our house in their vagrancy, and my father agreed to host them both because one of my uncles was affiliated with the group, and also because of tribal ties between my father and the men. That day all villagers gathered in our house to see these new guests. One was a short man with long hair whose glasses repeatedly slipped off his nose despite his concerted efforts desperation to keep them still. This man appeared to be the spokesperson; he talked with a wild energy and waved his clenched fists in the air. My uncle was taken with this man; standing beside me, he kept turning to me to say, "what a mind!" This fugitive group returned to our house on several occasions, often in the middle of the night, and always I would greet them with milk and buttered bread.

Now that I was in Mali Bagh, it felt as though they had all decided to repay the hospitality my family had offered them in their bleakest moments. They welcomed me with hugs and kisses, and made me feel like I was at home. The morning I arrived I met Engineer Ali, the short man who had captivated me with his words that first day the men came to our house. He greeted us warmly and kissed our heads, his trademark gesture.

The next day Engineer Ali took us to a vocational training center for Afghan refugees, to show me where I might learn some marketable skills. We went into the building but were not even seated when all of a sudden, Khan burst into tears. He could hardly speak through his tears, and only managed to whimper, "comrade Arif is no longer among us." The moment he said this,

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deems jurisprudence as the main factor for deviation in Islam and advocates accepting Islamic role models during prophet Mohammad. Akhgar did not succeed in his endeavors to organized a political organization with revolutionary Shia objectives, but has been a role model for many freedom fighters in Afghanistan. Ethnically, Akhgar belongs to Bayats of Afghanistan, who are said to have come to Afghanistan with the army of Sultan Mahmoud Ghaznavi, prominent Turk conqueror, and Nadir Afshar, famous Iranian King. After the collapse of Taliban, Akhgar started 8am newspaper in Kabul, which is regarded as one of the most successful newspapers in Afghanistan.

everyone in the room started weeping. I, however, was dumbfounded. I knew Khan. I also knew the people in the room. But I had no idea who this "comrade Arif" was.

The weeping went on for a while, until Khan finally began to tell the story. It was then that I realized that "Comrade Arif" was the *nom de guerre* of a young man from our area named "Kazim," who I knew well, and who was murdered in front of his family and relatives by one of the Mujahedeen. Kazim was a brave and enlightened person who was known for his knowledge and wisdom, and his murder brought sorrow to many. Afterwards, it was said he was also "Sholayi,"—Maoist—and the reason for his death was that the local Mujahedeen did not like his ideas.

For the entire time we spent at the vocational training center, all they talked about was Kazim, his murder, and its consequences. On and on they talked, until finally around noon, we returned back to Mali Bagh.

The next day when I woke for prayer, much to my consternation, I found that my roommates were staying asleep, and simply skipping their prayers. This took me by surprise. I had always, on my own, woken to pray with the rest of the family member. My father never had to call for me to get up for morning prayers, and was proud of me for this trait. He would brag about me for this in front of his friends. But here, it seemed things operated differently. My roommates started calling me "Sufi" because I woke up early in the morning for prayer. And despite the fact that everyone accepted me as a member of the group and showed me kindness and support, this nickname, and the group laughter that rose whenever someone used it, caused a new feeling in me—that of being a stranger.

However, the memory of being called "Sufi" and the resulting ridicule taught me an important lesson about the so-called revolutionary movements in my country. It was as if they never cared to attribute any value to their audience, or to use constructive means of educating them. It seemed like to them, ridiculing and taunting meant being different, being a revolutionary. This was how they initiated me into the circle of so-called "revolutionary intellectuals".

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Everyone in Mali Bagh called Qaseem Akhgar by the honorific "Agha Sahib," so I also came to know him by this name. But despite the authority he had, he also maintained a sense of humor. Some mornings when we woke up, we would find one shoe from each pairs missing. Everyone knew that Agha Sahib had done it. He would wake up before the rest of us, and throw some of our shoes on the roof. Other mornings he would sneak into the room we slept in and silently yank the blankets off of us, so that everyone would see the unfortunate places their hands were, or the funny positions their bodies had taken as they slept. Rarely were his pranks repeated; every day he took us by a new surprise. Despite these hijinks—and maybe because of them—he was liked and respected by all.

I soon found out that despite the authority and status he enjoyed, Akhgar was a guest here like the rest of us, not a host. He had fled from Iran because of his opposition to Ayatollah Khomeni,

and lived secretly in Pakistan. Later I found out that he had published an article in Iran criticizing Ayatollah Khomeini's motto "neither east nor west" in a pro-Kohmeni party periodical, and it was speculated he had been expelled from the organization and pursued because of his writing.

The people who had given shelter to Akhgar—the same who had welcomed me—were some of his personal friends from an organization founded by Afghan Maoists in the initial days of resistance against the pro-Soviet government in Kabul.

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My happiness in Quetta was short-lived. I finished the vocational training program, and before I knew it, I was working in sweatshops to make a living; I worked in tailor shops, as a carpenter, in a candy factory, hotels, a bakery, and on construction sites. I was "surviving," as my father wished, but my life was not much more than that.

