

HEARTS AND MINDS: STORIES

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Graduate Program in Creative Writing

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Camden, New Jersey

October 2017

THESIS ABSTRACT

Hearts and Minds: Stories

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The stories in this collection were inspired during my two deployments as a Marine in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. I have watched as an entire generation of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines have come back from fighting wars in the Middle East only to be met with a new challenge: battling guilt, acceptance, meaning, and a public with a decreasing attention span. The characters in these stories mirror my own complicated feelings about being involved in an immoral war, though their perceptions are not construed as a finger-wagging, moralizing force. Instead, these characters cope with more immediate conflicts, such as the struggle of life and death, and immediate acceptance of military orders. From downtown Fallujah to rural gas stations in Pennsylvania, the trajectory of these characters takes them from the battlefield to home and back again, and the confusing and often contradictory notions of patriotism, service, duty, and honor follow them like the ghosts of those who never made it back.

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USER'S MANUAL: MY VETERAN™ 1.0

Congratulations on your consideration of MyVeteran™! This manual will assist you in making sure you get the most out of the product, whether deploying it as a conversational tool, or adding it to a pile of stomach-turning statistics, we hope that should you encounter any problem whatsoever, the MyVeteran™ manual will be there for you.

QUICK START

Setting up your MyVeteran™ is incredibly easy! Just follow these few easy steps:

1. Approach your MyVeteran™ from the front so as not to startle the unit.
2. Speak the following phrase calmly and directly: “I don’t blame you.”
 - 2a. If you do blame your MyVeteran™, slowly back away from the unit.
3. If your MyVeteran™ appears confused in any way, just simply treat the unit as if it were a person with real thoughts, feelings, preferences, and hopes.

GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1 System Overview

The personalized unit you have selected is Jarome Gentner and the serial number is 337-45-2299. This particular unit served in Iraq during 2004 and 2005. It served in Operation Phantom Fury, which was the Marine Corps’ attempt at ridding the city of Fallujah from the vast number of foreign fighters who had gained control of the area while the Army sat idly by. The house to house fighting made sense to your unit, even if he was afraid many times for his life. Your unit has never felt anything quite like

nearly dying, and living normally just doesn't make much sense to your MyVeteran™ because he is unable to understand why anyone wouldn't want to experience the thrill of adrenaline from killing and nearly being killed. Whether or not your particular MyVeteran™ has some retroactive guilt about participating in an unjust war is anyone's guess. But it is the nature of this particular manual to suggest that it is likely that your unit has some misgivings about its involvement in such activities, unless it actively participates in mental gymnastics, which, unfortunately, some units have been known to do. We take great care in crafting our units, and we hope that the pride and tax dollars we have sunk into these projects speaks to that end.

Your unit began its training in 2003, but the story begins before that. It watched as nineteen men armed with box cutters changed the course of American history while sitting in high school chemistry. This event had such a profound effect on your unit that it fomented a desire to effect actual change, rather than, say, installing a bumper sticker that says "These colors don't run." Your unit had no concept of the trajectory of its life, and had many family members before it who also served in the military. Thus, your unit ended up seeking out the Marine Corps recruiter. MyVeteran™ units do have a proclivity for allowing others to make life decisions for them, and in some sense the structure provided by the military allowed for your unit to think and feel less, except when that feeling was actually killing another human, which the military and MyVeteran™ have indicated to this and other units that is of supreme benefit to its efficacy.

Your unit's placement test indicated that it was capable enough for any job in the military, but the obvious choice for your unit was the infantry, which was chosen by your unit because your MyVeteran™ was tired of people in his high school calling him faggot

and beating him up. And so upon completion of recruit training, your unit returned home for a few weeks to patrol the local mall and various bars looking for anyone who wanted to fight. The trainers of your unit did their best to promulgate a sense that your unit's primary function was "to kill people and blow shit up," but your unit has managed to retain some semblance of humanity. It took several years for your unit to understand that it can be both ashamed of its former activities and proud of what its decisions have turned it into in its current manifestation.

Ultimately, your unit is reluctant to spend much time thinking about its involvement in what it perceives as an unjust war primarily because it suspects that no one cares. Remember that unless your unit asks to speak with you directly, it likely does not want to talk about past experiences.

1.2 Authorized Use Permission

Anyone is authorized to use your unit provided that they look your unit in the eye and speak to it, though they are forbidden from asking certain questions that include, but are not limited to:

- "Did you kill anyone?"
- "How'd you lose your leg?"
- "What was it like over there?"
- "Did you have any traumatic experiences?"
- "Do you have PTSD?"

Asking such questions may put the user at risk of getting punched in the mouth and having their access to the unit revoked. Anyone who uses this unit does so at their own risk.

1.3 Help Desk

If trouble occurs with your unit, users are encouraged to call 911, just as a user might for any other normal human person. Additional points of contact are the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255, and your unit's parents at 215-951-1000. If no one is available to take your call, be there for your unit.

SYSTEM SUMMARY

Your unit is running on software that was implemented 32 years ago, but current updates occur almost daily. Suffice it to say that your unit, while aging rapidly, is likely at a more advanced place emotionally than where it was years prior. Your unit's hardware was damaged during Operation Phantom Fury, leaving it with only 1.5 legs. Various patches and reconfigurations have allowed us to refurbish your unit, and we guarantee that it will run fine for years to come. Admittedly, it does look somewhat different than other units, and while we take great care in the refurbishing process, you may want to upgrade to a unit that has less obvious damage from the previous owner.

Your unit is white and male, and this has afforded your unit many opportunities that other units will never experience. These opportunities are so central to your unit's experience, it has taken years for your unit to realize that its own experiences are only

slightly anecdotal to other units. This has confused and tormented your unit, though at a substantially lower rate than its complicity in mass murder.

Your unit is 30 percent disabled. During its deployment, your unit's vehicle was struck by an EFP, an explosively formed penetrator, which is an improvised explosive device designed to penetrate armor. While the blast of an EFP is fairly mundane, its penetrating effects are substantial, and molten fragments of metal entered through the side door of a HMMWV your unit was riding in, and separated its right leg from its body at the knee. The blood loss almost ensured the premature system failure of your unit, but a quick-thinking Marine unit was able to apply a tourniquet to your unit's leg to stifle the bleeding.

Your unit has since undergone a rigorous physical therapy program, and as a compensation for the loss of part of its hardware, has been awarded life-long medical care for anything related to its disability. More information can be obtained by turning to the Warranty section for MyVeteran™.

2.1 System Configuration

Your unit has been configured, through no small feat, to better itself through education. Unfortunately, your unit has no idea what, specifically, that means, and so spends much of its time attempting various pursuits in the hopes that they will give it direction. This makes your unit feel as though it is unmoored.

Your unit is deeply introspective, which often gets mistaken for shyness. As such, your unit has had few meaningful relationships in its life, and even fewer meaningful romantic relationships in its life. Your unit is heterosexual, and though it enjoys sex, does

not enjoy the thought of fucking a person with no emotional attachment. It has had some difficulty in finding a partner who can look past its disability, though your unit suspects that these shortcomings are more projections of its own sense of loss than they are of any partner's disgust at its stump.

On occasion, your unit will consider killing itself. This type of behavior is common among MyVeteran™, and users should exercise caution in handling their unit in certain high-stress situations. Your unit is experiencing consternation at the general thoughts of ambivalence, and, all things considered, wishes there were a way to not “be” on occasion. Your unit has experienced the heft of a loaded weapon in its hand, and recognizes the firearm's potential to be a world-ender, which, upon that realization, filled your unit with an inchoate dread that felt like vertigo even though it was sitting on a chair examining the loaded M9 pistol and carefully flipping the safety from fire to safe and back again listening to the healthy click, click, click, click, click, click. This is partially why your unit does not own a firearm. Should your unit come across a firearm, politely remind your unit that they are no longer in the military and other people are not as comfortable with loaded weapons as your unit is.

2.2 User Access Levels

New users of MyVeteran™ are given base-level access, and through time spent online are afforded more privileges. Unfortunately, the Administrator level is available only to those closest to your unit and most romantically connected. Administrator privileges are something that your unit takes very seriously, and your particular model has difficulty trusting outsiders with those privileges. As such, the administrative duties

of your unit are being fulfilled by the unit at its own discretion. In accordance with our quality assurance guarantee, we promise that the code for this self-administration, while filled with bugs and various other problems, is generally self-sustaining. However, your unit has expressed a preference that it would eventually like someone else to take over its administrative responsibilities, which speaks to why it joined the military in the first place.

Base level access requires a level of patience with your unit, as it is likely that when engaging MyVeteran™ it will sound terse and irascible. Your unit takes a certain amount of pride in economy of speech; so do not be alarmed when your unit does not immediately interact with its surroundings. Your unit is model #INTJ.

GETTING STARTED

Your unit will wake up generally around 6am if for no other reason than your unit's canine accompaniment requires that it be so. From there your unit will assist in relieving the dog, and then returning indoors to relieve itself. Your unit is almost totally self-sufficient and can procure food and other sustenance on its own.

Your unit requires a healthy dose of caffeine to remain totally functional, which is aided by its employment at a coffee shop. While your unit is required to interact with the general public, your unit would prefer not to.

Interacting with your unit at work or otherwise is easy! Just treat it like a normal adult human with thoughts, feelings, and preferences.

3.1 Logging On

To log on to MyVeteran™, just initiate conversation that does not assume some sort of interpersonal relationship that does not already exist. Do not pretend to be friends with your unit if you are not already, but by all means engage your unit in small talk because that's the only type of talk that everyone loves, God knows. Your unit does not enjoy when people talk over it, so users of that type should log out immediately.

3.2 System Menu

Your unit's main menu will afford users the following options:

1. Firearms
2. Hunting
3. Recreational Drug Use
4. Philadelphia
5. Drinking
6. Current Issues
7. Pop Culture
8. Miscellaneous

3.3 Changing User ID and Password

To change the user ID and password for your unit, establish a conversation with your unit that makes it aware that the user no longer wishes to see it romantically, and that it is not the unit, but, rather, the user that wishes to change. Inform the unit that the user interface is not what it once was, and that it is very clearly user error. Instead of trying to update the interface, extract as much possible from the unit and move on.

Alternatively, inform the unit via social media that the user's information has changed and that the unit should update its servers to the correct information so that the user can log on.

3.4 Exit System

Users may end a session whenever they feel like it, because your unit will end it whenever the hell it feels like it too.

WARRANTY

MyVeteran™ Limited Warranty:

Warranty coverage for MyVeteran™ products is set forth in the terms listed below:

MyVeteran™ and U.S. Military, Inc. warrants its standard products against defects in materials and character for a period of (life) from the date of original completion of training. Should a warranty claim be filed for a break of material, replacement materials, assemblies, and parts may be procured at the nearest Veterans Affairs hospital, though users are recommended to get there early. The U.S. Military and MyVeteran™ are not responsible for any care received from a VA hospital, nor do they bear any responsibility for congressional inaction that proves detrimental to the health and well-being of your unit.

If a defect is discovered with your unit and a valid claim is received by MyVeteran™ and Uncle Sam's Misguided Children, Inc., the company will replace your

unit with 22 other cases. Those claims will be released to the public so that the public may collectively shake its head, do push-ups and change nothing.

When a Warranted Product is exchanged or repaired, it automatically becomes your property (i.e. your problem) and society will then see fit to judge your unit as “disgruntled.”

EXCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This Limited Warranty applies only to the MyVeteran™ product line and not any other products your unit comes into contact with.

Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children, Inc.

Made in the USA.

Offer void in the United States.

Sinners in the Hands of a Laughing God

It was strange then, using dead bodies as waypoints. There was a large circular swath that radiated out from our OP where, if we caught them at a particular distance, we made people crumple. Our small serpentine entryway was marked by the bodies of foreign fighters the August sun had turned into husks of people, piles of tattered clothing and flesh that feral dogs gnawed on. Survival—the basest behavior, motivated by pure biology, lizard-brain pulsing: *stay alive, stay alive, stay alive*.

Our patrols wound through the dusty village of Karmah, north of Fallujah, and put us face to face with a small, but hardened contingent of the insurgency who were hell-bent on forcing their warped world view onto a bunch of small town farmers just trying to eke out an existence. We were there to prevent that. Why that mission became our mission, why we were there in the first place, why that fucking fertile crescent seemed like the least hospitable place in the entire universe were all questions above my pay grade. But at least we had each other.

Mancini and I would take turns bounding down the dirt alleys of Karmah screaming, “It’s a trap!” Admiral Ackbar and pretty much the entire *Star Wars* lexicon made it to Karmah along with us, but nothing was funnier than when we’d arrest someone and Mancini would ask them questions in some corny fake Star Wars language. Even the terps laughed, but that was probably more because they were embarrassed. Only a couple hundred people lived in Karmah, but the town itself took on its own life force and seemed to seethe and pulse with every incursion. We drove and marched through daily, trying to engage the people with whatever we could: candy, water, money, heavy weapons—but nothing really ever changed. We patrolled, the city closed up like a

pressure cooker, shit got real. Ad infinitum.

