

God is great.

Those words had meant something different when I was younger.

At least, they had to me.

I was told that these words were spoken when I was born, that even through the pain, my mother had named me Shaian and declared “God is great.” Of course, I’d taken those claims at face value as I had no way of knowing for sure beyond hearing those same words spoken when my brother and sister were born after me.

His was one of my earliest memories, only second to my parents leaving our first home in Buta Kashan, just outside of Kunduz, due North of Kabul. I was four years old when the Russians first invaded in ‘79. A small village as we were, we didn’t have television or radio, only a courier from Kunduz who’d ridden ahead of his bi-weekly visit to inform us that as of three days ago, our government of infidels had sold us out to foreign invaders, and that God’s chosen people of Afghanistan, if not our government, were now at war.

I’d understood nothing of what was happening at the time. How could I? I was four years old and still struggling to differentiate between the Pashto spoken to me by my father, and the Dari from my mother, the only thing I was capable of understanding being that the average volume of discussions between my parents had been louder than I’d ever heard it before in those days.

Both would have their turns with me when done with each other, as though hoping they might rally support from a child who was just now beginning to learn how to string complete sentences of his own. My mother would speak to me in Dari, asking if I really wanted to leave the only home I’d ever known, to which my answer was always, ‘no.’ My father would speak to me in Pashto, asking if I wanted bad men to take me in the middle of the night to never see my parents or my arriving brother again, to which my answer was always, ‘no.’

It was easier to understand the motives of my parents with years of hindsight. My parents were driven by fear equally, manifesting itself differently in the two of them. My mother, somewhere around eight months pregnant at the time, was afraid of needing to raise another child alongside her current one without a place to call home, always on the move, running from the combined forces of our own government or an invading army. My father, meanwhile, was afraid for his family and for his pride, afraid that it would not be him to care for them as was his duty as a husband and a father. He was afraid that, in staying and surrendering ourselves to a government that’d promised those such as my mother more autonomy, freedom, and care, his position as our sole caretaker would be threatened.

I would be lying to say that now, as a father myself, I didn’t understand these fears of his, but I would be lying too, as a citizen of a new Afghanistan, to say that I would surrender my wife and my daughter to the same world my mother had grown up in, terrified for her safety and that of her children.

We left Buta Kashan on the day of the Christian New Year. My father had gotten his way in the end. We looked back on our old home as we left it behind and my mother prayed aloud, “God is great.” In her fear and defeat, she believed still that He would provide, and that he would look over our exodus.

We joined a larger caravan of fellow villagers, and joined up with refugees from Kunduz as we began a long march south. I'd allegedly been to the capital, Kabul, before, though I had no memory of it, to visit my grandparents before I'd even said my first words, much less learned to toddle, and was set to go there again now alongside the few dozen hundred others we travelled with. What would ordinarily be only a week's walk at most would become one twice as long for us on account of the pack animals that carried our belongings and the livestock that walked beside them as well as the time it took to, five times a day, stop in our tracks, and perform the salah.

"God is great," we said as trucks of soldiers rolled by us.

"God is great," we said as jet fighters and helicopters darted overhead.

"God is great," we said in observance of the Jumu'ah on the Friday we travelled, or rather, travelled only half of.

"God is great," we said still as we came to yet another stop and my mother died giving birth to my new baby brother.

God was great as my brother came into the world, as was God great when we buried my mother who had died delivering him. The prayer was spoken as I overlooked her shallow grave, and my brother cried in my arms.

I'd asked my father how God could be great both in life as in death.

"Because your brother is with us now," my father told me. "And your mother is with Him."

I'd asked my father in my naivete if God was all powerful, then why he'd allowed us to be attacked, to which he answered that our enemy fell outside of His realm, that they did not believe in God. 'Our enemy,' he'd called them, no longer simply a disembodied threat that'd forced us to leave our home, but the enemy. My father blamed them for the death of my mother. That was easier than blaming himself, I supposed.

She was not the only one to die on our passage south, but I admitted that much less had died than could have. The invasion hadn't been underway for a month, and many towns and villages had still stood, offering food, shelter, and hospitality to us on our way, the last of which on our route South, offering more than that.

Kabul was lost, they told us. Soviet soldiers littered the streets, propping up a puppet ruler somehow even more abominable than his predecessor. Our capital was lost from us, as was our last chance for safety, but all the same, we prayed, "God is great." Half of our caravan of refugees had continued south, deciding that life under occupation was worse than being stranded without a home and a quarter had continued south, but beyond Kabul en route to the Pakistani border instead. The quarter that'd included me, my father, and my newborn brother, had gone West, further inland, to the

Maidan Wardak province where we were told we would find like-minded individuals who wished to protect the 'true Afghanistan.'