The candy factory introduced me to child exploitation and humiliation. Alongside me were many children working in the factory, sweeping floors, emptying the trash, and collecting hot candy that would stick to our hands and burn our flesh from the sizzling stone molds, all for just a few dollars per month. The conditions were exacerbated by the constant insults from the owner and the other employees, but we all tolerated these miseries because none of us had any alternative.

The bakery introduced me to yet another type of blight devastating my society, a kind of abuse destructive to young people but hidden behind the curtain of modesty. The bakery belonged to one of my relatives, so I was spared the worst of their mistreatment. But in the six months that I worked and lived in the bakery, I witnessed a mistreatment of young people that left a bitter memory, and has haunted me all my life. The men who ran the bakery taunted women who came in; there was a nine-year old girl they took special pleasure in harassing, and they used sexual violence as a way to dominate their younger workers. I was appalled by the behavior in the bakery, but without the words or understanding to really challenge it, I responded in the best way I could—I was rude, I acted aloof, and I spoke back to them every chance I got, showing dissatisfaction as best I could. But those six months devastated me.

It was in these environments that socialism began to seem like a good idea. Friends of mine had introduced me to Marxist thought, but it was in that candy factory, and in that bakery, that these ideas began to resonate.

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My confrontation with this environment soon grew beyond just childish insolence. Not only did I want to break free of this environment, I decided I would try and reform it myself.

First, I was drawn to the world of books. Any free time I had, I read books, and in them I sought the people who shared my fate. Soon the bakery backroom, where I lived, was filled with books. *Sociology* by the Iranian writer Ahmad Qasimi, was required reading for leftists in Iran and Afghanistan, and my introduction to the concept of social strata. It had been given to me by Maoists when I first arrived in Pakistan, but I hadn't really understood it. Now, after my

experiences in the candy factory and bakery, it was as if the book described my own situation. I was a member of the group Qasimi called the “laborers and slaves”, and I did not care about the ideologies, religions, and races of the people Qasimi described; I could relate to them.

It was around that time that I learned about Spartacus. I found the book by Howard Fast and read it full of excitement. I memorized Spartacus’s letter to the Roman Senate and would recite it to myself whenever I was alone. And I discovered *Mother* by Maxim Gorky, *Les Misérables*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, and …

These books introduced me to the theories and the ideas, and soon I would find the people who embodied them; figures who taught me to be a warrior. First was Jeanne d'Arc, the French heroine, then came Ernesto “Che” Guevara who overshadowed them all. I found his memoir and accompanied him on his journey from the mountains of the Sierra Maestra to the forests of Bolivia. It was at the end of this journey that I returned to Kabul and was introduced to a Maoist thinker and guerilla named Majid Kalakani.

I got most of these books from a man named Mukhtar, who owned a small bookstore near the big mosque where everyone went for holiday prayers. Mukhtar seemed to recognize my passion for books about revolutions and those who led them, and also, he knew of my financial constraints. Once when I walked into his bookstore—which I did almost everyday—I saw that he had made a pile of books in a corner of the shop, all of them books that he knew I’d be interested in. Without fanfare, he handed me the books and told me to take them as long as I wanted, and to just bring them back whenever I was done. Mukhtar came along at a time in my life when I was alone and seeking companionship in knowledge, and his mentorship imprinted him on my mind as an important and beloved figure.

And yet I never found out what ideology or faction Mukhtar supported; he never brought it up in our discussions. He believed principally in the advancement of knowledge, and whatever class, creed, race, or ideology that knowledge belonged to was secondary to him. He saw a curious boy, and he sought to feed the impressionable mind before him.

Now, he owns a drugstore near where I live in Kabul, and I always top in when I’m in the neighborhood. In his aged and subdued face, I see the beloved person that had so selflessly nurtured me in my adolescence.

Akhgar also was a mentor through these stages of life, and I never went more than few days without sharing a new finding, or an impression about a philosopher’ analysis. And it was from Akhgar that I obtained many of the books that Mukhtar didn’t have.

It was through Akhgar that I learned about Majid Kalakani, as well as many anonymous Afghan fighters. Akhgar nurtured my reverence of Majid Kalakani and his companions. Then my uncle who came from Afghanistan, introduced me to Kalakani’s Maoist followers, a great thrill in my childhood eyes, and a turning point in my life.

"Knowledge can come from any source, even from a cheap pamphlet. However, sometimes fate, in its craftiness, arranges for you to encounter a person, a miracle. You will believe that it was just a fluke, a coincidence, and that had it not happened, you would remain in ignorance for your entire life, never knowing that there existed such peaks, colors, landscapes, scenes, such and highs and lows."

— Dr. Ali Shariati, *Kaweer*, My Idols

4
Akhgar and Rahbar: Two Mentors

My uncle was a commander in my hometown, but he left the area for Pakistan after he got into a fight with one of his rival commanders. When he arrived in Pakistan I left the bakery shop and accompanied him to Peshawar, a city in Pakistan's northwestern frontier province, that had become a staging ground for the anti-Soviet jihad. I met my uncle's friends and colleagues some of whom would later leave profound imprints on my thoughts and actions.