So, you have country A that spends hundreds of thousands of dollars per war fighter ensure they're fully equipped with the latest technology; force them to undergo months of training on tactics, techniques, and procedures; pay them twice as much as they'd get payed at home; tell them they're doing the right thing and being patriotic; and you have country B who, well, really isn't a country at all, more like shadowy rich donor country B who sometimes sends money and weapons to promote its fucked version of religion; gives its war fighters next to nothing except maybe a Soviet-era weapon and an explosive belt; some misguided sense of immortal worth if said warfighter dies; who the fuck do you think is gonna win that one? Well, y'know, the jury is still out.

What I do know, is that if you put a threatening dumb fuck with an AK-47 within 550 meters of Christopher Mancini, or any member of our squad, said militant will have hot pieces of metal exploded through him until he's dead.

And so it was. After a doozy of an early a.m. shootout, Mancini and I, along with the rest of first platoon, set out on patrol as soon as dawn broke, trying to figure out who was dumb enough to try to take on the whole of Kilo Company. But aside from some shell casings and tire tracks, there was only one body. He wore a blue Adidas track suit with a green tactical vest draped over his neck along with a checkered scarf. To this day I'll never understand why someone would try to carry out a coordinated attack wearing slide-on flip flops. No wonder we couldn't teach the Iraqi Army to do jack shit.

"Hey, Manchild," I said, laughing as we approached the body. "Swap out your shemagh with that guy's. It's the real deal. Not that fake-ass shit they sell at the Turkish barbershop."

“Don’t listen to Justin,” Ramirez said. “All that shit is made in China anyway.”

Mancini grinned at all of us and kneeled down, his massive frame shadowing the thin corpse below. He unraveled the scarf from around the guy’s neck, tucking the souvenir in his back pocket, and then draped his own shemagh over the insurgent’s shocked face. The body was impossibly dusty and bloody, like there was no way a body could hold so much blood. Our daily reminder that we had to keep our lives bound up inside us because if we let anything out, we’d be as fucked as the haji on the ground.

“Well,” Mancini said, putting in a dip and looking toward the compound we’d just emerged from. “I guess he thought he could sneak up on us last night, but we’re the only ones who can see in the dark around here. Even Allah doesn’t have shit on us.”

We threw the destroyed body into the canal and watched it float face down until we were bored. I still don’t know why we did that, but it felt right at the time. We did a lot of shit that doesn’t sit well with me now, but I just keep trying to remind myself that I’m alive and should be thankful for that.

Mancini never backed down from a challenge, no matter how inane. He and Ramirez almost died in the chow hall at TQ on the way home because they started drinking cup after cup of hot tea, and no one’s even sure if they said anything to each other about it. We were all talking about redeploying stateside, Ramirez about his wife and kids, me about just wanting to drive normally, and Mancini about getting out for good and moving back East to be near his family. After their sixth or seventh cup of tea, guys just started bringing tea to the table so those dummies wouldn’t have to get up. Mancini’s muscular frame looked awkward lounging in the frail folding chair, and, for a moment, it felt like we were back stateside. The flame of dread burning in our guts

dimmed until all that was left were memories of the shit we destroyed. I went to go call Moms when they were on cup eight or nine, and when I stood I couldn't help but notice how twitchy and sweaty they both were. Mancini's laser focus never wavered, and he was frustratingly good at everything he attempted, so I figured he'd end up the victor. I never heard how much they drank, but Ramirez pissed himself on the way to the head and Mancini didn't sleep until we went home two days later.

I don't even really remember seeing Mancini when we got home. Well, when we got back to the barracks. That place was never really home to anyone. Most of our families were sitting around with signs that said bullshit like :“Welcome home HEROS”, which made me cringe because I hadn't even been to college and I knew that was fucking wrong, and they were waving an insane number of flags, but Moms wasn't there. She'd told me she couldn't afford to fly to Camp Pendleton from Indiana, and I said, “Roger that. I'll come to you.”

I still hadn't purchased a ticket.

Coming home was such a disruption to routine that I could barely function when I first got back. At some point you're just trying to buy a pack of cigarettes from 7-Eleven or something when your stomach practically falls outside of your body because you realize you don't have your weapon on you, which means certain death in more ways than one, and then everyone's looking at how frantic and wild-eyed you are and they're probably thinking you're tweaking on something or are trying to rob the place, and, let's face it, you look mean and gaunt and vacant, totally like the type of person to raise suspicion, which then makes them watch you out of the corner of their eye, which in turn makes you more paranoid that some shit's about to go down, and then when you finally

get to the counter prepared to waste the first motherfucker who says something to you, the clerk saying, “Would you like a bag?” is so confusing that you don’t even answer, and you’re thinking *What the fuck?* and then you swipe all of your shit from in front of the register and blast out of the door so fast the wind in your ears sounds like static, and when you finally get to the car you’re laughing, but the tears come anyway and you can’t stop feeling the weight of the world pressing down on you, and you start to wonder if death is really the worst thing imaginable.

Iraq starts making more sense than being stateside, because of course it does, and I start getting this feeling like I want to go back, which is fucked because I couldn’t wait to get out of there. I still have this feeling and I know I shouldn’t. But what can I do except cry out at night when I close my eyes and dream? I consider reenlisting, even going so far as to talk to the monitor, seeing if I can get a better duty station, but even 40K tax free if deployed isn’t really enough for me to say, “Sign me up to be shot at and blown up for seven months so I can spend my whole bonus on alcohol and strippers to heal the pain when I get back.” Everyone starts getting out around the same time, and there are so many new faces in the battalion I feel alone all over again. Mancini’s gone before I have a chance to say goodbye in a way that isn’t totally bullshit. His EAS party was one for the record books, though. He spent his whole last paycheck, and probably some other peoples’ too, on booze and strippers. It was hilarious, but also kind of sad. The strippers were older and not attractive and we basically treated them like shit the whole night.

“Welcome home, sexy boy,” the older one oozed to me, throwing her arms around me.

I could feel the heat of her breasts against my ribcage. I took a sip of shitty whisky and glared around the room.

“Who hurt you?” I asked, but she just looked confused and moved on to someone else.

They took turns giving lap dances to people there, and at one point someone grabbed too much ass and everyone started yelling. They calmed down and gave their final oo-rah to Mancini by sitting on his face, but he was already blackout drunk by that point, and when they were done I couldn’t tell who was more embarrassed. They got into it for the most part, but that’s what money does, I guess. It’s pretty much the reason I joined the Marines in the first place. *Hi, son. Want to be a patriot? Go kill those fuckers with this gun here and your college tuition is on us.*

I’d just finished training and evaluating some of the newer Marines who were deploying over the next few weeks when Ramirez came into the staging area with this look on his face like he was about to start fucking with me, except I could tell he’d been crying. Apparently Mancini had been out with a bunch of buddies back home drinking, which I’d heard had become the norm for him, and his sorry-ass friends had left him at the bar to fend for himself. So, when he had finally decided to walk home that night, he ended up sticking close to the main road and was struck by a truck driver who’d mixed a little vodka in with his 5 Hour Energy.

I left work that day feeling as if my insides had been carved out. I went back to my barracks room and turned off all the lights. I felt my way into the bathroom and turned the water on as hot as it would go, waiting until I could feel the hot vapor rolling past the curtain. I stepped into the scalding stream wincing a little, focusing on the pain of

cleaning myself. I could tell my skin was red and raw even though the only light was a faint glow from under the bathroom door. The hot water started to taper a bit, and I shut off the shower. When I finished toweling off, I stared into the mirror, but all I could see was a black void, a shape not unlike our dog targets on the rifle range. I looked like the absence of a person.

Once I opened the door, even the soft light from the closed curtains seemed harsh to me, as if the brilliance of the grey day outside wants to warn me that I was no longer welcome in the world. I could feel every stitch in my clothing, and every scent was nauseating. My only hope was to become numb, to drift back inside the blackness. Mancini spent months in a no-shit war zone and didn't get a scratch on him, even though he'd been on the team that saw the most action, and when he came home within a few months he got plastered on the side of the road, hit so hard the funeral was closed-casket. I didn't go to the funeral because fuck it, right? I had time, of course. But every decision turned into a hundred indecisions as the profound nothingness of everything I'd ever known throttled me until I felt like my mind was going to cave in. Everyone was dealing with so much shit those days and then throw Mancini on top of all of that....

No one from headquarters ever said anything about it. No email was ever sent out. No one received any sort of counseling after Mancini died. We just continued on with the mission of doing what we were told. I watched my time dwindle down knowing full well that I wasn't going to reenlist. If I had to deploy one more time I was going to lose my shit, and besides, there wasn't any way I was going to deploy without Mancini on my team. We had each other's back even though we never talked about it. We never really talked about much of anything, but the silence we shared was probably the most tolerable

part about being in Iraq. The rest of it—the heat, the fighting, the boredom, the bullshit, the death, the fear, the politics, the surreal, and the truth—it all sucked. It's like God put everyone in a small room, gave each person a weapon, and cranked the heat. Artillery fire was just God's laughter.

I finally bought a plane ticket after I went through all the EAS paperwork, but I wasn't flying home to see Moms. She'd moved in with another new boyfriend anyway, so I mailed all my stuff to the address she gave me and figured I'd work it all out when I started caring about it. I took my terminal leave and decided to fly into Philadelphia and rent a car to go see Mancini's grave. I went alone because I wanted to share some silence one last time. When I was finally on the road, I pushed the car faster and faster leaving the city behind. The hills around me started to swell, and over each crest the trees became thicker, the green canopy welcoming, the sun high in the sky—reasonable though, not the angry Iraqi sun—and it felt strange all of the life around me when I was there to see death.

When I finally got to my exit the gas tank was empty, so I looked around for the closest gas station. When I pulled in and eased up to the pump, the smell of fumes and old hot dogs drifted through the open car window. The familiar heat I'd known for many months was gone, replaced by its overbearing cousin, humidity, whose presence was virtually inescapable. The air was still and I felt alone even in the midst of all the people scuttling to and from their cars. It was hard not to feel anything but contempt when I looked at them with their soft, plump bodies and camouflage hats and pickup trucks and political bumper stickers and dim gazes attracted to advertising and bad decisions like a mouse to a glue trap. I spun the gas cap off the tank and turned to swipe my card, but I

stopped, arm raised, card in hand, because I smelled smoke.

“Excuse me,” I said, dropping my voice into authority.

A skinny man poked his head around the pump, blue eyes framed by crooked wire-rimmed glasses, cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. His uniform said security but his demeanor said “bullied in high school.”

“Uh, yeah? Oh, the card thing is broken. You have to go inside if you’re using a credit card.”

“Great,” I said, hurriedly. “Are you smoking?”

“Yep.”

“In a gas station?”

He apparently didn’t understand why smoking was a problem, as if I’d chided him for making a decision that would negatively affect his own health rather than being concerned he might detonate the thousands of gallons of fuel beneath our feet. My coarseness clearly aggravated him, but I could tell he was intimidated by the way he nervously unclipped the holster for his pepper spray.

I decided it wasn’t my fight, so I headed inside to prepay, but there was a line of people and I started to feel antsy. I grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, thankful for both the air conditioning and the icy blast of the fridge, and I headed up to take my place in the line. When I glanced at the cashier I fell immediately in love with her, as if this whole time, without ever knowing her, everything I’d ever done in my life was for her. She had her brown hair thrown over her shoulder just so, and her unflattering red uniform polo shirt was seductively unbuttoned at the top. She looked like she’d be in college, but so did everyone else. I stared hard, trying and failing to regain my bearing. I

couldn't focus, and as I neared the counter I felt pinpricks of sweat spread out down my back.

"Hey, there," I said, smiling.

"Hi. Is this everything?" she said, pointing at my water bottle.

"Oh, no. Can I get \$40 on pump six?"

"Sure thing. That all?"

She turned away to swipe my card and I sensed the conversation nearing its logical end, so naturally I made an ass of myself.

"It's really hot out there."

"Uh-huh," she said. "It's August."

"I was wondering if you could tell me how to get to Indiantown Gap Cemetery."

"Not really, no. Sorry."

I should have stopped. Her gaze drifted around the store, presumably looking for something that required her immediate attention. She wore thick make-up around her eyes, heavy eye-liner that gave her round eyes an almond shape. The more I studied her the more I wanted to be here, with her. I wanted to tell her the truth. The truth about everything—everything that she was missing by working a register in a gas station. Everything that I had ever seen and felt. All because she looked like somewhere, deep down, past the make-up and her hair and her college and her life choices, and her hopes and dreams and preferences, like she would give a shit.

"It's just ... I'm visiting my friend's grave for the first time and I've never been around here."

"Hence the directions."

“Uh, yeah.”

“Well, like I said, I don’t know. Sorry.”