My brother, who God was so great to bring in the world, who my mother had died for, would die himself on that route west without a mother's milk to nurture him. We buried my brother in an unmarked grave, and my father once again prayed, "God is great," though I did not join him this time. He'd taken my mother and my brother from me. How great could He be?

We finally found those we were looking for, or rather, they found us, just a little under a week after my brother had lost his life-the Islamic and National Revolution Movement of Afghanistan. Without even realizing it, I became a soldier of a holy war that day—a Mujahideen.

I would first learn to hold a gun when I was six years old. They didn't teach me to fire it quite yet, but only enough to know how to avoid pulling the trigger accidentally as I transported them around our numerous camps or to our warriors in the field-those such as my father.

Learning the mountains of where we fought became second nature to me.

I was a guerilla soldier before I even knew what that meant, fighting a war I didn't understand in the name of a God I no longer believed in. I would hear warriors such as my father declare "God is great" when I delivered fresh ammunition, declare "God is great" with every soviet soldier killed, declare "God is great" with every brother lost, and declare "God is great" with every victory and defeat. They believed in God in thick in thin, but how could a righteous god kill my mother to bring my brother in the world, only to kill him too?

We were always on the move for that decade of war against our first enemy, enough time for my father to give a daughter to a woman of a village we'd passed by. When we passed by again perhaps a year later, she had presented my half-sister to him, and he'd taken the mother as his wife lest he dishonor her. I was eleven years old when I attended my father's second wedding and I realized that I hardly remembered his first, my mother.

I'd been forced to learn how to do more than hold a gun by then, but how to fire one as well. Man, woman, child, we were all soldiers in one way or another, fighting a war that none of us had asked for, but life did not stop simply because outsiders from a foreign land wished to destroy. So, even with a rifle on my back that was nearly as tall as I was, I attended my father's wedding, but could not bring myself to pray, "God is great" as it was shouted by all others around me.

In truth, a part of me was resentful. The supposed 'God' that was thanked for this day was the same one who would have to bear responsibility for taking my father's first wife, my mother, away from me. He'd been given a second chance, but what did I get? A broken home. Things would change the days following the wedding though when I would meet my father's daughter for the first time—my sister. I wanted to hate

her. I wanted to look at her and feel validated that in my belief that this new family wasn't mine, and never would be. Instead, I fell in love.

She was named Andisha, a name meaning many things: thought, reflection, fear, apprehensiveness, but even more than that to me. I saw the brother I'd never gotten the chance to know in her eyes. I did not love her because some 'great god' had brought her into the world in exchange for so many other thousands killed along the way. I loved her because she was a child, one that shared my blood, and one that I vowed I would never leave the side of. Even when my father was killed in a skirmish outside Gizab, and my sister's mother went missing shortly after, I promised to stay by her. So, when the walls of our cave would shake as Soviet bombers dropped bombs overhead, the others alongside us would pray, "God is great," but I would hold my sister tight, because God wasn't in that cave with her. I was. And so, I promised her that I would stay by her.

Surprisingly, things became easier after my father's death. I knew that his death and the calming of the war were by no means connected, but the timing was still ironic. I was old enough by then to understand why our enemy having a new leader, a man by the name of Gorbachev, was somewhat significant.

However, I didn't really think it was him who was responsible for the dwindling Soviet presence in our country. I attributed that feat to Johnny Rambo instead. I was fourteen when I watched a VHS copy of *Rambo 3*, smuggled to us all the way from the United States. By now, I'd already learned how to fire our guns at the enemy, but the way that Johnny Rambo so effortlessly mowed down legions of invaders at a time, it was awe-inspiring. I would cover Andisha's eyes during particularly gory segments of the movie, myself smiling all the while. It was hypocritical, sure, but I couldn't take my eyes away from him. My cheer was one of dozens others, just as loud as mine, when the movie ended with the on-screen caption, "This film is dedicated to the gallant people of Afghanistan."

Our warriors declared, "God is great" with joy as the credits rolled, but my voice did not join them there. My praise went elsewhere, to Johnny Rambo and the stars and stripes that waved behind him.

When the war ended only a few short months after, I was positive that it had nothing to do with the slow fracturing of our enemy or the international pressure of the entire world, but instead was on account of the heroic Johnny Rambo alone.

War did not end there, of course.

