

Christopher Lyke

## Disraeli Gears

There were signs of the British wars in that part of the country. Still signs, signs caught in amber, as though the passage of time was different in Afghanistan. It was as if time hadn't passed at all, not in any real way, for a hundred years. Maybe the ones on television had changed, the rich ones that schooled at Oxford and Cambridge, but here, in the mountains, in the east, nothing had changed. There were the goats and the rocks and the shit and the children and the painted boys and nothing had changed.

I have memories of a moment when I became separated from the main. It was only for a few minutes, and there are memories of worse things, bloody things, that keep buried most of the time. But this one comes whenever it wants. Just for a second, electric jolts while I'm driving, or in a moment to myself, and then I shiver and exhale and forget the feeling for a couple more days.

It was in the pitch hours between midnight and sun up. We'd walked for a few hours, through the Mayl River, over the plateau, up and through the craggy foothills of the mountain. We'd started around midnight when, a few hours later, we finally crested the last, and highest hill on our route. Once over it the valley opened beneath us and we could see a light here or there, a twinkling hearth or pit, marking the villages dotting the ridgeline. They were stepping stones that led to the Dowlat Shah and beyond, to the truly lawless place. We weren't going there yet though, that morning it was for the village of Bumby, the first village after the crest.

We'd split into two groups, looking for the passage down the mountain to reach positions over the town by dawn. My group swung like a gate down and across a section of the hillside, through the sparse trees, over the rocks that rolled with booted feet as they moved along. Trying to be quiet and then: separation. I turned back

and there wasn't anyone. It was too dark on this side of the mountain to catch enough moonlight for my night vision to work that well. Every shadow was the enemy, and They knew I was there, smelled me, could see in the dark like cats, padding from tree to tree waiting to grab me and drag me down to be lost forever, pin cushioned like the British stragglers racing for Jalalabad more than a century before.

A few months before this, before the night patrol to Bumby, we heard a bad man named Fazil Rabi was near our outpost in a place called Kanday. We surrounded the village while our comrades in arms, the Afghan National Army, along with our lieutenants, searched the buildings. We'd missed Mr. Rabi - "the Lion," the people called him- he'd slipped out as we got into position, but the search of the village paid off. There are pictures of the smiling lieutenants with stacks of rocket launchers and light machine guns, hundreds of rounds in boxes strewn about, a Russian automatic grenade launcher most of us had never seen before and there, in the center of it all, a Martini-Henry rifle. The imperial rifle. The British pilum. Rusted and wood-scuffed, the century-plus-old-action still working, ready to fire the ugly, blunt-nosed rifle rounds they were used to firing back in the days of Victoria and Rule Britannica.

How is it possible, I thought later, that it had all led to me, alone on the way to Bumby, separated and in the trees, trying not to breathe, and shrinking around my rifle? All of the time and calamity that traversed these mountains: the Persians, the Macedonians, and the Sassonids; the Khwarazmians, the Mongols, the Mughals, and the Brits and their damned Martini-Henrys. Then the Russians and the slaughter; there was a tiny graveyard on our outpost, next to the LZ, the product of a Soviet purge. All of it, all of time in those mountains grinded out, stopping and starting again throughout the ages had unraveled to me, and I was at its breakwater, I was the prow, alone. Kneeling as all of this unconsciously ravaged me, I put my rifle to my cheek and began turning from side to side, listening, scanning with the safety off, searching.

It's all time travel anyway, so it seemed like I was there, on the shale, leaning against that thin tree for an hour, or a millennia, but it hadn't been. It was only after a few moments that I saw an Infra Red signal, two flashes, I sent back three, and that was it. The other section had found the passage in the direction they'd been sent. I walked back up the hill and linked up with the squad, the squad that I was then supposed to lead through the night to the town of Bumby to surprise some man or another.

I know He was there though. Maybe He was scared of me as well. Maybe I was so close I could have dashed His brains out with my rifle. As it was I'm glad I didn't piss myself. We were all brave when next to one

another; even with only one other, we could be brave. As long as someone would be able to bolster you with love, or shame, or brotherhood, or whatever, then you could be brave. But alone is a different story. There were nights at the outpost that I could swear He was crawling up on us. I knew it, crawling up and cutting the wires while we huddled, freezing in guard shacks, all together, periodically staring at the mountains. Crawling up the stairs to the outpost while we dozed at the guns, fighting off sleep till morning. The tide would always come in.