“OK,” I said, undeterred. “I’ll try to figure it out. I just got out of the Marines and I’m coming to pay my respects.”

“Huh,” she said, uninflected.

“He died a few months ago.”

“Sorry to hear.”

I could tell she was following some sort of unofficial script, as if she’d had this conversation a thousand times before. I couldn’t tell whether I was angry that she didn’t care, or if I was angry that she didn’t think of me as someone worthy of engaging. The door swung open and the scrawny security guard stepped inside, removing his hat and fanning himself.

“Hey, McKayla,” he said.

The girl didn’t respond, and I realized I’d become trapped in between my own conversation and the awkwardness of the security guard. He stared at me and I furrowed my brow in the hopes of scaring him off.

“Everything all right in here?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah, Pete. All *secure*,” McKayla mocked.

“This guy being weird or something?”

“Oh, fuck off,” I said.

The mood immediately intensified, as if everything were connected to a string that had just been tightened. There was music playing on speakers I hadn’t heard before. Everyone in line was quiet. McKayla turned, eyebrows raised.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave, sir," Pete said.

"No," I said. "I don't think you do."

"Security is my job and I don't think we're safe with you here."

"Just what the fuck are you going to secure?" I asked, my heart pounding.

"You're 90 pounds and you have a dirt 'stache."

"Please, leave *now*, sir."

I felt my hands tighten into fists and the room began to focus into a pinpoint. Sound became unnecessary and I could see what was about to happen before I even started moving. Step forward, grab left hand, smash fist upward into nose, sweep leg, take down and pummel until, until, until...

I glanced back at McKayla who was standing, alert and clearly frightened. She'd stepped farther back behind the counter, peering out at us from behind the sandwich warmer. I softened immediately and instantly became self-conscious, grabbing my water bottle and pushing past Pete to the door and back out into the humidity. When I got back into my car, my hands were still shaking.

The immense blue of the summer sky was washing away to twilight. The plot was supposed to be on the southern end of the cemetery grounds, but it took me a lot longer to find it than I hoped. There was something about cemeteries that freaked me out, but wasn't that there were hundreds of bodies buried beneath my feet, or that we put someone's rotting corpse in the ground and marked it with stone to remind us who exactly they were. It was the heaviness that got to me. The solemnity. The feeling when I walked on the freshly clipped grass that I was being pressed down into the earth with everything else there. I have no other end for me than that which was laid out in front of

me. A couple of swallows traced their way through a line of maple saplings that followed the perimeter of the grounds, and as I neared the recent grave sites I started looking for Mancini's name.

When I finally found his headstone I couldn't help shake the feeling that I wasn't supposed to be there. It felt strange and forced almost immediately, and I fought the inclination to turn and leave before I'd said anything.

"Mancini," I said aloud, testing the silence. "Christopher Michael. Beloved Son and Uncle."

I waited for a while before speaking again.

"It's a trap," I said, but it didn't feel right.

I stared down at the simple headstone in awe. I'd never known Mancini had siblings, let alone that he was an uncle. Hell, I'd never even known his middle name was Michael. I started to become self-conscious even though I was the only person among the gravestones. I sunk down onto my haunches and put my hand out, but I didn't feel anything except the cool granite on my fingers. *This is what people do, right?* My hand rested there until my knees started aching and I pulled away without having said anything, without having felt any different.

Remember when Ramirez fell into that irrigation trench outside of Karmah? We both rushed down there to grab him, but as soon as we smelled what was in there we just let him struggle in the muck for a while. LT was pissed but we laughed the whole way home. And that time on OP3 Road when that kid came around the corner with the small pipe bomb? My first experience with pink mist. And the time Tamworth ate an entire jar of Crisco on a dare. He didn't take a shit for a week! God, there are so many stories to

tell sometimes I don't even know where to start.

My voice trailed off into a whisper and I listened to the world around me come alive again. The insects were celebrating the arrival of evening and I took deep, healing breaths of summer air. Before I knew it, I was crying.

It's fucked you're not here. You know that, right? You should be here. You were taken from what matters. Your friends, your family. I had no idea you were even an uncle. How? The fuck? What was I to you? Just some guy in your squad? Were we friends? ... Of course you can't answer now when I really need you to. Why are all these questions coming now? I mean what the fuck am I supposed to do now? How do I go on living when all I feel like doing is dying?

My voice grew more and more frustrated and I started hammering my fist down on top of Mancini's gravestone at the end of each sentence, each phrase, each word, until I lost control of myself. My vision blurred and I started striking Mancini's name with my bare fists, the pain deadening into numbness.

"Fuck you for taking the easy way out!"

When my rage finally subsided I stood up heaving, and blood was trickling down my left hand. One of my knuckles must have caught the edge of a chiseled letter and split open. I looked back down and saw some of my blood on Mancini's grave and was instantly ashamed. I shuffled back to my car with my head down, leaving a wake of blood behind me.

Once I was back out on the main road I pressed my foot farther and farther down on the accelerator until it stopped moving. The rental's engine strained against my command, a swarm of metallic bees under the hood. I went faster and faster, the force of

the inertia pinning me back into my seat. I wanted desperately to let go of the wheel. It seemed so easy, just to slip off and close my eyes, retreat into the darkness. But the faster I went the tighter my hands gripped the wheel. The tires shrieked against every corner and I started to feel euphoric. When the gas station I'd been to swung into view I pressed on the brakes and signaled my turn before my brain had a chance to question what I was doing.

There was no sign of the nerdy security guard as I swung open the door. McKayla wasn't behind the register either, so I started patrolling the aisles looking for someone to talk to when I saw her stocking chips.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi," she said, her eyes widening as she saw me. "Oh, Jesus. Uh, hi."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Except that you're sweaty and your hand is bleeding and you caused a scene earlier," she said, backing up. "Kinda see how I might be startled?"

"Yeah, I, uh, sorry," I said, shoving my tattered hand in my pocket and stepping forward.

"What do you want?" she asked, putting her hands up in front of her and stepping back. She was putting up a barrier before I'd really even begun.

"Look, I just wanted to apologize for earlier. I was acting stupid. I get stressed out a lot and it's worse around girls I find attractive."

"Um."

"So, sorry about that."

"OK," she said, narrowing her eyes. "Is that it?"

I felt like exploding. I wanted to rip open my chest and point to the life inside me and scream *You see this here? It's all for you if you want it. Open your fucking eyes!*

"Do you think that we could, like, talk? I mean do you get off soon?"

"Yeah, that's not going to happen."

"No, don't take this the wrong way. I do think you're attractive, but..."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You're freaking me out."

Silence took hold of the conversation and squeezed the life out of it. Music was playing again. McKayla still faced me, as if she were waiting for an explanation, but everything I wanted to tell her stuck in my throat. She watched me as if I were a wild animal, something exotic and potentially harmful that, if kept at a certain distance, might be worth investigating.

"Look," she said, suddenly. "I can see you're hurting, or whatever, but I don't know why you think there's some sort of connection here. We don't know each other, and this is not appropriate in any way."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry. Not a whole lot is making sense to me right now, but when I saw you earlier today I thought, for, like, the first time since my friend died, that everything was going to be all right."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't really know, actually. I just sensed that you were a person who would make me feel better."

"But how could you know that from just interacting with me at the cash register for thirty seconds? And why am I suddenly responsible for your well-being?"

I held up my hands and stepped forward as if I were going to surrender to her, and

all I wanted in the world was for her to tell me that everything was going to be all right. I wanted to tell her my truths and I wanted to hear hers. I needed her to tell me that there is some obvious bad shit in the world but, if you look hard enough, everything that matters—the beauty and the truth—it’s all worth it, in the end.

“Can we start over? My name is Justin.”

I held out my unbloodied hand and, to my surprise, she took it. The tensivity of the situation had melted slightly, and her expression seemed more bemused than worried for her safety.

“McKayla.”

“Sorry, again.”

“Believe it or not, this is far from the worst experience I’ve had with men in this gas station.”

“That makes me feel slightly better, I think.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“You’re here for some reason. Maybe you’re like the disgusting truckers who are looking for ass in every gas station they come to. Maybe you’re sad and want me to hold your head while you cry. But you’re here, now, and you want something from me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Jesus, Justin, you really didn’t think this through, did you? You thought you’d come here and apologize for earlier and I’d just be so excited you were back and I’d jump at the chance to get to know you better.”

“I mean, I guess I had hoped we could talk more.”

“Well, I’m at work,” she said, continuing to stock chips.

“I don’t have anywhere to be. I could wait until you got off work and then we could get a drink or something.”

“I already told you, Justin. That’s not happening. It’s like you don’t even hear yourself.”

I stared at the box from which she was unpacking chips. It had been a long time since I felt embarrassed, but the unmistakable heat began to rise from within and I could feel my face begin to flush.

“Okay,” I said. “Here it is: my friend Chris died. He and I were in the Marines together and he was my best friend. We both made it back from the war fine, but he was killed by a drunk driver recently and now it feels like I have nothing to come back to. I’m lost, alone, and scared. You seemed nice, like I could tell you my story, and in telling it to you it would begin to make sense to me.”

She stopped stocking the shelf and listened while I spoke, but I couldn’t look her in the eye or I knew I’d start to cry, so I set my gaze in the middle distance toward the refrigerators filled with soda. She was silent for a moment after I was done speaking.

“All right,” she said, with a certain tinge of exasperation. “I’m going to give you a hug, but then I need you to get back in the car and go. I can tell you right now that I’m not the answer, but if this helps you heal just a little bit, maybe it’s worth it.”

My shoulders softened and I stepped toward her with my arms outstretched, wrapping her in a firm embrace. She pressed her head into my shoulder and I could smell her grapefruit perfume. She was even more beautiful than I had expected. I could feel the tears start to well up, and I opened my mouth to thank her.

Instead, the security guard hit me in the back of the head with a metal baton, spilling me into the shelf of trail mix and candy.

I looked up at McKayla from the floor, and I could see that she was screaming, but I couldn't hear anything. The back of my head was warm and wet. When I pushed myself off the ground the security guard rushed me again, but I sidestepped his swing. My adrenaline sharpened. The cacophony of the attack turned into a symphony of movement. I grabbed his wrist as he swung at me and spun with him, driving my other arm down into his outstretched limb. I could feel his joint buckle the wrong way and he crumpled to the ground, letting the baton fall out of his grip and clatter under a shelf.

I was beating him. I watched all of it happen, and, for once, I felt absolutely nothing, and it was everything I thought it would be. I saw myself grabbing his hair and hitting. Hitting, and hitting, and hitting. At some point, I forced my way back into the immediacy of the situation. McKayla was no longer in front of me, and the stupid security guard with the destroyed face lay whimpering at my feet, and I was alone again in the world. I turned and saw McKayla on the phone, gesturing wildly toward me and I figured that the police were already on their way.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," I said, as she sunk farther behind the counter away from me. "I'm not who I am right now."

I walked toward my car and when I got in and started the engine I couldn't remember where I was going. The tires chirped angrily as I left the parking lot, and the engine strained again under my command. I felt like I had finally made it to the beginning of something, like I was a caged animal finally being released into the wild. As the gas station disappeared behind the curve, I gripped the steering wheel and pressed

forward into the blackness. I knew now that death and life are the same sort of hell. One just hurts more than the other.

The Only Religion is Power

You came to us because you want to belong. You left your shit town because you knew, deep down, that you would never go back there. You told the recruiter that you were joining the Marines because you weren't a pussy and you were tired of everyone who doubted you. Right now you're scared, but you're also feeling powerful. You feel like you could take on the world. You start to wonder why you ever doubted this decision. You've seen the videos and you have done some research about us. You even talked to your friend's uncle who is one of us. He said it wouldn't be easy for you, but that you wouldn't regret your decision. You asked him what he thought was the toughest part, and he didn't answer. He just got a far away look in his eyes and wished you good luck. You are anxious on the bus ride, waiting to see what your drill instructors will look like. You start to feel a little nauseated, but somewhere inside of you starts to feel strangely accepting, as if you've made this decision over and over again, time immemorial.

You're a long way from Lewiston, Maine, recruit. Oh, yes. I know all about you. I am your Senior Drill Instructor, and I will be with you for the rest of your life, locked away inside the recesses of your brain. I will pop out unexpectedly from time to time so that I can check in on you. I know you think you know what you're doing here. You came here because you were worried about making the family proud. Your daddy was in the military and your daddy's daddy was in the military and now, to prove wrong everyone who said the best part of you ran down the crack of mommy's ass, you're here with us. Before you prove to us that you are worth it, we will prove to you that we are the best.

We are here to train you to become the finest fighting force in the world, and we will not fail you because we are the best in the world at what we do. There is no greater power than a Marine and his rifle, and we will accept nothing less than 100 percent from you at all times. You will treat us with respect, and you will observe complete fidelity to the chain of command. A Marine never lies, cheats, or compromises. He is at all times faithful to himself, his fellow Marines, and to the United States Marine Corps. The core values of the Marine are honor, courage, and commitment. You will be held accountable to these tenets. But above all else, never quit. If you get in our way or prevent us from doing our job we will knock your teeth out of the back of your skull. Remember that.