Things were rarely that simple.

At first, it was a matter of removing the collaborationist government that'd handed over its people to foreign invaders. It was a simple enough task with the Russians no longer around to prop them up. I fought as a mujahideen for three more years until I was 17, watching as, on our border, the Soviet Union fell apart, and a half dozen new nations secured their place in the world right on our doorstep. The Russian's

government wasn't the only one to collapse. So too did our own under the weight of a country's people that'd been fighting to escape it for over a decade. It felt as though our victorious mujahideen were still declaring "God is great," when the new coalition government they'd fought so hard for after so long collapsed again right beneath their noses, and so my country was at war with itself again.

Somehow, those of us who'd been fighting alongside one another, calling themselves God's chosen warriors, had now turned their guns on each other. Both sides would shout "God is great!" in the heat of battle as they gunned down those who shouted the selfsame thing, who they'd fought alongside in God's name just mere years ago. I didn't ask questions; I had stopped trying to unravel God's mystery years ago. I didn't fight for God's glory; I didn't delude myself into thinking I was one of His chosen people. If hell was supposedly the absence of God, then war was hell itself.

There was no God out there, no greater purpose. We were split down the middle, us mujahideen who had fought for our country, those of us who called themselves government, and those who claimed it no more legitimate than that the Soviets had put in place. I found myself a part of the latter group by merit of where I was when the split was made apparent, and who those surrounding me were. We were Tālebān, and we were traitors. Naturally, we told ourselves a different story—that it was our enemies, who had come together, come to a compromise, and agreed that their country had suffered enough, who were the traitors. I didn't bother questioning it at the time. I was in my early twenties and had been raised on war. I lived deep within the territory of our new breed of mujahideen alongside my sister, now in her teens, and would have done nothing to put her in danger. She complained, of course, having memories of the short time in which a partial education at least had been promised to her as well as perhaps some hope for a future, but as little of one was being promised to her in the new Afghanistan I fought for, or "old Afghanistan" depending on your point of view, there was even less if the wrong people were to hear her speak out. I promised I would protect her, but she was gone, having left for Kabul, leaving those behind she considered part of an old Afghanistan that would never fully welcome her, including myself.

She wanted more from life, and I couldn't give her that. The most I could give her was what I had promised—protection, and so I did that, ceasing to look for anything else in the world—a sense of improvement, of hope, of purpose. I fought alongside those who shouted "God is great" while gunning down their neighbors in broad daylight, and I allowed them to carry on with their delusions, but I knew better, better to believe in a God who allowed man to kill his fellow man with little regard, who did nothing to stop wanton slaughter against villages we'd fought to protect just years prior.

God was supposed to be justice, but he didn't care about those who used His name to slaughter hundreds to thousands. He didn't care about those who'd been given the chance to deliver a country that'd suffered through war for over two decades, and had squandered it in their own grab for power.

He didn't care because He wasn't out here with us. He didn't care because while hundreds praised his name with every battle won or lost, I knew the truth. I walked through the ruins of towns I'd helped to destroy simply because we'd been born in war, and knew little else. I saw boys firing rifles at half the age that I'd been when I'd first held one, and I wondered if my children would be firing them at half theirs.

I didn't much think about children until I met the woman who would be my wife in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif after we'd "liberated." She complied to the new law quickly enough, surrendering the liberties that'd been afforded her without too much of a fight. Though she'd caught my eye, I hadn't thought much of her then. I knew that I would be leaving the town shortly after, off somewhere else to continue the war, but found my mind tracing back to her time and time again. I didn't know her name, but all the same, she was ever on my mind, even as enemy bombs exploded around me, brothers in God were killed, and I faced death as I always did.

I saw men, women, and children put to the sword in the name of our holy war, screaming "God is great," with their last breaths. I saw towns that I'd been to before, now no more than piles of rubble, and still she was on my mind. She never left, and I understood finally why it was when I was besieged in the city of Mian Sahib late in 1996. Artillery was raining down around us, leaving sandcrete and wooden structures as little more than piles of dirt and debris. In the middle of that hell storm, there'd been a sound, almost musical, that sounded to me at first like what I thought the trumpets of heaven may sound like. They weren't trumpets, however, but the blaring speakers of a car racing through the city. Though it was being hit by artillery, and had been for the last day and night, there had been a wedding just that morning, and the newlyweds were racing through the city in a 1973 Monte Carlo. Their city was being blown to shreds around them, but life hadn't stopped for them.