It was during this trip that I met Qayoum Rahbar, who had taken over the Maoest organization his brother Kalakani had started after Kalakani was assassinated. Even before I met these men I had a high impression of them, because my mentor Qaseem Akhgar would talk about him in glowing terms—even though Akghar and Rahbar came from opposite ends of the ideloagiical spectrum: Akghar was an Islamist, who had spoken of Rahbar, a leftists, in glowing terms. And I found these impressions to be borne out by my own experience upon meeting Rahbar: he was an eloquent speaker who spoke slowly and simply, but with great power. Everyone would get something out of his talks. As a mentor, he was an odd complement to Akghar: Akhgar used a humorous and poetic tone, Qayoum Rahbar was serious, composed, and thoughtful person.

I would seek out as many opportunities as I could find to meet with Qayoum Rahbar. I came to find that despite his intelligence he was a simple and humble person. He never treated me as an immature and inexperienced kid and always was compassionate and frank with me.

The juxtaposition between these two mentors—Akhgar, the Islamist, and Rahbar, the leftist—taught me a lot of things. Akhgar had never promoted his own ideologies and doctrines when we talked. I do not know the reason. Never in our conversations did he quote the Iranian Islamic scholar he followed, Dr. Ali Shariati, or instruct me to read Shariati's books. And there was another thing that puzzled me about him: How could he be religious and revolutionary at the same time? All the revolutionary intellectual types I'd been exposed to until then had been Marxists. Akhbar was a brilliant intellectual, but an Islamist. I hadn't known those two things could exist in the same person.

On the other hand, Rahbar, even though he was the leader of a leftwing Marxist party, actually had a moderating influence on my already-developing leftist political tendencies. Before meeting Rahbar I had already read books about leftwing movements, and I expected Rahbar to send me off with more. However, never once did he direct me to a Marxist book. Unlike others

under his leadership, Rahbar seemed uninterested in personally promoting the Marxist and Maoist views his organization stood for.

So between these two men with a vast gulf between their divergent ideologies, there was this one fundamental similarity—neither tried to indoctrinate me into his respective ideology. Each thought it more important that I learn to think for myself, than that I agree with him. And both encouraged me to listen to the other.

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I soon found that many Afghan Maoists knew little about the Marxist-Maoist doctrines of their own movement. Many had not even read a single book about Marxism or Maoism and had no authority on Marxist or Maoist creed; those who had read something most likely read a single irrelevant booklet that circulated, "Analysis of the Classes in Chinese Society", about the feudalistic Chinese society in the 1930s. The Afghan Maoists used the same dated analysis as the bases of their judgments about Afghan society.

This pattern of obliviousness about the origins of their own ideologies was present in nearly all of the political movements at the time. For many, membership in these movements was more about finding an identity than it was about ideological persuasion. Political movements in today's Afghanistan reflect the costs of this lack of real understanding many have of the provenance of their own ideologies.

Very few Afghan political activists, rightist or leftist, had any academic background in political science or anything related. Many of had been students of medicine, engineering, military academies, or seminaries, and most hadn't achieved high professional status than teaching in schools. I believe that this lack of political insight accounts for the negligence Afghan political activists still today demonstrate, and that the shortfall in political capacity derives from the dearth of people who have studied it.

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Although Akhgar was my mentor, and although he was a loyal follower of Dr. Ali Shariati, it was actually not Akghar that introduced me to Shariati. But it was only after reading Shariati that I truly understood where my mentor's views had come from.

Later, Akhgar wrote a booklet called *Shariati: A Versatile Response to Our Needs Through Time*, which argued that Shariati could apply to all times, and all places. But I had a difficult time accepting that a philosopher who has worked on a specific time and place—prerevolutionary Iran—could offer useful guidance elsewhere. Afghanistan, I thought, was a much different place, where Shariati's thinking would be provocative. I believed this because of an alarming experiences I'd had in the valleys of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Sharing my Shariati-influenced view on the early history of Islam had nearly cost me my life. I believed that Shariati's *Oppressors, Heretics, and Apostates* could shape the views of anyone who, in Shariati's words, possessed the basic qualities of "reasoning, dignity, and literacy." He

had, after all, shaped mine. But I had neglected the fact that people were as much driven by emotions in matters of religion as they were by reasoning, and thus, shaping people's views required appealing to their emotions, as well as to their "reasoning."

So it was that in 1990, on my way from Pakistan back to my hometown in Central Afghanistan, I offered a ride to two seminary students in a car I had rented to bring books back to my hometown. Along the way, one of the students proposed that we talk about the history of Islam and the conflict between its two sects we belonged to, Shiism and Sunnism. I was reluctant, but he insisted that since Quran encourages discussion, we should debate so that we might come to a better understanding of these issues. And, he added, it was a way to pass the time on our journey.

In my argument I used Shariati's teachings, which were forceful and drew on many sources beyond just the Quran—history, economic issues, politics—whereas my opponent had only the Quran and old sacred texts to support his arguments. After two hours of intense debate, a silence fell over us. One of my guests scoffed at the other, calling him a loser, until he flew into a rage, and called me a heretic who had rejected Prophet's companions as exploitative and unjust. He swore that he would hand me to the Mullah in the first village we saw, so that I would be punished as an infidel. It wasn't until I changed tactics, using my own accusation of heresy against my opponent that he finally gave up his threat to turn me in.