You are standing on yellow footprints because that is where new recruits stand when they arrive in Parris Island. Many good Marines before you have stood there, and many good Marines will stand there after you have stood there. We do not know yet if you will be a good Marine. Recruit training will tell us everything we need to know about you. We will learn if you are to be trusted. Our default setting is not to trust you. Because we know you lied to your recruiter about smoking weed. We know you were arrested once for breaking into a construction site and stealing building supplies. We know things about you that you haven't yet learned about yourself. You will trust us and obey us because if you do not, well, what choice do you have? You are on our base, and you are subject to our rules, which are known as the Uniform Code of Military Justice. There are articles in this code that, when broken, will require us to imprison you. If you break one of our articles, it is your fault, and you must suffer the consequences. You cannot run away from us; we will find you. You cannot disobey us; we will break you. The only thing you can do is fail us, which means that you are failing yourself, your country.

We are here to teach you everything you need to know. You will not move unless you are told to move. When you are told to move, you will do so with expedition. You will only speak when spoken to. Everything you say starts and ends with the word “sir.” If you do not follow the rules, you will be killed. We will have the drill instructors play games until you are too exhausted to continue. Playing games means that they will take you to the quarterdeck, the open area in front of the squad bay, and they will make you do push-ups until you die. And then they will make you do more. You will then be “smoked,” as we say. Or, if your infraction is particularly egregious, we may take you outside to the sand pit. The irritation of the sand is to make up for your stupid mistakes. The bites from the sand fleas are extra punishment because you all deserve it. And when you try to sneak food out of the chow hall because you are hungry, we will find it and smoke you. We will push you past what you thought your breaking point was.

You may be wondering what it is you’re doing here. Many before you have wondered that as well. We already know why you are here. You will have to look deep inside yourself to the places that you never knew existed and put together an answer that doesn’t make you seem like an absolute fuck-up. You will look deep inside yourself and think about the disgusting hole of the country you came from and your fat, lazy friends and family you’re leaving behind. You want to be better than everyone else. You want to be able to say you did something that gave you purpose. You only think these things now, but you don’t know if any of it is true. You think that you said to your recruiter that you wanted to join the Marines because you knew that the other branches are weak, but you don’t really even know what you’re in for yet. You will remember the time that you

visited all those colleges you didn't go to, and that now mommy considers you a failure because her little baby boy is learning how to be a killer instead.

Of course you're here to try to find purpose in your life. You always knew you wanted to join the military, if for no other reason than it seems to be the family trademark. But being in the infantry scares you so you want to choose something that won't put you on the front lines. But what you don't even know yet is that there are no more front lines and that everyone faces some risk. And if you don't already know joining the Marines exposes you to the risk of death you will die anyway, ripped apart by hot bits of exploded metal on a dirt road outside of Fallujah.

You're thinking now about the girl you left back home, about Ashley. You're thinking about how much you love her, which may be true, but I know she does not love you. There was no one but her for you in the small town you grew up in, and it feels like you've had a portion of yourself carved out of you. But this is a lie. You are missing fucking her, and little else. If you pass our tests and we label you a Marine, you will be able to fuck whomever you wish, unless of course you actually want to become intimate with anyone, which will not work, if for no other reason than we will have stripped away the part of you able to understand the distinction between sex and intimacy. Ashley resents you for having left her, and she's already contemplating cheating on you. This should not fill you with sorrow. This should make you happy. There is no room for love of anyone else in your life except for love of country and love of Corps.

You will try to compare yourself to the other recruits here, but you won't be allowed to make friends, so your judgments will be internal and unfounded. You will wonder whether or not you made the right decision, and that answer will be both yes and

no. You will wonder what made your drill instructors join. Your drill instructors all had a higher calling. They were transformed and have become transcendent. They are untouchable, infallible, divine.

This is your drill instructor Sergeant Mullins. He wears his hat far down over his face so you cannot see his eyes, but he sees everything. He does not like you. He will never like you. His job is to kill you. He is also known as the “kill-hat” drill instructor. He will be in charge of punishment and discipline here in your platoon, Platoon 3105. Sergeant Mullins is not to be fucked with. If you fuck with Sergeant Mullins, you will die. Notice the veins bulging on either side of his neck. Sergeant Mullins does not sweat, and if you see him sweating, you are close to death. We do not want to receive letters from your parents, or your congressmen, or your local faith-leader about how difficult life is here. We do not care about your comfort. We care about training you to kill.

Some of you fucking fucks don’t know how to march, but we will train you. If you fail to learn how to march, you will be killed. You will continue to be killed until you get it right. If, for whatever reason, you fail to learn what is expected of you here, you will be administratively separated. That is a fancy way of saying you’re a fucking piece of shit and the Marines don’t want anything to do with you. This will also happen if you do drugs. You will not have access to drugs until you are in the fleet, but none of you fuck stains should even be thinking about graduating from here yet. You must prove yourself. You will receive all of your recruit equipment at supply as well. We will give you two uniforms, desert and woodland patterns, boots, boot blouses, socks, cover, soft cover, PT gear, running shoes, reflective belt, harness, flak jacket, canteens magazines, camelback, M16—everything you need to learn how to become a killer, because, as we

all know, that's what you really want to be. That's why you're here. Hold out everything that you've been issued. This is an impossible task, but we know you will learn how to perform the impossible. In order to perform the impossible your mind must be outside of what is rational, and that is what we hope to transform you into: irrational, disciplined monster men. You will be angels of death.

Reach up and feel your head. You now can feel the coat hanger marks on the top of your skulls from where your mommy tried to abort you. All of your hair has been shaved off. Why? Because you have no business having hair on your head. We said so. We will force you to get your head shaved every week. You will come to learn that a proper haircut is one of the most important things a Marine can do to prove that he is good at his job. We know that does not make sense, but we impose our will anyway because we love tradition. Tradition dictates that we require all Marines to get a haircut weekly. That is so the enemy will not be able to grab the hair on your head and hold it while he slits your throat. The enemy wants to do that. The enemy may be able to do that to you even though we are fighting with weapons that are accurate to distances of more than 500 meters. Of course, the enemy could be right around the corner, or staring down at you through the windows of a destroyed, vacant building. You will never know precisely where the enemy is, except when you have positive identification of the enemy, which is what you need in order to shoot the enemy. What you do need to know is that the enemy is out there. He is more capable right now than you are. He is waiting for you to make a mistake and then he wants to kill you. You will be on his turf, and you will have to go find him. Right now you don't stand a chance against the enemy who wants everything more than you do. That will change. Unless you are fucked. If you are fucked,

there is nothing we can do except destroy you over and over again until you unfuck yourself. While we are destroying you, you will be happy about it. All the tears you cry will be happy tears, because, as we all remember from our recruiter: Pain is weakness leaving the body.

You are all still weak, but we will change that.

Eyes up front. That is Sergeant Axelrod. He is your junior drill instructor. He does not like you either. Sergeant Axelrod will be in charge of the bulk of your training. He will not hesitate to kill you either. If you look any of the drill instructors in the eye, we will kill you. We are above being looked in the eye. You are to keep your eyes forward at all times. Sergeant Axelrod will teach you how to drill. He will teach you how to fight. He will teach you all how to kill. Killing is what we do best. Do not forget. He will teach you our history. He will explain why we wear red stripes on the sides of our dress uniform. He will explain how good men, certainly better men than you, fought and died for this great nation, for our Corps. Sergeant Axelrod will not hesitate to make examples out of you recruits. He demands your full attention, maximum discipline, and a tenacious spirit from all of you. That is what he will give you, so we expect the same in return. When we go to the pool to train you weak fucks how to swim, Sergeant Axelrod might just want to watch you drown. Because if you are not able to swim, why would you want to be a Marine? Sergeant Axelrod will not let you drown even if he wants to watch you drown. He will pull you out and kill you. Sergeant Axelrod is the closest thing you have to a friend here. Do not fuck with him or you will die. Those ribbons on Sergeant Axelrod's uniform mean different things. Things you do not even know about yet. You will have one ribbon when you complete recruit training, even though none of you cunts

deserve it. All you prove by being here is that you are committed to killing another person. Where, when, and how is our decision.

You may be wondering why I can tell you all of these things. It is because I am God. Your voices are now sounding out in unison to my name, and my name is “Sir.” That is all you really need to know about me. You will never sound my name loud enough. You will never perform your tasks fast enough. Look at this pathetic piece of trash here.

You are now all standing on line. The black line on the floor that runs parallel to the racks where you sleep is where you will be expected to stand when we say so. The order is the tall fucks up front and on down to you little pieces of shit in the rear. Each of you has been given a rack and rackmate. You will be responsible for each other. Do not fail your rackmate or you fail yourself. If you fail your rackmate, you will both be killed. Sergeants Axelrod and Mullins will see to it personally that you perform mountain climbers until your hearts explode. Then there will be nothing left but a sunken shell of a person. You will be broken and exhausted and ready to give up. If you give up you are a piece of shit. You were never meant to be a Marine. If you think at some point you will get comfortable enough to start fucking with each other, just know that no one is as skilled at destroying as we are. We will take all of your little games from all you recruits who think you are so smart. The last platoon we trained thought it would be funny to wake everyone up in the middle of the night and get dressed. And let me tell you, this is about the closest your Senior Drill Instructor ever came to losing his bearing. Those long dormant muscles that make a man smile kicked into gear, but guess what? They’re all dead. Long dead. They wanted to have fun with each other, so we marched them until

their feet bled, until their muscles failed. We trained them harder, faster, longer, so they would never forget that this isn't about having fun. This is about death—yours, mine, ours, the enemy's. So if you want to copy the drill instructors and play games with each other, you'll die. Simple as that.

You are now standing at the position of attention. This is where you will live most of your life at recruit training. If you address one of us it will be from the position of attention. You are standing board straight with your feet splayed at a 45 degree angle. Your legs are together and your arms are straight, held fast to your sides. Your fingers curl up from the second knuckle as if you were holding a roll of quarters. Your jaw is lifted and your eyes are open, mouth shut. This shows respect to your superiors. This also allows us to get in your face. This also allows us to hurt you, which we will want to do because you all must be molded, changed into killers. You will kill on command. This will make you feel good inside.

You are no longer allowed to have a sense of self. The self is dangerous to Marines. It gets in the way. When you address your human person, you must do so in the third person by saying, "This recruit..." and so on. Use of the first person pronouns are strictly forbidden. If you use an incorrect pronoun, you will die. Furthermore, if you do not refer to your Drill Instructors as Drill Instructor, rank, name, may God have mercy on your soul. You will forget the rules from time to time, even though you will have learned that the best way to survive here is by becoming a fly on the wall. You know well enough not to stand out in either good ways or bad ways, that there is safety in numbers—your own personal herd immunity. Then, one day, when you are preparing for a field exercise, you will look Drill Instructor Sergeant Axelrod in the eye. He will give you the faintest

hint of a smile before he kills you. You will be on the quarterdeck for what feels like hours. When your muscles have finally betrayed you, and you can no longer push your disgusting body up off of the deck, you will have a moment of clarity. You will not be able to tell the difference between sweat and tears, and you will look down at the sweat-stained concrete at your feet and see a cross. And you will wonder whether or not God has been testing you all along.

You will be allowed to attend church once a week on Sundays. It will not make it easier for you, but you will want a “come to Jesus” moment. You will feel like you are lost, alone in the world, which does not make sense because you are in an area where everyone else is thinking just like you. They might not be thinking just like you yet, but they will; you all will. But you will go to church and the chaplain will make you feel like a person and you will cry because you are weak, and you will reach up and grasp the group of recruits who have formed a pile around the altar, and you will try in vain to feel something that is more than sadness and homesickness, but you will not be able to. Chaps will tell you that we need more killers like you. He will say to you, in words you’ve never heard from a member of the clergy, that God is on our side, that we are the righteous. The chaplain will give you God’s permission to kill. You will then only need our permission to kill. You will wonder whether or not you have misunderstood what religion is all about, and then years from now you will realize how wrong you were and the only religion is power, and you will feel powerful and closer to God than you ever did when you were religious. You will feel this power start to build from now on. When we run, your lungs will burn and your legs will be on fire. You will be exhausted, but this is you becoming more powerful. This, everything you see and experience here at recruit

training, is your church. You don't need God. You need us. We will help you attain your full potential.

You will feel echoes of this on the battlefield. You will wonder whose prayers God is answering, yours or the enemy's, and you will not know. You will accept that you have already died, and that the only way you have permission to expire is whether or not your commanding officer has granted it. You will be surprised to learn how many of your fellow recruits have been killed. Like Recruit Underkoffler, here. He will die on the battlefield and you will never see him again. He will occupy a place in your memory that fades with each passing moment. You will think about every time you interacted with him, and it will not be enough to really remember what he was like, but you know now that he was not good enough, not strong enough, not fast enough to outrun the enemy's bullet, to outwit the enemy explosive device, to have enough clarity of thought to see the things that were put in place to end his life.