I realized then that the same way God, if truly there was one, didn't care about those who slaughtered others in his name, declared war on one another, and brought His world to ruin, he also didn't care about this couple, wed in the middle of a war, looking past the smoke and debris that flooded their town and were, somehow, happy. If God didn't care about the evil in the world enough to stop it, then so too did he not stop the good. For nearly two decades, war had been all I'd known, because I'd thought that only when it was over, that I could have that, but the music playing from their car, the rubber they burned on our roads, they were already living it while the war raged around them, and so I had to ask, 'what was it all worth?'

I'd thought I'd been fighting for that, but out there, through the smoke and within, it already did exist.

The war would not end, not after Kabul was taken, nor after the coalition government was driven as far north as the Wakhan Corridor, but it did for me that day. It was hardly something so dramatic as declaration my wishes to abandon the cause. Mujahideen such as us came and went, most likely thanks to a bullet in the chest, gladly breathing their last breaths to say, "God is great," but I was in my early twenties and had

just begun to see the light past the smoke was being asked to shoot it to pieces in the supposed name of a God I was just beginning to understand.

For the first time in my life since I was four years old, I was walking away from a war rather than towards it. Mazar-e-Sharif was different from when I'd last seen it. I saw the flag of a regime I'd fought for now standing over every government building, school, and public center that now would preach God's Sharia Law, at least as it would be interpreted by those who now dictated it. Perhaps a part of me wanted to feel guilty, but I was no longer so vain as to think that my involvement in the war had been the instrumental factor that'd seen the tidal wave of extremism consume this town. I was tired of viewing myself in the perspective of the war that'd consumed my life, and so dedicated myself to a new objective—one that, for once, had not been thrust upon me.

The first miracle was that I found her again, almost a half year later. The second was that she was yet unmarried. Her father killed in one of the numerous battles or killings that'd plagued her home over the last few decades, the role of her Wali, male guardian, fell to her uncle.

I found work at her uncle's shop where she herself worked, and so spent that time beginning to make a living for myself. I was fresh out of war without an afghani to my name, not having wanted to risk looting as the odds were just as likely I would lose my right hand if caught as be encouraged. I was a man seeking a family and needed something to my name more than self-pity and regret as well as newfound good intentions. The pay was honest and good all things considered, and it placed me closer to her—a woman who only grew more beautiful with every day I worked beside her.

A little over a half year later, I confessed to why it was I had sought employment there in the first place, and so asked for her uncle's blessing to wed her. He didn't care that I had asked to be employed under false pretense nor that I had been attempted to court her for over half a year without his knowing. He'd simply informed me, as though a farmer confessing to bad stock, that she was not virginal, 'tainted,' as he called it, by passing Taliban. I wondered when it had happened, if at around the same time that I'd passed through myself and saw her for the first time. I wondered if I might have known the man that'd raped her, if rape it was as her uncle had implied. In the kingdom built around God's law that half of our country was fighting, and winning to create,

I told him that much, and perhaps believing that few other options would be afforded to her, he consented. I was told she agreed the moment he told her that I had proposed.

We were wed the following Summer, and with the money I had saved up to this point, minus the dowry, cheap for a non-virgin, we moved. Just a little over twenty years after initially leaving my childhood home of Buta Kahsan, I had finally made it to where I had first set out to find with my mother and father, now both dead—the capital, Kabul.

It was a miracle to me how my grandparents were still alive. They had been just another reason my father had wished to go to Kabul as they were ailing, but they still lived, and I understood why shortly after arriving. They hadn't recognized me at first, only having known of my existence by letters sent via courier after I was born, but it was another that made them remember who it was—their caretaker and grand-daughter, my sister.

For family had never been whole, not since I was four years old and my mother had died delivering my brother who'd died in my arms after a few short weeks. Not since my father died fighting a war he believed dictated by God, leaving behind me and my sister. And not since my sister had left, looking for something greater than the war camp of a group whose ideals she despised. For the first time now, it felt as though we were—whole, and happy, reunited with the grandparents I'd left my home for, forgiven by a sister I'd failed, and still beside a faithful wife who carried my child within her belly, a boy or girl I promised never to fail.

The flag of the Taliban waved over Kabul in those days, and the momentum of the war did not seem like to turn in the coalition government's favor any time soon. For a time, we considered leaving, namely for my sister's sake, as well as for my child, boy or girl. I'd seen the law of the radicals of our faith in practice, and had no desire to see my children live under it. However, my grandparents in the condition they were, not capable of mass movement, much less fleeing as a refugee across borders, we chose to stay. We had lived through worse, and we would still live, but the world would change faster than we could adapt.