Nevertheless, this experience taught me that just because Shariati's arguments were powerful, didn't mean they would translate easily into other contexts. They could agitate an Afghan just as easily as they could convince one.

But despite the fact that I had a powerful example that led me to disagree with my mentor's embrace of Shariati as a panacea for the woes of our home country, Akghar opened a window of knowledge in front of me. He pushed me to look for a deeper meaning in the world, and to be critical and analytical, not dogmatic, when it came to Islam. To be confident enough in my faith to challenge it with books, ideas, and other philosophies. And to love and fight for individual freedom. Afterwards, whenever I studied, I would be remembered the lesson of Akghar, which was to question and criticize, even when it applied to his own ideas.

Afterwords, I would come across many influential figures, people with high status, and people gifted with powerful minds. But it was these two first mentors – Qayum Rahbar, and Qaseem Akghar –who had the first and deepest impressions on my thinking.

"Pakistani Hazaras, which constitute the third biggest Hazara communities, are very different from Hazaras in Afghanistan and Iran in many respects. Unlike Hazara refugees in Iran, they have preserved all their indigenous traditions and societal structures."

— Dr. Syed Askar Mousavi, *The Hazaras of Afghanistan*

5
Hazara

Quetta is a city in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, which borders both Afghanistan and Iran. The first Hazaras settled near the end of the 19th century, during the reign of "The Iron King," Amir Abdurrahman Khan, who launched a series of massacres against the Hazara people. Fleeing Hazaras first came to Quetta because the British Indian army offered them positions as soldiers fighting against insurgencies going on there at the time, and soon the city swelled with émigré Hazaras, and they enjoyed a rather peaceful life with the support of the British-Indian administration.

The Hazaras in Quetta maintained a sense of nationalism that they had carried with them from their homeland. Hazaras, who have always struggled to find an identity and history they can be proud of, were offered a subtle but important opportunity in Quetta. Hazaras are considered by many non-Hazaras to be descended from the Conqueror Ghengis Khan—this is the explanation for their Mongloid features. Many Hazaras, however, consider this link to be a blight on their ethnic history; the idea that they are a conquered people. They believe that instead, they descended from central Asian pilgrims and Silk Road traders who predated Genghis Khan in Afghanistan.

In India, however, the Mongolian influence was not something to be ashamed of, but rather to embrace. The Mongolian legacy in India was one of more than 500 years of benevolent rule by Mughal emperors; to these leaders India owed development and prosperity, and many of its historical monuments, from the Taj Mahal to Lal Qala, the The Red Castle. Where Hazaras in Afghanistan tried to shed any Mongol legacy, those in Quetta began to eagerly claim it; in Afghanistan people often changed their names to hide their Hazara heritage, in Quetta, the opposite was happening. Surnames that reflected this newfound pride became common -- people called themselves "Hazara," "Mughal," and "Genghisi," staking a claim on their connection to Genghis Khan.

In his book *The Hazaras of Afghanistan,* Dr. Syed Askar Mousavi quotes a prominent Hazara intellectual from Quetta as saying "we know that Genghis Khan is not our real ancestor. The fact that we consider ourselves the descendants of Genghis Khan is a political rather than an ethnographical one. It earns us respect and status in the community vis-à-vis other ethnic groups in Pakistan."

To the immigrants in Quetta, their Hazaragi identity is more prevalent than their religious identity as Shias. The original settlers of Quetta, regardless of their Hazaragi or Sayed ethnic groups, identified themselves as Hazara. Many Sayeds in Quetta took on the last name "Hazara"

and prided themselves in being Hazaras—a remarkable trend given that "Sayed" implied that they were descended from the Prophet Mohammad. So while in Quetta, being Hazara was as much a source of pride as being descended from the Prophet, in Afghanistan, it was still common to hear people say, "I don't even want my dog to be a Hazara."

The rise in Hazara ethnic pride in Quetta led to a similar phenomenon in Afghanistan, and as a sense of Hazara pride grew, it came into conflict with other, non-Hazara Shias. Later, during the civil war in the 1990's, this would feed a split between these different groups of Shias—the Hazaras and the non-Hazaras. Non-Hazara Shia leaders would rile up resentments against Hazaras. Some non-Hazara Shias wrote to a prominent Ayatollah, asking him to pass judgment on marriage between others Shias and Hazaras:

"In central Afghanistan inhabit a tribe named *Hazaras*, who claim to be Shias. Although they perform all the duties obligated by Islam (praying, fasting, paying Zakat and Khums, going to Hajj, Jihad, and…), they are hideous-looking and have no physical resemblance with holy Shias. Does the Sharia authorize us, the descendants of prophet Mohammad, to have any interactions with them, to marry someone from their tribe, or to marry our daughters to them? Is it only marrying *our* daughters to *them* that is haram? Or does marrying *their* daughters also plunge us into abjection?"

With utter indifference to the insulting words in the letter, the Ayatollah had written in response:

"May the peace, mercy, and blessings of Allah be with you,
Response: It is quoted from Prophet Mohammad that whoever says the *Shahada* [oath] is a Muslim, and he is authorized to do whatever other Muslims are authorized to do."