We will be going through three separate phases to train you the best we know how. Some of you will not make it. We will push you even after you have given up on yourselves. That is why we are here. The first phase will be conditioning. You will be put through the gauntlet. We will run until you puke and run some more. We will destroy muscles you didn't even know you had. We will fill your head with information you didn't know you didn't know. We will break down every slimy, self-destructive tendency all of you should-have-been-blowjobs ever had.

You will all learn how to fight. Even if you think you already knew how to fight, we will prove you wrong. We have the finest fighting force in the world and we didn't get that way by getting drunk at bars and throwing down with the first person who calls

your girl ugly. Even though everyone does probably call your girl ugly. We will train you to fight in such a way that you will know how to defend yourself from the enemy. The enemy out there. Do not confuse the enemy with our trumped-up legend of Jody, your best friend back home who is fucking your girlfriend right now, though you might think him to be the enemy. He is doing you a favor. Actually, he is probably doing your girlfriend a favor because all you limp-dicked idiots couldn't ever please your girlfriends anyway. So, your best friend Jody is back home banging away on whatever pile of overripe fruit you call a girlfriend. Good ol' Jody. I need all you faggots to stop thinking about Jody's dick right now and start thinking about killing the *real* enemy.

During the second phase here, after we have spent sufficient time breaking down your bodies to build them back up, we will move to the rifle range. You will be issued a rifle. We store the rifles in the armory. You will come to understand your rifle as a tool. Without you, your rifle is harmless. Together, you and your rifle are the baddest motherfuckers on the planet. This is motivating. When we say motivating things you respond by saying "oo-rah," which is the Marines rallying cry. We know it doesn't make sense yet, but it will. It will make sense because we will require it to make sense. If it does not make sense, you are in trouble.

Everyone look at recruit Oskowski. He will have a very difficult time at recruit training. He will not be able to understand all that we are demanding of him. He will continue to be confused and disoriented, and he will get Marines killed. I can see it now, actually. Oskowski will fall asleep on his post, much like he does on his firewatch shifts. The enemy will be able to come up to the FOB where Oskowski and the other Marines are staying and lob a grenade into the compound, killing some Marines. It will be

Oskowski's fault. I can say this with absolute certainty because I have seen it over and over again. Perhaps, on the course of becoming Marines, Oskowski will realize the challenges are too tough. He will want to kill himself. Some of you also may want to. Do not take anyone with you to make up for your shortcomings. That is what the enemy does. Do not be like the enemy. The enemy is cowardly. Marines are not.

It is, of course, true that you will learn to shoot long distances, up to 500 meters. This is necessary because sometimes your targets are far away. You will fire round after round of ammunition into paper targets. Sometimes these targets are shaped like men. This is because eventually you hope to be killing men. Abandon any misperception that killing is a bad thing because that is what you are here to do. Do not forget that. Do not forget that too often you will be required to kill someone inside the room of a house while you too are inside that house. This is the reality of modern combat. You do not know who the enemy is until he announces himself. When the enemy finally makes his whereabouts known, you will swiftly and justly end his life. It will be swift because we have trained you to act no other way. It will be just because we have declared it just.

You may even encounter a scenario where the enemy turns out to be women and children. It might make your feelings more complex and uncertain, but we will have done our best to remove those feelings from you. There have been instances in the past, we are ashamed to acknowledge, where Marines before you have acted in a way that besmirches the good name of our beloved Corps. They have committed crimes against civilians, defied the Geneva Convention, and abandoned the general rules of war. They are not truly Marines. There will be a time when you question what it means to be a Marine, and

we can only hope that we have done our best to firm up the idea of patriotism, service, and duty.

While at recruit training the Drill Instructors will begin to single out a few recruits who are failing to hold themselves up to the standards of the United States Marine Corps. You will hear them berate those recruits so often that you will hear recruits shouting in their dreams. Those voices in the night will prevent you from sleeping at first, but then you will be amused. You will have night terrors, but they will not be for many years. We will continue to mock and deride failing recruits because we must show you what will and will not be tolerated. We will tell all of you that these types of recruits are the ones who get people killed when we finally do battle with the enemy. Like Oskowski there, and Nuñez. The recruits will feel bad about this, they will feel like they made a mistake to join the Marines. This is normal, but is also not good. If the recruits are feeling this way, they have already failed. When you are in the fleet and looking through the names of people who died in our many conflicts, you will see one or two that you know from recruit training. It will likely not surprise you when you see that they have been killed by the enemy. It was because they were pieces of shit who did not listen. You may feel hollow inside because you know it could have been you, but then you will get over it because you made it out of bootcamp without the Drill Instructors in your face all the time for being a piece of shit.

In the front of the squad bay is the Drill Instructor office. This is where we stay when we are watching all of you. When we allow you to fall asleep at night we require two of you to stay awake for an hour of firewatch. Two recruits will be awake at all times during the night. If you have firewatch and you see the Drill Instructors you must report

your post immediately. If you do not report your post in the appropriate manner, you will have another hour of firewatch. If you fuck up, you will be killed. If you fall asleep while on duty, you should not bother waking up. Fifteen minutes prior to reveille the firewatch must wake the Drill Instructor by pounding loudly on the door. Of course you will wake the rest of the recruits, but that does not matter. You will all wake up and hear the countdown to lights-on. This will feel like the worst type of pressure. It will be as though you are psyching yourself up to get kicked repeatedly in the nuts.

Training will end upon completion of the third phase, which is the most difficult. You will be put to the test. You will need to complete a physical fitness test. If you do not pass, you will be recycled. We will not accept failures. We want to see you all puking your guts out, dragging your disgusting bodies across the finish line in time, or you will die. You will also be required to complete the culmination exercise, which you may know is called The Crucible. You will be undergoing a similar degree of judicial scrutiny, which means that nothing will make sense until it is all over. You will be required to hike 48 miles over the course of this 54-hour event. You will have six hours of sleep if you are lucky and you will have one meal. We will force you to march 10 miles with all of your equipment at the end, and you will be weary with exhaustion. When the march is over we will give you an apple and scalding hot Gatorade. When you ingest these items you will feel the energy start to flow from your core to your limbs. This will feel strange, but also transcendent. You will wonder why you have never felt this feeling before, and you will realize, at that moment, what we have done is annihilated your previous existence and chiseled an entirely new you out of our own material. We will have hardened you the fuck up so the enemy has a harder time killing you. The enemy wants very badly to kill

you, and if you do not pay attention to what we are saying it will be much easier for him to do so.

Long after this is all over you will look back on everything that you have experienced here and laugh. You will laugh and laugh and laugh. None of it will make much sense to you, and when you come back from our wars, *if* you come back, you will wonder what it all means. You will grapple with issues of meaninglessness and absurdity and every time you think that you're onto something, the universe will open up and take a giant shit on you so bad that you'll consider that death certainly might not be the worst alternative. We know this, and we are telling you this because we all have experienced this. Even the most decorated Marine questions You will remember all the books you read in Mrs. Allen's English class and what a profound effect they had on you, and you will return to those books about war. And you will wonder, with a certain sense of finality, who was right: Wilfred Owen or Horace?

You will think about all the purpose you thought you had while you were serving and you will wonder what that means for you. You will think about the time you watched the oil fields on fire at night and the time you saw that little boy's brain and you will wonder how can the world be so on fire all the time. You will wonder why it is that you didn't die over there, unless of course you did die over there, and it will only start to make sense years after your service is over. You will suddenly understand that it isn't that you are having difficulty adjusting, it's that what you've become makes more sense than what you're coming back to. You will say to your friends and relatives, if you have any, *How can I hope to explain everything to you, here in this Target, as we pace the aisles looking for that brand of gum you really like?* And no one will be able to understand you.

There will be a moment where a single solitary smell or sound will gut punch you harder than Drill Instructor Sergeant Mullins ever has, and you will be on the ground crying for your mommy because the images of everything that you've packed away inside you come flooding back. You will watch movies about war in hopes to understand the sorts of things that you experienced, but those Hollywood hacks won't be able to tell you anything about yourself other than you're not good looking enough to be in a movie.

And guess what? You are already dead. The decisions you have made and will make have already led you to your demise, and there is nothing we can do for you except guide you. You will realize that making the decision to come here and press through until the end, to never quit, to never falter, to never give up, has inexorably changed you, as if your DNA combined with ours and you are forevermore a Marine. The pieces of you that will splinter off at every moment of your existence will continue to haunt those realms, and you will be reminded of your shattered existence when you hear the National Anthem, the Marine Corps Hymn, when you read a particularly poignant passage from a book. And on days when the sun is shining, when you're out walking your dog and listening to the world breathe a sigh of collective relief, you will not be able to tell where you end and the world begins.

Now look at me. I am Senior Drill Instructor Staff Sergeant Zorn. I am your God. It does not matter what you believe in, because you are now required to believe in me. I can give you everything and I can take everything away. Look at how perfectly my uniform fits me. Look at the ribbons on my chest. Look at my shiny black belt. This all proves that I am better in every single conceivable way than the rest of you. You are powerless and I am the power. You all belong to me now. There is nothing you can do to

hurt me. You cannot kill me, you cannot harm me. I am all-seeing, all-knowing. You all want to be a part of my beloved Corps? Well, you'll have to prove yourselves worthy. If you think that you've made the wrong decision, you might as well kill yourself right now. You're as useless to me as you are to the rest of humanity. As for the rest of you, prepare to die.

By the Book

Of course you can practice as many times as possible, figuring out what to do when the whole world goes to shit and the pavement gets wiped away from you in a brown cloud, and you can pretend some of your teammates are injured so you get used to calling in CASEVAC over the radio and using your 9-lines and shit, but what no one ever tells you is what it *feels* like to hit an IED. At least not really. And I could try to make some half-assed analogy—like a bully slamming you backward into a locker, or a single note from a subwoofer that breaks your ear drums—but what the fuck would you even really get from that? Besides, if you're the unlucky dumb ass whose vehicle catches a direct hit, maybe you don't even feel anything. Maybe the last thing you see, as the overpressure and shockwaves turn your organs to liquid, is the rest of your team limned in golden light, like one brief sunset to signify the finality of your existence. Or you could be a real unlucky fucker like Ozzie.

The real irony was that out of any of us, Ozzie liked Fallujah. He genuinely enjoyed it. None of us could wrap our heads around what there was to like, especially because we'd done a pretty good job of destroying the place.

"Smell that, boys?" Ozzie asked when the bird touched down on Camp Fallujah.

"It smells like burning garbage, Oz," I said.

"No. It smells like liberation."

"Fuck off with that motivational bullshit," Corporal Garza shouted over the whine of the rotors.

As far as squad leaders go, we could have gotten worse than Garza, but me and Oz and Coyle wondered whether we were better off with someone like Applegate who'd

go guns blazing into just about any shitstorm, or someone more timid like Evans. But as angry and irascible as Garza was, there wasn't a more by-the-book swingin' dick in the entire company. He was a stickler for haircuts, and he would chew out anyone for not blousing their boots, not shaving, not being hydrated, and any general Lance Corporal fuckery that happened, for which Coyle and Ozzie both seemed to always be on his shit list. They were two of the youngest Marines in the company, and though I was close with both of them, they were even closer with each other. "A modern day Laurel and Hardy," our XO called them, passing by the two jokesters when they were out by the burn pit, "out on their own midnight patrol." I don't think either of them got the reference, but their nicknames stuck.

We never considered, not even for a moment, that anything bad would happen to us as long as Garza was in charge, but it still felt weird every time we went on a mission with him because it was like working with some sort of robot. He was our own local legend, a Marine's Marine. Unflinching, unfeeling, unapologetic.

Halfway through the deployment we were supporting a route clearance mission when we get called to the Jolan District in northwest Fallujah. There was some sort of an attack on a market, likely an IED or suicide bomber. What this meant was: blood and limbs and twisted metal and broken concrete and dust and everything singed and burning. We provided security as EOD did their post-blast analysis, confirming what we already knew, which was that shit was very obviously fucked and we were all glad we weren't here when it happened. And the whole town started showing up and gathering around and looking at all the carnage, which made me feel pretty sad to be honest, because who were we to tell them that they couldn't come in and take the pieces of their loved ones back to

wherever you take pieces of someone when they're blown apart. And for whatever reason a couple of dumb ass PFCs were in charge of stacking the bodies and getting the scene ready to transfer over to the Iraqi Police when they began to laugh and joke about the dead hajjis. Garza walked over to them and grabbed each by their throat protectors and pulled them in real close. I still don't know what he said, but both of them turned the same grey color as the dead they were stacking and they shut right the fuck up.