On September 9th, 2001, the leader of the government forces that'd still opposed the Taliban was killed by two suicide bombers who had no doubt declared that "God is great" in their final moments. If the coalition government had had a fighting chance before, it was gone now. The news was impossible to miss on the radio, interrupting midday prayers, perhaps believing their news equal to the word of God. Even more unavoidable, however, was news of what happened two days after—the Taliban had attacked another target. They'd helped to free us of Soviet occupation only a little over ten years ago, and we had attacked them—The United States, and so they had pledged immediately to return the favor, and "bring us to justice." The War on Terror had been declared, and we were its targets.

My firstborn son couldn't speak, and could just barely walk, but he could read. Faces, at least. I knew that he saw my fear, that he understood it. I saw it in his eyes and knew that he understood. I was terrified, and my son could see it as clear as day.

I was an adult of twenty-five years, and I would wake up terrified in the middle of the night. I dreamed that Johnny Rambo from America had returned to Afghanistan, now on a path of rightful vengeance, leaving nothing alive in his wake. And sure enough, not even a month after the Taliban had destroyed the twin towers, they arrived, and as though in the blink of an eye, the country was theirs

What had taken the Taliban a decade to accomplish was undone by the new year. Kabul was the coalition government's once again, the formal army of the Taliban in shambles, its leaders in hiding. War from outside had come back to my country, and so I'd braced anticipating the worst, expecting another war the likes of which the Soviets had brought. But to my surprise, the world did not stop. I worked at my job one day, braced in my home the next as the bombs fell, and the day after, I was back at work once again as American Humvees and tanks rolling down the street, the flag of our coalition government flying from our government center, the Taliban's in flames, its words reading even as material disintegrated from them, "God is great."

Two decades ago, I would have been called a traitor if I'd even considered complying with the law the Russians had brought in, and perhaps now was still seen by some as a traitor, but if such was the price of not merely surviving, but living, then so be it. As American tanks rolled down the street, the masses gathered on the streets and shouted, "God is great." Some did so out of grief, and others in celebration, but I had refrained, not for a lack of faith.

If God was great, it was not because he would bring the Taliban back to liberate us. If God was great, it was not because he had freed us from them. God was great, but because he's given us a life that was ours to make.

I did not praise God's name with battles won or lost, with Taliban cells destroyed or spawned. I praised God when my grandparents passed, thanking Him for the life he had given them, for helping them to last this long, and for allowing me to find them once again so they may pass in the presence of those who loved them. I praised God when my sister, five years after the initial American invasion, was accepted to study abroad in Chicago. I praised God yet again when my daughter was born with a similar condition to her brother, our firstborn, who had died before his second birthday, but was saved by Western medicine.

Of course, the war hadn't ended there. It hadn't ended when the Russians had come, nor when they'd left. It hadn't ended when the Americans came, nor would it end after. As many around me, in my own family, lost their faith under the belief that God had allowed this war to continue, I learned to believe because he had also allowed us to live a life amidst it all. I'd never thought it a choice to live, thinking war must end first for true life to begin, but it'd been my own delusion to believe so when I was a soldier. So, I chose to live. I grew old with a wife and a daughter that I could finally protect not by fighting against the world to secure for them a future, but by being around for them in a way that I had failed to do before.

God was not great for the laws He handed down to us, for paving the road to military victories, for allowing His children to martyr themselves in His name. He was great because he had given us the world, and had left it to us. There were those who chose to war atop it, killing their fellow man, but just so, there were those who chose to heal, to live, and to love. I'd believed that God's greatness demanded I shout it aloud with a gun in my hand to remind those who'd forgotten, but I had not learned of God's

love with blood on my hands and dead at my feet. I'd learned of his greatness when I'd chosen to open my eyes and see that it had existed all my life.

Twenty years after they had come, the Americans left again. For most in Kabul, it was an invasion when the Taliban finally returned, overwhelming our government's army that'd become complacent, believing their friends from abroad would never leave them to fend for themselves. Many saw it as the return of the old and repressive, and perhaps it was, but for my family and me, it was a long time coming. We had learned to love our home in Afghanistan, but we had all agreed that Afghanistan was not the sole domain of God. He had given us the world, and so we would choose to see it where we were free to do so. There were tears, of course, a sadness to leave our home, but it would not be the end for us. We had lived before, and so we would live again, because the world had been given to us by God to inhabit and live in, and so we would.

The world that God had more for us was beautiful, and God is great.