The question of whether a non-Hazara woman could marry a Hazara man has given rise to horrible and sometimes bloody conflicts. To many, the greatest slander to their dignity was to learn that their daughter fell in love with a Hazara man, or accepted a marriage proposal from one.

Furthermore, the Hazaras of Afghanistan were usually called by disparaging names from the city dwellers or non-Hazara Shias. Some of the most recurrent of these labels included, "flat-nosed;" "mouse-eater;" "smell of raw fish;" "porter donkey," "dog's belly button."

Thus, my initial days of visit to Quetta introduced me to an entirely new concept of my own ethnic identity. On those first few days there, I was taken aback by the intensity of Hazaragi sentiments in the city. The distinctive Hazaragi accent with which the people spoke was new and surprising. The walls of the city in Quetta were covered with peculiar pro-Hazara slogans, unlike anything I'd seen in Kabul. One of these slogans I became preoccupied with supported Sultan Ali Keshtmand, the prime minister of the pro-Soviet communist regime back in Kabul. It read, "Long live Sultan Ali Keshtmand, the pride of all Hazaras." I knew Sultan Ali Keshtmand as one of the followers of Soviets in Kabul, and a man who had therefore facilitated the presence of Russian soldiers in my country. I, in other words, thought of him as someone who had helped send me to exile, stripped from me the opportunity to study in my favorite school, and killed people in my home village. I had never thought of him as someone I should have "pride" in. I had never thought of him as someone who I should identify with, simply because he and I were both Hazara.

It was such that I learned about the concepts of "Hazara." During all the time I had lived in Kabul, I had not known anyone as a "Hazara."

Across from our house in Kabul, lived a Pashtun general who owned many goats. We often called him "the goat general." His wife did not speak a word of Farsi, but even though she didn't speak my language, I loved her as I loved my own mother. Whenever I craved some yogurt I would knock on her door, and would ask her for it, calling her "Adae" (the Pashtu word for mother), as if I were her own child. Her children, some of whom were my classmates, treated my mother in the same way. They would come to our house and call my mother "Aabay" (the Hazaragi word for "mother"), to demand some bread or tea.

I remember another Pashtun neighbor whose house shared a wall with our own. She and my mother would climb the wooden ladders on their respective sides of the wall our houses shared, and although one's native language was Pashtu and the other's was Farsi, they would spend hours chatting and laughing together. When Afghanistan T.V. Network started its broadcasts in 1978, this neighbor was the only one who owned a television set, and they welcomed us into their home, where we spent hours upon hours with them watching Indian and Pakistani films, military marches, and concerts.

But in Quetta, these memories seemed like they came from another world. I was now first and foremost a "Hazara." I was shaped by the tragic history of the Hazaras, I shared blood and destiny with them, and there was no longer any space or time for fond childhood memories of other ethnic groups. I was now detached from them.

But at the same time this identity shrunk my world, it also expanded it. Because while my ties to other ethnic groups were severed by my newfound Hazaragi identity, I now felt a kinship with persecuted peoples all over the world, and at all different times, from Hazaras in Quetta in 1982, to slaves of the ancient Roman empire, to the Cuban peasants oppressed by Juan Bautista's brutal regime. These were now all my brothers.

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There was a whole new collection of experiences to feed my new Hazara mindset. I learned of a writer named Mullah Essa Gharjestani, a short, fiery man who would raise his hands in the air and shake his fists while giving speeches. It was in these speeches that Gharjestani called himself "the leader of seven million Hazaras." For me, that there could be *that many* of us was a brand new idea, but according to Gharjestani, it was a conspiracy by Pashtuns to suppress Hazaras by calling them only 2% of the population of Afghanistan, a tiny minority unworthy of any influence. But if there were seven million of us, as Gharjestani claimed, that would be at least a quarter of the population. It was time, according to him, that we Hazaras demand more power.

And there was another part of this new Hazara identity—we were different from other Muslims, because we were *Shia*. It was in Quetta that I witnessed public celebrations of *Ashura* for the first time, an experience that shocked me. Thousands of people poured on the streets, chanting

elegies about the martyred Shia saint Imam Hussain, and beating their chests. One of the most spectacular events in these celebrations was the exhibition of a horse named *Zoljinaha*, said to be descended from the horse Hussain himself had ridden. When the sacred horse was led into the streets, the mourners reached out to touch it and cried, “Zoljanah, Zoljanah, what happened to poor Hussein?”

Also it was then that I first witnessed the use of weapons to celebrate this Shia holiday. The mourners would carry a wooden handle connected to chains with blades affixed to the ends, and as they marched, the mourners would use these weapons to beat themselves, tearing the flesh from their own backs. I saw one man beating himself so badly that he collapsed in convulsions, blood gushing from his wounds. Still he did not let go of the weapon. And when people came to take it from his hands, a cleric stopped them. “Don’t deprive him of his love for Hussein,” the cleric said. The man died of blood loss that day.

This was the beginning of my experience of religious fanaticism, and the memory of the dying man convulsing on the ground haunted me for years.