We stayed at the government center for most of our deployment. It was in downtown Fallujah and it was air conditioned, but it was also the tallest building around at six stories, making it an ideal target for complex attacks. So even when we weren't actively out on a mission it felt like we were always in someone's sights. Mortar teams would constantly set up in farmland out by the Euphrates or up north past the train station and try to get a bead on our location. And these weren't just random farmers who were being paid to attack us like what usually happened on our foot patrols. These were foreign fighters who had no-shit combat experience in other countries most of us knew nothing about but hated with a ferocity that defied explanation.

We used our ignorance as a shield to help us make sense of what we were doing. It became easier to hate everyone around us, to hate the people of Fallujah for existing, to hate our missions of trying to win hearts and minds. Even Garza seemed to have an easier time resenting our job there than actually enjoying it. The only one of us who seemed to really enjoy what he was doing was Oz.

"I'm going to start taking hearts and minds, not giving them," I said.

"Ah, come on, Flynn. It's not that bad," Ozzie said from the turret. "These people are just like you and me. Think about what you would do if some large occupying force

landed in your backyard. You probably wouldn't let them go barging around letting them do whatever they wanted, right? You'd be pretty pissed off if you had no money and then those guys roll up on your house and break everything. Or imagine if they killed someone you know? What would you do?"

"Your statement doesn't make sense, Lance Corporal," Garza said, as we piled into the trucks. "That would never happen because Los Angeles is not the same as Fallujah. Also, shut the fuck up and get ready. We're OM in five minutes."

Ozzie sighed and readjusted himself in the gunner's sling, his tree trunk legs taking up most of the room in the back of the truck. I sat down in the rear getting the coms ready listening to Oz rack the .50cal bolt over and over again, ensuring that it had been properly cleaned.

The missions blended together under the oppressive heat of summer, as if the thermal waves dancing off our armor were an indication it was all a dream. Time no longer seemed to matter, except in those frantic milliseconds when it all goes to shit. Of course, the going to shit never really happened to us, but we could see it happening to everyone else. Missions piled on top of missions, and we visited blast site after blast site. The carnage was obvious, but we showed up like reporters to a crime scene and waited for something else to go wrong. We even wanted something to go wrong so we felt like we had a purpose, not like an unused tool in the toolbox. Our training seemed pointless, the heat drilled into us, enveloped us, annihilated us. We never even considered for a moment that the people we were fighting, even though we never saw them, were our enemy because the only enemy we encountered was our boredom.

It was the unrelenting sameness of the days that took its toll. It wasn't even the stress of near death, at least I don't think so. I was more concerned about dehydration and heat stroke than I was about shrapnel or enemy rounds. Every time I closed my eyes, all I heard was the clicking glide of Ozzie's turret turning around and around, the rattle of the armored doors, and the groan of a diesel engine. The brown concrete walls of Fallujah were the same at every corner, around every bend, until we finally showed up at a black hole in the ground. The country itself seemed to react to its own boredom, the bedrock flicking itself into the sky and taking as many people and vehicles with it as it could. Shell casings and blood stains were the bench marks by which we measured how angry the country was at its own existence, at our incursion, at its inconsistencies.

Every ounce of training the Marine Corps chose to gave us prepared us for what might happen, but nothing prepared us for the crushing boredom. I'm guessing Ozzie was the first to crack because he spent so much time in the turret. It's the most exposed position on the vehicle, but if the truck strikes an IED, the gunner has the best chance of survival because he'll just get thrown dozens of feet away instead of being trapped inside the twisted metal. But any solace Ozzie could have derived from knowing he'd likely be limbless but alive in the event of an explosion was mitigated by the realization that he'd be the first to die in a sniper attack. It was also really fucking hot in the turret, and I think his brain was baking.

"I'm gonna come back here some day," he said, as we passed over the north bridge, where three years prior Blackwater security agents were hung and their bodies burned.

“Keep your eyes on the rooftops, Lance Corporal Oswald, or you won’t ever leave here,” Garza said over the radio.

“I’m serious,” Ozzie said, rotating the turret. “Just think about how beautiful this place would be if people weren’t trying to kill us all the time.”

“Who’s trying to kill us?” I asked, but no one bothered to answer.

The signs were all around us; every time we went out of Camp Fallujah the giant concrete Alaska barriers warned us that “Complacency Kills,” and yet it was the only way we were able to stay sane. I started coming up with backstories for random civilians we came across, their tired expressions and wary demeanor ripe for our brand of comedy. Laurel and Hardy tried to fry an egg on the hood of our vehicle in the 120° heat, but the slick mess just slid off the front and plopped into the dirt, Garza yelling about wasting a perfectly good “chicken fetus” and getting the truck dirty. He made Ozzie wash it by hand. We caught scorpions and made them fight each other, but we soon tired of our arachnid gladiators and embraced the carnage of feeding them to camel spiders instead, until someone in first platoon lost their number one prize fighter and spent three days in Fallujah surgical after it exacted its revenge inside his poncho liner. It was weekly inspections after that to make sure we weren’t keeping anything in our bunks we weren’t supposed to. Late in the evening when the temperature dipped down to a much more manageable 100°, Ozzie and Coyle and I took turns passing the guitar around and tried to learn “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” but we’d always get the chords wrong, and Coyle was the only one who could really sing, but he didn’t know the words.

One night, while waiting for the heat to stop radiating inside our rooms, I joined Coyle and Ozzie who were smoking clove cigarettes they stole from the Turkish

barbershop across the camp. Ozzie stood next to a Hesco barrier poking holes in the fabric with his long, delicate fingers. Coyle sat in a camp chair with the guitar slung low across his lap, picking absentmindedly at a few strings. Garza never joined us, and Coyle always joked that he was just like Chuck Norris inside his room waiting, never sleeping.

“It’s hotter’n two rats fuckin’ in a wool sock,” Coyle said, spitting.

“That’s what I love about this place,” Ozzie said. “You always know what you’re going to get.”

“You seriously gotta knock it off with that shit,” I said. “It’s getting real boring.”

“You really think it’s so bad here?”

“Oz, this place is the worst,” Coyle said. “We could die here at any moment.”

“Tell me how that’s different than anywhere else.”

I wondered how far I wanted to pursue this thread. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. My voice was instead replaced by the dusty gruffness we’d been trained to respond to immediately.

“You’re right, Lance Corporal Oswald,” Garza said, his voice coming from the shadows of a conex box. “This place isn’t any different than other parts of the world. It’s you who’s different. It’s us.”

We watched the cherry from Garza’s cigarette float from hip height up to his mouth, and as he inhaled, the glow revealed the sharp nose and hard eyes of a man who had spent months figuring out how best to stay alive.

“You want to come back here, Oswald? Fine, fine. I’m sure there will be parts of us that always want to return. Just remember that apart from you and our government, Oswald, no one wants you here. You want to come back because you feel like you belong

to something, something good, something greater than yourself. But there's nothing here for you once we leave. Just memory. And if you're here without the things that are keeping you safe, keeping you alive, the only thing that you'll find here when you come back is death. You're protected now because you have me, you have the Marines around you. You and Coyle like to laugh, and you have the privilege of doing so because there are others out here working harder than you. There are others, the dead and dying, who will never leave this place. You will leave this place because that's my job, but maybe if you're lucky, you'll get to come back here when you're dead."

We watched as the cherry on Garza's cigarette suddenly arced its way up until it struck the barrier in a small shower of sparks, and we heard the crunching of Garza's boots fade away until silence wrapped itself around us. Ozzie sat in his folding chair without saying a word until I went to bed an hour later.

That was the last time Garza ever spoke to us outside of something that was directly related to our work. As soon as he released us for the day, he'd disappear to his rack and we wouldn't see him until we were supposed to report for our next shift.

July heat broiled us as we set up a cordon for EOD. A suicide bomber had struck a gas station and there were many badly injured and some dead. The locals wanted to get in to start cleaning up after the blast, but we were instructed to keep them out so EOD could do a proper investigation. And just like any other day, it was going to shit. The fumes from the fire sent thick black smoke rolling out of where the pump used to be, just in front of a storefront the size of a toolshed. The owner of the gas station was very likely dead, caught in the brunt of the explosion that shattered glass as far as a block away. Garza and I dismounted from the trucks and scanned the area for secondary devices. The

rest of the platoon stood near the growing crowd trying to make sure no one came in and contaminated the scene, but the crowd was restless. Sectarian violence had been increasing steadily and we were now caught right in the middle. As the first trucks of the EOD detachment lumbered in, someone threw a stone. Ozzie whirled the .50cal threateningly, but it didn't intimidate a group of people who were perpetually near death.

We released the scene to EOD and they conducted a hasty analysis which went something like this: a man in the car nearest the pump exploded himself and killed many people. The ordinance likely had been artillery shells supplemented with fertilizer. Everything smelled like burning and we were tired.

We stood by our vehicle as the Iraqi Police allowed the crowd to attend to the dead. An older man with dark skin and deep-set eyes walked into the destroyed store and came out carrying a small child, no more than 10 years old. He paused when he passed us, and presented the body toward us for judgment. The boy was blue grey, covered in dust from the explosion and his skull had been cleaved off straight back at the forehead. There was very little blood, save for a small trickle by the boy's ear, but we could see inside his head. And in that moment I could feel the world start to make less sense. The boy's father stared hard at us each in the face until we were too ashamed to look, and then he walked away without a word.

Our deployment wore on and we started getting edgy. Coyle and Ozzie didn't seem to enjoy each other's sense of humor, and many of our missions took on a hostile silence. Every irritation seemed more present, more inescapable, and we took shower after shower to feel clean, but we only ended up washing away bits of ourselves. A new numbness crept up from deep inside ourselves and wrapped its arms around our hearts.

One morning before our shift I caught Garza giving Ozzie hell because he hadn't shaved.

"What the fuck do you think this is, Lance Corporal? Go to the shower and shave that nasty face of your before I PT you until you die."

"Aye, Corporal," Ozzie said, glumly.

"Oh, good. You want to give me attitude, too."

"No, Corporal," he said, eyes set in the middle distance.

Garza swooped in beside Ozzie and struck him in the throat with the side of his hand. Ozzie tumbled backward choking with raggedy breaths.

"Jesus Christ," I said, jumping in to help Ozzie back to his feet. "What the hell is your problem?"

Garza stared down at us and spat into the dirt by Ozzie's feet.

"You fuckers are going to get good Marines killed," he said, and stomped off toward the company headquarters.

In the month we had left on our deployment, virtually no one spoke. I tried reading to pass the time, but it was too hot to focus on the words. Ozzie slept as much as he could, waking only to use the head and go to chow. Coyle spent a lot of time at the MRW rec center, chatting with his girlfriend back home who had definitely already left him for another guy. He didn't believe us, the dope. And Garza was Garza. All work, no play.

The sole moment of release that we gave ourselves was when our relief showed up from Camp Lejune. We had two weeks of side-by-side missions so they could get to know the lay of the land and we could help establish the relationships and what have you

before we got to head home. A PFC from their company rode with us, the boredom-hardened veterans, in the back of our truck.

“Did you guys see any action?” the boot asked.

“What does that even mean?” Ozzie radioed down from the turret.

“You know what I mean. Did you engage the enemy?”

“Coyle knows all about engagements. Why don’t you ask him?”

“Fuck you, Flynn,” Coyle shot back. “At least I’ve got a girl waiting for me when I get back.”

“We’re both going back to the same thing and you know it,” I said, leaning forward and tapping him on the helmet.

We were patrolling a section of farmland outside of Fallujah proper on our way to link up with a route clearance mission that had encountered some IEDs. We had learned to stay off major roads because of how frequently convoys had been blown up on them, but the smaller dirt trails were harder to navigate and much narrower than the paved streets Saddam had built up during his reign. Up ahead the convoy slowed to a stop and word came back from the lead vehicle that the road was blocked with a broken down tractor. The vehicles were pressed tight up against a long brick wall on a dirt path next to a wide irrigation trench that connected far up ahead with the Euphrates. It was a total choke point. The trucks had nowhere to turn around, so the entire convoy had to K-turn to head back, but the road was so narrow that we had to be careful the soft ground by the canal’s edge wouldn’t collapse. Our vehicles had four wheel drive and big-ass tires, but even they wouldn’t help us if we got stuck in the mud. Garza yelled at the boot to get out and ground guide for Coyle so that we could avoid slipping back into the trench. I

watched the skinny Marine shove open the door and amble up to the front of the vehicle, giving Coyle directions on which way to turn and how far to back up. And before I could even react, I felt the back tires slip into the trench behind us.

“Fuck,” Garza screamed. “Flynn, get out there and pull his head out of his ass.”

I got out to survey just how badly we were stuck. Even though the humvee has four wheel drive and locking differentials, it didn’t mean shit because we were high pointed. The armor on the bottom of the truck was stuck on a mound of dirt and all four tires were spinning.

“I don’t like this man,” Ozzie shouted, whirling the turret toward our exposed rear. “Something’s wrong here.”