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In 1985 Quetta experienced a major turning point. For the first time Hazaras of Quetta came face to face with the Pakistani army. Some kind of trivial incident sparked a rage among Hazaras. Still I do not know what happened to first cause this rage, but whatever it was, it was exploited by the clergy in Quetta, who provoked resentment amongst the people for the government. Hundreds of Hazaras stampeded through the streets, starting fires and throwing rocks at the police. The protestors cried anti-government slogans and attacked the police stations in the area. The Pakistani army soon became involved in order to bring the fiasco under control, declaring an emergency state and warning that if anyone left their house without authorization, they would be shot. They encircled the area and fired at all the people who tried to leave their houses. Only after a full day of curfew did the army allow people who had been brought to their knees line up at certain shops to buy necessities.

Thus the army made plain its belief that Hazaras had violated the terms of their relationship with the military government. From now on, the military would show no restraint in punishing Hazaras for their transgression.

After the incident, several Hazara intellectuals and politicians in the city tried to bring the situation back to normal. However their attempts were undermined by the Iranian-backed clergy, which was trying to make Quetta into another foothold of Iranian regional hegemony, by connecting what was happening there to other issues, like oppression of Muslims in Palestine and the Iraq-Iran war. But the attempts were not very successful; by this time, many people had seen what happened when they listened to the clergy. They had been mercilessly crushed by the Pakistani military, and had accomplished very little. Now, when the Iranian-backed clergy tried to stir up resentments, people were not so easily convinced. For Quetta, the Sixth of July marked a break between religion and ethnicity, even though for me, the two had only just been fused.

Quetta was quickly transforming. Every day it seemed a new party sprang up as politicians tried to win a base of support among youth—mainly university students, who were among the most politically active community in Quetta. But the way the parties emerged reflected the new split between ethnic and religious identity. Soon after the student-led “Hazara” party was formed to capture ethnic-minded Hazaras, a party called “Imamia” emerged seeking adherents from the religious-minded ones.

On one of my last days in Quetta before returning to my hometown in Afghanistan, I heard that some of members of “Hazara Student Organization” had travelled to Kabul to meet the Hazara prime minister of the Soviet-backed regime, and secure scholarships to Kabul University for students from Quetta. This was a shock. Clearly, the Hazaras of Quetta were thinking in a way completely distinct from Hazaras in Afghanistan. Most Hazaras in Afghanistan considered the communist regime to be an enemy of their religion, not to mention their freedom. Many Hazaras in Afghanistan were actively fighting against the regime, while the Hazaras of Quetta were coming to ask it for favors. It was an inauspicious beginning to the Hazara Secular Community’s attempt to win outside support for their cause.

Meanwhile, for their part, the clergy would not give up in its attempt to incite the people, and would gradually win back a foothold among them. Even though Hazara intellectuals were trying to appeal to the people with their secular vision, they lacked the resources that Iran was providing the clergy, and with those resources, the clergy would ultimately pull ahead.

Secular Hazara intellectuals would not fully grasp the influence Iran was winning—through the clergy—among the common people until it was too late. Nor did the common people themselves, who were gradually falling under the spell of the Iranian-funded clergy, fully grasp the danger in the messages they were being lulled by. Just by *listening* to these messages, Hazaras would eventually become—at least in the perception of all those around them—agents of Iran. And for agents of Iran, there was no quarter. Hazaras would become suspicious to the military establishment in Pakistan, to the Wahabi state of Saudi Arabia, and even to Western countries like the United States, all of which were leery of Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary Iran.

It was only when sectarian violence erupted in Quetta that Hazaras would finally understand the risks they had taken; when anti-Iranian groups began to form with the sole purpose of turning Quetta into a killing ground for Hazaras.

By then, there would be nothing they could do about it.

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6
Home, Sweet Home!

One day in the fall of 1987, I was sitting in the study room I had in my uncle's house when my uncle came in and asked me about my association with the Maoists. He sat on the floor, while I remained behind my desk, and the discussion gradually turned into an argument. It has been he, after all, who had first introduced me to the Maoists. But he later quit the group, and had been trying for some time to persuade me to do the same.

In the heat of the debate, I accused him of lacking ideological commitment, and this *really* sparked his rage. He jumped to his feat and struck me across the face. I was shocked, he hadn't once hit me before, and I resolved at that moment that I had to leave Quetta. My mentor Qaseem Akhgar was the only person I told of my plans to leave, and he tried to convince me to stay, he wanted me to remain in Quetta to continue my studies, and he thought Afghanistan was still unsafe for me. He tried even to mediate between my own uncle and me. But I had made up my mind: I was going home.

The night before I left, I wrote a letter to my uncle and gave it to his wife, and asked her to wait until I left to give it to him. I had not held my tongue; I had not let familial relationships or my uncle's seniority prevent me from saying what I wanted to say. I had been, to be frank, rude.

I realized this only when my uncle handed me the letter several months later, upon my arrival at Quetta. I was embarrassed to reread the letter. I felt ashamed to have said these things to the person who had given me shelter and care for more than three years. In the letter, one of the sentences that probably hurt him the most was "You hit me and proved that you rely more on physical force than reasoning. Maybe that lack of reasoning is why you turned your back on your friends." Worst of all, I had told him that I would never forgive him.