“No shit,” I yelled back. “We’re stuck here.”

Two Marines got out of the humvee in front of us and pulled out a tow cable, hooking it to the front bumper of our stranded vehicle. Once they set the cable, the convoy commander ordered the tow. Garza ordered everyone out except Coyle, who sat in the driver’s seat with the door open. Once the tow vehicle started, the cable strained against the weight of our stranded truck. We backed up for fear of the cable breaking, but we were worried about the wrong thing. As the tow progressed, our truck started to slide sideways down the bank, pulling the tow vehicle back.

“Woah!” Garza shouted. “Stop!”

But the tow vehicle gunned its engine against the strain and yanked harder. The cable held, but shifted to a strange angle, and in an instant our truck was up on its side. It tipped in a slow groaning rollover, the top of our truck coming down in the middle of the

trench. The foul stagnant water spilled into our truck, and I was mesmerized by the sight of our humvee upside down. I totally forgot about Coyle.

Ozzie was under the water before the rollover even finished, searching for Coyle. I threw off my flak jacket and jumped in at the edge of the water, surprised to find that my feet didn't touch the bottom. The front right fender was all that stuck out of the water, and air bubbles were roiling from down under. After a minute, Ozzie sputtered to the surface shouting that he couldn't get the door open. Before he could disappear under the water a second time, Garza waded in and grabbed him, pulling him back to the bank.

"Let me go," Ozzie said, struggling against Garza's grasp.

"It's not your turn," Garza said.

The two slumped on the bank of the canal as the rest of the convoy fluttered with activity behind us. Coyle was still under the water, trapped inside the truck, his lungs still convulsing, his brain still active while we watched from the bank with no other options.

I remember the email I got years later from Garza when we learned that Ozzie killed himself.

flynn i dont know if u heard but ozzie killed himself
yesterday. he hung himself from what i heard. what happened to
coyle was not right and i feel like its my fault too, but i had a
choice to make and i chose to save the marine i knew i could
save. maybe its my fault for being too hard on them. sometimes i
wake up and i feel like im back there. i get up and walk the

streets of my neighborhood but i dont know what im looking for.

do u ever go back?

I never responded to his email, though I knew immediately he was right. We're all fractured, and there are pieces of me, of us, that will always be back there.

Get Some

The military has strange rules about whom you can and cannot fuck, which is made even stranger from the irony that the military just about fucks everyone. It's called the Green Weenie in the Marines. I don't know what any other branch calls it, but I imagine they've got their own versions. Everyone has felt what it's liked to get fucked by the Green Weenie, and if they haven't, it's only a matter of time before it gets to them. It always gets everyone. Hell, it got me even before I knew what it was. Evidently what the recruiter heard when I said "infantry" for what I wanted to do, meant, to him, "I'd like to be a mechanic." Apparently the test I took in high school pretty much guaranteed I'd be turning wrenches, but why would I join the Marines to be a mechanic? There's a pretty obvious reason that they don't make mechanics the focus of recruitment videos. It's pretty interesting in kind of a sad way to see how the trickle-down fuckanomics of the GW ended up not only putting me in Motor Transport, but also landing me in a platoon with an idiot Staff Sergeant and his band of merry know-nothings.

Back when we first deployed I had been pretty excited about the prospect of coming to Iraq, if for no other reason than it seemed to validate the whole reason I joined in the first place. I knew that even though fixing trucks would leave me mostly stranded on Camp Fallujah, 1) I still got combat pay, 2) there was a chance I might get outside the wire on a convoy where they needed more bodies, and 3) on said convoy I might even actually get to shoot at someone. But the only sort of action I'd seen so far on my deployment was feeling my bed shake while Van Flynn jerked off in the bottom rack.

One sweltering April morning Christiansen and I were installing some radio frequency jammers on the newer trucks that had just arrived. The RF jammers transmitted

an overpowering signal in the vicinity of the vehicle upon which it was attached so that any wannabe terrorist couldn't phone in an IED attack because the signal wouldn't make it. They were an important part of the vehicle, but it was already hotter than it had any right to be and Christiansen was losing it.

"I'm beginning to question whether or not I'm gonna make it the whole deployment," he said, more out of frustration than in an attempt to have conversation.

"You and me both, man," I said.

"Why is it just the two of us out here doing this? Where's everyone else?"

"Convoy, up north someplace. C'mon, Marcus. You know the Marine Corps isn't going to send its two best mechanics outside the wire to get blown up."

"Oh, yeah. The two 'best' mechanics—like there's some metric for evaluating that," Christiansen said. "Still, that doesn't mean I don't want to, though."

"What's not to like here?" I said, slapping the dusty metal shroud covering the jammer. "You've got this glorious concrete pad with all of these wonderful trucks. There's even this gorgeous, ratty cammo netting giving you a nice amount of shade. Over there is the bin filled with plastic water bottles baking away in the heat. Very refreshing. Oh, and look over there by the gate. That's Staff Sergeant Frank's trailer. Maybe if you're lucky he'll let you come inside and sit in the air conditioning."

"Shut up, Nate. You know exactly what I'm talking about. You feel it too."

He was right. Three months in to the deployment and I still hadn't done anything except fix broken Humvee after broken Humvee. Replace A/C condenser. Install armor modifications. Fix transmission issues. Replace popped tires. Strip usable parts from destroyed vehicle to use as spares for others. The whole goddamn war was happening

around me and I wasn't even involved. I got a few care packages from home, but my mom sent me some moldy Tastykakes and I couldn't tell if she did it to spite me or in the hopes I might get sick and they'd send me home. Anytime I tried to instant message my friends back home when I got my 15 minutes on the computers at the MWR, all they'd ask me is if I'd seen any action yet. I started kind of resenting everyone back home for what they didn't know. I felt so impotent I wondered if maybe this deployment were just another way the GW got me, that maybe everything I'd ever do in the Marines would have some sort of twisted, silly, annoying repercussions. I don't think I was the only one who felt the tension getting to me. The foreign nationals who clean up after us on base put signs up in the showers that told us we couldn't jerk off there anymore. Apparently too much cum makes the drains clog up and then they shut down the showers entirely until they can get a mechanic out there to fix the problem. I doubt those signs actually stopped anyone. It definitely didn't stop me. It's one private moment of pleasure in a world full of shit, but the GW doesn't care. Its reach is indiscriminate.

The only reason we all jerked off so much is because female Marines aren't allowed in male Marines' trailers. I mean, a few lucky ones crept in after dark, I guess, but I felt off my game in Iraq and anytime I tried to approach women at the chow hall they just looked at me like I was some scummy guy. And FMs are crazy anyway. The way I looked at it, I was doing myself a favor for playing by the rules.

Those rules apply to people who don't have bars or stars on their collar, although officers are certainly not excluded from the conversation if they're caught dipping their wick in enlisted oil. While taking junior or senior ranks to pound town is obviously fraternization and potentially detrimental to unit cohesion, that isn't the only area of

fornication legislated by the military. If one of the parties happens to also be married, well, then they're *really* fucked. Article 134 of the ol' Uniform Code of Military Justice posits that if one member of the beast with two backs is married, well, then "under the circumstances, the conduct of the accused was to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces or was of a nature to bring discredit upon the armed forces." Or something like that, anyway.

That makes sense intuitively, I know, but it didn't stop Staff Sergeant Randy Frank from absolutely franking the hell out of a married lance corporal from admin. Frank was my platoon sergeant, the senior enlisted person in charge of all Motor T. Nobody really seemed to have a problem with the guy until we actually got in country, like the pressure of being deployed affected everyone in some way. Either it instilled some kind of mania and hyper-attentiveness, or just made everyone despondent and irritable. Even though we weren't traveling outside the wire that much, I guess the nascent proximity to death made Frank feel like he ought to be out spreading his seed, and he set his sights pretty quickly on one Lance Corporal Tiffany Taggart. Why Taggart was the first choice as a sheath for Frank's glorious five-inch meat stick, no one seemed to know. Maybe no one wanted to ask. Frank was one failed PFT away from having to retire early, and probably one more care package away from having to request maternity cammies from supply, but even with the antithesis of a Marine's physique, he had a drill instructor's intense precision and deafening cadence. You could be waist deep inside the engine compartment of a running seven-ton, and you'd still be able to hear him barking orders from across the motor pool to the stupid bulk fuel privates running back and forth filling up convoys. He had his bald head all shined up so it'd glint in the sun. Every time

he came outside without a cover on it looked like he was some sort of video game character with an icon blinking right above him. He didn't much look the part of a big-dicked Casanova, but the amount of scuttlebutt was undeniable, especially since a PFC from supply had come forward about seeing some very "private" "inspections" taking place behind the counter in the mailroom. How that fat fuck managed not to have a heart attack while hopping on the good foot and doing the bad thing was anyone's guess. I had to give him credit, though. He was trying to lose weight, whether it came from shuffling around the motor pool perimeter for lap after lap, or by laying some hardcore pipe.

But it still didn't really make sense to me, especially because I had always been a by-the-book type of guy. I did everything that the Marine Corps told me, and all I got was the shaft. I wanted to be the one fucking, not getting fucked. I ran during my time off to keep the chow hall food from gathering around my hips, which was a distinct possibility given how much better the food was while we were deployed than what it was when we were back on Camp Pendleton. There's a big difference when you measure your life out in the millimeters in modern combat, but, then again, I wasn't really in combat. I was a mechanic.

Over the course of the deployment I had resigned myself to the understanding that I wasn't going to see any action while deployed. I wasn't alone, though. When I would walk through the trailer park where all of the POGs on Camp Fallujah slept, I could see pretty much every vice out on display. Marines would have their buddies over to play cards and gamble with anything they could get their hands on, including but not limited to, porn on thumb drives, tobacco of any kind, books, movies, contraband. It was as if the concept of being "at war" gave people carte blanche to behave in the open as if no one

were looking, provided, of course, that they stayed relatively close to military standards. Which meant that if you got a hair cut and bloused your boots, no one would really fuck with you. Except for Frank.

About halfway through our seven month deployment Frank started getting more and more irascible. He'd yell at people for even coming into his office, as if the ten by ten plywood hooch was his own private lair. People started to think he was beating off, but Christiansen came running up to me one cloudless afternoon with excitement sending his baritone voice into a shrill.

"Nate," he said. "Get your dopey ass over here and see what I just found in Frank's office."

I slid out from underneath a Humvee and stood up, tying my jumpsuit arms around my waist.

"Marcus, it's too fucking hot for this bullshit."

"No, seriously. You've got to see his setup."

Intrigued, I wiped my hands on a rag and followed Christiansen toward Frank's small office on the edge of the motor pool.

"Where the hell is he, anyway?" I asked.

"He said he's headed out for PT, but I don't see him running his usual route, so he's probably pegging Taggart."

"Or getting pegged by Taggart," I said, shaking away the thought as soon it had come.

"Do you think he calls his cock to attention?"

“Oh, god. He probably calls cadence to his thrusting: one, two, three, four, I fuck the Marine Corps. Wait—so what am I supposed to be looking at?”

Christiansen punched in the cipher code to Frank’s office and wrenched the door open to reveal Frank’s inner sanctum. It didn’t look any different than the last time I’d seen it. I turned to Christiansen, uncertain whether he was fucking with me or if I was just an incompetent idiot.

“There’s nothing there,” I said. “What’s the big deal?”

“C’mere,” he said, and I followed him up into the air conditioned trailer.

“What the fuck are you on about? If Frank catches us in here we’ll be police-calling the entire base.”

“Check this out,” he said, and sat me down in front of Frank’s computer.

He shook the mouse to clear away the screen saver and I saw a simple desktop background with a picture of Frank holding his weapon near the Camp Fallujah sign. I opened my mouth to protest a second time, but Christiansen shushed me and began clicking through folders.

“So, I was just in here playing a little bit of minesweeper—”

“Motherfucker, I thought you went to take a shit! I’m out there sweating my ass off by those trucks and you’re in here in Frank’s office playing minesweeper? Jesus Christ, Marcus.”

“Nate, shut up and look. I was poking around in some random folders and I found one labeled ‘T.’ So, naturally I opened it and found this...”

When he clicked the folder there were several dozen images inside with the random lettering a digital camera assigns to its photos. I couldn't really see anything from the thumbnails, but I already had an inkling as to what he was about to open.

"Oh, my god," I said. "What an idiot."

Christiansen opened the whole album of photos and up popped picture after picture of Taggart in compromising positions. It was all right there in front of us: Taggart in underwear, topless, bottomless—posing in every way, with and without Frank's dick in her hand. The two dumb asses had chronicled every moment of their sordid love affair and then uploaded it to government property.

"We ought to get out of here. We'll catch serious shit if he sees us in here," Christiansen said.

"Marcus, come on. This is fucking ridiculous. We have to tell someone about this. Taggart has a husband back home. What if that were you?"

I wondered, as we closed the door and stepped back out into the heat, what he might say if we confronted him about it.