When my uncle gave me the letter, he did not tell me how it had made him feel. His silence felt worse than any kind of punishment he could have given me. And I believed that this was his purpose.

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While in Quetta, I always reminisced about my verdant village back home in Afghanistan ringed by tall mountains, and about its weather, cool and temperate in the Summer, covered by pristine blankets of snow in the winter. But I was not going home for a leisure visit; when I felt my uncle's home in Pakistan was no longer a viable option for me, I had resolved to return home to help my people fight for their freedom. My patriotism was bolstered by all the books I had read and movies I had watched about revolutionary fighters leading struggles for freedom, and I was eager to partake in the resistance. However, I was yet to realize that the resistances, which came to be known as *Jihad*, was led by Islamist organization, and I had no connections with them. It

took me a year to find a link to them. I realized this the first time I met with some of the local commanders of the Nasr organization; who had already made up their minds about me: I was not one of them, since I had spent so much time out of the country, and thus had to be viewed as a stranger with suspicious beliefs. They knew Quetta to be a haven of Maoism, and so my beliefs were easily known.

By now, I was 16 years old and had spent a quarter of my life away from my home. Despite my youth I had read many revolutionary books and met with many intellectuals. I considered myself to be one of the few intellectuals in the surrounding villages, and my father thought the same about me. This was clear from the letters he had sent me while I was in Quetta. He was proud of his eldest son, and yet, he was reluctant when I told him I wanted to join the resistance. He thought me too young, and he thought the local commanders wouldn't trust me because I was not like them. And they didn't know me, because I had not been around for four years.

Winter was coming, and I had planned a few ways to kill time during the rough, snowy season, including to teach my brothers and sisters how to read and write. But I soon discovered that unlike Quetta, there was nothing in my village to read. My father was not literate, so had no books. No one in my family cared about what was happening in the world beyond the boundaries of our village. There were only a handful of people in my area who were literate, and this reality weighed down on me.

One day I found an old box that stored my father's files, and I ferreted through it to find something to read. I came across a booklet by Dr. Ali Shariati, just a few pages long, and with the vague title of "Mysticism, Equality, and Liberty."

I knew my mentor Akhgar was a disciple of Shariati, but until then, I had not read any of Shariati's works because I had no interest in religious issues—on the contrary, I sympathisized with Maoist, Marxist thought. And though I loved and admired Akghar, there was no space in my mind for "the opiate of the masses." But at that moment, this booklet on religion was the only thing that could quench my thirst for reading.

My father did not know why and how the booklet had ended up in his box; he had never even skimmed through the pages. My brothers and uncles were not interested in books and reading. Since my father had connections among Nasr organization, he suspected that one of the members of the organization had handed him the booklet to read. But he had thrown the booklet inside the box without even considering reading it.

The first few sentences of this booklet were beautifully written and drew me in. Until that moment I believed only Marxist writers could have such mastery over language – that's why I always wondered how Akhgar could read about Marxism and still hold his religious beliefs. Now, I was beginning to understand.

And though the literature drew me in, the ideas seduced me even more. Soon I was skipping through to the end to see what message Shariati was driving at. And then I read the booklet again. It was during my third of fourth time reading through the book that my father walked into

the room and found me in tears. In total surprise, he asked me what had happened. I looked at him, and back at the book, and back at him, unable to produce a response.

I do not know precisely what had happened to me, but I knew it was something momentous. Mysticism, equality, and liberty: the three sacred needs of human beings. And, here, Shariati was providing the answer to these needs: Islam, The Quran, The Prophet, and his son-in-law Ali.

This was the beginning of my "relationship" with Shariati. I searched for other people in the area who could provide me with more of Shariati's works. There was a barely-literate mason from a nearby village who had some of Shariati's works he had brought back from when he had worked in Iran.

These books kept me busy during winter. And on the first days of spring when the snow melted, I returned to Pakistan to try and find more books and information about Shariati and Islam. My uncle was pleased to see me, and Akhgar was pleased to see that I'd discovered Shariati over the winter. Unlike the past occasions, this time my discussions with Akhgar solely revolved around Islam, Shariati, and what he knew of religion and resistance.

My uncle was relieved to see a softening in my extreme allegiance to the Maoist group. He felt that now I had come to fully understand his views and advice. I had nothing to say in response to my uncle. Nonetheless, I believed that his growth had stopped after he realized his mistake—he had given up at that point—while I was becoming smarter and more experienced with every passing day. "My past has not been a mistake," I told him, "it was just an experience I needed to gain, and I still feel connected to that past."

When I explained to him that now that I'd studied about Islam, and no longer rejected it as just Marx's "opiate of the masses", my world had expanded, he was stunned. He could not believe that a rational person could still be religious. "By the time you mature," he teased, "the world will have come to an end."

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Although Quetta was still a place, and a haven for intellectuals, my stay there there was not meant to be long. I craved more books by Shariati and I had questions about him I needed to find answers for. After a month or two, I had what I sought, and I prepared to go back to Afghanistan where my destiny awaited me, in the form of Jihad. I stuffed my suitcases with religious books from Akghar and my old friend Mukhtar the bookstore owner, and prepared to leave Quetta again. When my uncle saw the titles of the books I was packing, he raised his eyebrows. "You are a brilliant kid", he said on the night I was leaving, "but after all I have done for you I wouldn't want to see you as a medieval person."

I knew what he meant, but I had no response.

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Toward the end of 1980, I finally got my chance I'd been waiting for to join the jihad. Several commanders from the Nasr organization travelled through our village on their way to a meeting in a nearby district. When my father learned about their itinerary, he decided to invite them for a dinner at our house. He had me write the invitation letter, and deliver it personally to their leader, Sayed Abbas Hakimi.

Hakimi was one of the most prominent figures in Ghazni. His religious knowledge was said to be unrivaled throughout the province. The members of the Nasr organization were proud to have him as a leader. The last time I had met Akhgar in Quetta, he told me that meeting Hakimi would be invaluable for me.

Hakimi accepted my father's invitation and came to our house for the night. When he entered the room where I kept my books, he was delighted, and he asked my dad who they belonged to. My father pointed at me.

Hakimi skimmed through many of my books, but Shariati's books seemed the most interesting to him. He asked me about my views on Shariati. Most clergy like Hakimi took pride in knowing, and rejecting, Shariati's ideas. He challenged me on Shariati's merits, while I defended Shariati's position on Islam. Our discussion went late into the night, and on into the next day he asked my dad to lend me his horse, so that I could accompany them to the front. My father was thrilled—even though I was heading into harm's way, he was proud of my new relationship with this prominent clerical and political figure.

Hakimi took me to the meeting, where the Nasr party gathered to decide how they would deal with the impending Red Army withdrawal from Afghanistan. But the meeting was less exciting to me than the trip there and back with Hakimi, where I got to learn from his views on everything from Afghan politics to Ayatollah Khomenei.

When we returned from the meeting, Hakimi asked my father if I could accompany him on another trip, this time to the front. And my father, proud of my association with Hakimi, granted permission.

On this trip, Hakimi made me an offer: If I helped him with his recently-founded school in his home village near the front, he, in return, would mentor me in Arabic literature and religious studies.

It was thus that I officially joined the mujahedeen, and became apprentice to the great Sayed Abbas Hakimi.

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As the Soviet were preparing to withdraw from Afghanistan, a myriad of heinous memories and images came to the fore and brought me to my knees. The Communist Coup had propelled me into an early adulthood with a horrendous shock, and now after ten years, as the Red Army set to leave, it was as if they uncovered all the horrors that had accumulated for me during their presence.

I remembered the first time I tramped across the Argon valley in the southern province of Paktia. The Argon was one of the most beautiful and verdant valleys in Afghanistan, but I did not see a single wall in the Valley's villages, for hundreds of miles, that had made it through the wars unscathed.

I remember one trip to Pakistan. When we travelled across the countryside, we would wait for dusk, so that the vehicles could move without being seen, and then when darkness fell, we would start, driving with no lights on, and spaced out 15 to 20 minutes so that it wouldn't sound like a convoy. One evening, I was in car behind a big lorry, which was divided by wood to make it double-decked. Eighty or 100 refugees were crammed into the truck, trying to escape towards Pakistan. I remember there was a girl, maybe eleven years old, wearing a yellow dress embroidered with white flowers. She hung on to the bar at the back of the lorry, and the wind ruffled her hair over her shoulders. Sun was directly shining on her face and she and her dress glittered in the sunlight, and occasionally she turned towards her companions and laughed, which made her seem even prettier. When dusk fell, my vehicle followed hers, keeping a space of twenty minutes between.

We were just about to enter a turn in the valleys of Paktia when an aircraft roared over our head, and we slammed on the breaks. A few minutes after, a heavy explosion reverberated across the valley. When finally we started up again and reached the scene, all that was left of the lorry was a heap of metal. The passengers were reduced to body parts and fractured bones scattered all around. It was a scene from the hell. We stopped there until the next morning, but no one dared look at the scene that laid before us. But I couldn't help it. I found the pretty girl I had seen the previous day, now nothing but pieces of flesh and protruding bones a few meters away form what was left of the truck, and torn pieces of the yellow dress, with white flowers.

I never found out why the aircraft had bombed the truck, or how many others fell prey to the Soviet army that night. It puzzled and haunted me trying to understand what Soviets and the PDPA were after, that led them to commit such atrocities. But I recall vividly that the only sentence I managed to write in my diary after the incident was, "Oh God, how helpless a human being is."

I remember meeting a mujahid in a hotel on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan, who had been ordered by his commander to feed his prisoners to dogs. The guilt had driven the man insane. His family had taken him to different shrines in Afghanistan and Pakistan hoping that he would recover, but still, he got worse each day. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw the last victim staring at him, and he constantly imagined the dogs chasing him, after his own flesh.

I remember the camps; I remember the five million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, a third of the country's population living in exile, half of the world's displaced people, all driven from their homes by the Soviet Regime. Life in exile was something terrible and complicated, an experience I would struggle to understand throughout my life. But as the Soviet forces prepared to leave, all the memories from their years of occupation were unleashed, rushing over me at the same time, and adding up to this one observation: My generation was experiencing a living hell.