"You think this is all Taggart's doing?" he asked.

"Well, who else would it be?"

"You don't think Frank coerced her into having sex with him? I mean, none of those pictures look like she's having a particularly good time doing all that."

I gave him an incredulous look and threw my arms up in exasperation. I was prone to conspiratorial behavior, always thinking that some larger mechanism were in play. I reiterated the story about Dick Cheney being on the receiving end of some

paychecks for the KBR chow hall every time we went in for a meal, so this new development played into my psyche.

“I’m telling you, Marcus, give it time and this is only going to get worse.”

“Well, *if* that turns out to be the case, and you think that you’ve got a legitimate grievance against Staff Sergeant Frank other than plain old envy, we can go to Captain Tran to complain. The only problem is that we need to have the rest of the platoon on our side.”

“Oh, shit,” I said, dropping my voice to a whisper. “Here he comes.”

Just as Christiansen turned, Frank was weaving his way through the trucks in the motor pool with the grace of a camouflaged piggy-bank, head shining with fury.

“What the fuck, Devil Dogs?” Frank barked. “What are we doing here besides a whole lot of nothing?”

“We were just discussing mission prep for tomorrow’s convoy, Staff Sergeant,” Christiansen said.

“And?”

“Uh, well,” I stammered. “Everything is on schedule. Only three trucks have the Mk 1 armor still on them. We’re waiting to outfit them as soon as the parts come in.”

“Good. The CO wants every truck to be uparmored as soon as possible, so when the parts come in, let’s get that armor on there double time, roger?”

“Aye, Staff Sergeant,” we replied.

“Christiansen, get your hands out of your pockets before I break them off.”

“Aye, Staff Sergeant,” he said, jerking his hands behind his broad back.

“Corporal McManus,” Frank said, turning to me. “If you let your Marines get complacent, men will die. Do not let me see you wasting time in my motor pool again.”

“Staff Sergeant, can I ask you a question?” I said, surprised at my sudden boldness.

“What is it, devil?”

“Are you sleeping with Lance Corporal Taggart?”

The sound around the motor pool seemed to intensify, as if the volume of the world had been turned up. Frank’s mouth was pursed, and his normally reddish hue turned a splotchy purple, and he reached forward and placed his hand on my shoulder. He began to slowly dig his thumb into the hollow space above my collar bone, the pain bringing me to my knees.

“If you ever,” he whispered, “bring up something so obviously false like that again, I will personally stomp your guts out.”

“We saw the pictures,” I grunted.

He released me and I slumped forward. My shoulder ached from his grip and I tried to rotate the joint, but it was too painful.

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, Marine,” he said, stepping up into his office.

He stood in the door frame, jaw set, waiting for us to head back to the trucks. Christiansen helped me to my feet and we headed back across the motor pool, gravel crunching under our feet. We didn’t say anything for a long time, until the sun stretched the shadows of the trucks out past the fence.

“Fuck me,” Christiansen said, as we shuffled back to our shitty trailers. “Do you think he’s going to delete the pics?”

I didn’t reply. As dusk fell, artillery thundered from the southern end of camp, splitting the world open.

The next morning, I went for a long jog around the perimeter of Camp Fallujah, my shoulder still aching. It was just before sunrise, and the coolest part of the day. That didn’t really mean anything, as the coolest part of the day was still well above ninety degrees. I tried to clear my mind and just focus on my breathing, but I kept thinking about the photos I’d seen. I started to get angrier and angrier, if for no other reason than Frank was getting ass in Fallujah and I wasn’t, but I knew that some surface level envy wasn’t going to cut it if I went higher with this gripe. I needed proof. As a staff NCO, Frank had an entire trailer to himself, so no one else would be privy to who enters and leaves. I shared one with three other Marines, including Van Flynn, the perpetual masturbator. It wasn’t especially invigorating to spend my off time in a hovel that smelled like dirty ball sack. I spent some of my own personal time in the shower after my run, but the release only made me feel worse, and I found myself resenting Frank with unusual tenacity. I got dressed and headed to the Motor Pool, anxious to confront Christiansen with my plan.

“I really think we should do some sort of stakeout,” I said from the protective shade of the camouflage netting. “We could catch her going in to his hooch and then run back and tell the OOD at Battalion HQ.”

“Nate, I don’t want to sound like I don’t give a shit, but what do you hope happens out of all this?”

“I don’t know, man. I’m just tired of people trying to take advantage of their rank, people getting special treatment. You know, that shit. I’m tired of people playing Real Housewives out here. We’re supposed to be at war.”

“Look at where we are, dude. We’re at war. This is war for us. We’re mechanics,” Christiansen said, leaning back from the hood of a humvee.

“You know something? You’re right. This *is* war.”

Christiansen looked back over his shoulder, the grease on his face made it look like he had three eyebrows, all raised in confusion.

“What I mean is, I’m going to do this properly. I’m going to do it the right way. Once I get proof that she’s in there, I’m going to go to the OOD’s office, or maybe even the Captain.”

“Are you sure you want to make a stink about this? Frank seems like he already wants to kill you.”

I hadn’t really considered what might happen if Frank found out it was me who ratted on him, but I was certain that if the chain of command was respected, the focus would be on Frank’s adulterous escapades. That fat fuck would be the pariah, not me.

He must have suspected that I was on to him because I waited outside his trailer every night after chow for a week and nothing happened. Taggart never came. I started to wonder whether or not Frank and Taggart were actually together. How had Marcus and I known that Frank was in the pictures with her? We never saw his face. I felt like an idiot, which was exacerbated by the fact that I had been camped out inside a Hesco barrier for several hours this week. Time I could have been spending doing literally anything else.

“Fuck this,” I said, to no one.

The next evening at chow I sat down with Christiansen and a few other Motor T people, watching the daytime news broadcasts from back in the states. I missed being home. I was tired of the war, and even though I had been doing my own brand of fighting, I felt inconsequential. I felt forgotten. Everyone was talking about fantasy baseball and other bullshit at home, and the whole place started to seem so surreal to me that I started to sweat.

“Why is the food better here than it is back home?” I asked.

“Don’t start, Nate,” Christiansen said. “We all know your theories about KBR.”

As I started to speak, I saw Taggert stand up across the chow hall and take her tray to the scullery.

“What?” Christiansen asked.

“Hold on,” I said. “I’ll be right back.”

I threw out my food even though I wasn’t even close to being done eating, and I jogged outside to see if I could catch which direction Taggert was heading. She was walking with a few Marines from her section, and it looked innocuous, but I wanted to follow her anyway. The longer I stayed behind her the more involved I became in their story. With every step I felt like I was guiding her to his door. I wanted so bad for it to be true, to be validated and vindicated. And when she split off from the rest of her fellow Marines, my heart leapt. The vision of her walking toward Frank’s trailer unfolded like a dream, and I felt like I was floating behind her as she walked. I felt detached from my body, formless, as if I could follow her inside the trailer and they would never even know I was there. When she did finally knock on his trailer door, the noise jolted me out of my daze, and I turned to run back to headquarters before I even saw her disappear inside.

Lt. Brockheimer was the officer on duty, and while I never had any personal experience with him, I was relieved it wasn't Captain Chew, who had a reputation for being as unyielding as Frank's grip on my shoulder. The LT sat behind a cheap particleboard desk reading a *Guns & Ammo* magazine with a handheld radio sitting in the middle of the desktop.

"Sir," I said with such forcefulness that he bolted upright out of his chair. "I need to speak with you."

"What is it, Corporal ... McManus?" he asked, glancing at my name tag.

"I have proof that Staff Sergeant Frank is sleeping with a Lance Corporal from admin, sir."

As soon as I finished I felt relieved, and a sense of satisfaction, of release, swept over me and it was all I could do not to smile in front of the Lieutenant.

"Come here, Marine," the LT said, pushing me into a small office inside the headquarters building.

"It's true, sir. I saw her heading into his trailer just a few minutes ago."

The lieutenant's face remained unmoved, as if all that I had been telling him were simply an inconvenience that had taken him away from his magazine.

"She's married," I added.

"Look, Corporal. I don't know what you think you're doing here, but I'm going to give you a word of advice: don't. If you ever come back here to this building and try to raise a stink about one of my enlisted Marines, I will send you back stateside before you've even had a chance to understand how fucked you are."

"But sir, I—"

“Do I look like I’m fucking with you, Corporal? There are bigger things out here to be dealing with, and I don’t like the intimation that I don’t know how to police my own men. Get the fuck out of here before I bust your ass for insubordination.”

I stood there under the weight of the entire incident and felt suddenly foolish. Would I really raise a stink over an adulterous asshole? The hollowness of my own outrage suddenly collapsed under its own weight and I realized that the lieutenant was right. There are things outside of my direct influence that don’t involve me, that would never involve me. I thought about home, and for the first time in a long time, I wished that I could smell the sea air of Pendleton. I wanted my mom’s home cooking. I wanted to get rid of the pressure in my chest. I wanted pretty much everything I couldn’t have.

I went back to my trailer after a while and showered. I stole Van Flynn’s copy of *Cum Fart Cocktails 4* and sat on my rack alone. Tory Lane’s face appeared over a hairless pussy into which she started shoving her idiotically manicured fingers. Her face looked stupid and the video was the complete opposite of attractive, but I jerked off anyway and went to sleep ashamed at the injustice of the world.

No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy

Church burst out of his cramped trailer into the bright sunlight, feeling the straightjacket of Iraqi heat embrace him. The coolness from his wall-mounted air conditioner vaporized and itchy prickles of sweat sprang out from his scalp and spread over his shoulders and down his back like a breeze through a cornfield. He checked to make sure his pistol was secured tightly to his thigh and looked out across the quadrangle lined with Alaska barriers. The sun was a sledgehammer high above him. A sooty Marine danced wildly around a burning oil drum of feces across the long, low buildings in the trailer park, stopping every now and then to stir the smoldering contents, contributing to the country's omnipresent smell of scorched garbage.

"Goddammit, Reed," Church sniffed.

Church knew Lance Corporal Reed was making himself an easy target for any officer or First Sergeant worth his salt—thrashing air guitar solos while stirring burning human waste was certainly a safety hazard—but Church had long ago distanced himself from the regulatory enforcer the three chevrons on his collar indicated he might be. Looking down at his unbloused boots and remembering the stubble on his chin, he decided that dressing down Reed for being an idiot probably made even less sense than the war they were here to fight. And as a seven year Lance Corporal, Reed rarely listened anyone.

Church took a longer route to work than necessary, scuttling in vectors from shadow to shadow as if it were the only way to stay alive. The sparse date palms provided little respite from the sun, and his circumnavigation around Camp Fallujah allowed him to decompress, to think about anything and everything unrelated to the military. The

trailer he shared with Baker was fine, and he'd amassed enough of a library that he'd started to wonder how everything was going to make it back home. Even though it was air conditioned, it felt confining. If you could say anything nice about the Iraqi climate, at least you could say it was sunny. He wondered, squinting upward, if it was possible to feel crow's feet forming on his face.

The intelligence compound sat just behind the large, concrete block walls of the former Ba'ath Party headquarters, shrouded in razor wire and bolstered with sandbag barriers. Three doors separated passers-by from the secrets contained within, and cipher locks, which, Church noted, were positioned in direct sunlight and always at least a thousand degrees. The Trojan communications satellite dish sat next to the gated backyard and hummed ominously. Several people had once complained of stomach pain after troubleshooting the device after its inevitable breakdown. Most of the unit was afraid to go near the Trojan, especially since stories surfaced of some poor radio tech who had inadvertently sterilized himself. But the only visceral reaction Church had to his place of employment and the equipment positioned there was a thudding headache that never left the back of his skull.

A small guard shack where outsourced Ugandan security forces loafed against a black and yellow Jersey barrier separated the command units from the rest of Camp Fallujah. Church approached the gate and flashed his ID in the general direction of a guard he didn't particularly trust. He found the guard's permanent smile sycophantic.

"Sergeant Church," the guard said. "How are you doing today?"

"Fine, Gabriel," Church said. "But hot."

"It is a good day to be alive, though. Thanks be to God."

Church wondered how much suffering must a man endure before he is able to opine about the gift of life, a thought that made him sadder than he expected. As he punched in the door code, the PA system on Camp Fallujah crackled to life, and a professional, yet clearly agitated voice was asking for anyone with A positive blood to double time toward Fallujah Surgical.

“Two more months of this,” he said, entering the compound.

Brian Baker sat at his computer working hard on a game of Mahjong that he didn’t totally understand when Church tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey,” he said in Church’s general direction. “You realize that in eight weeks we’re going to be back on Mission Beach with no camouflage in sight?”

“That’ll be some sight. I haven’t taken off these cammies in about five months, so I’ll probably blind some people. Hell, Baker. I think even you have a farmer’s tan.”

“Don’t be that jealous. I saw Tim Reed out stirring some shit. He looks even blacker than I do.”

“In all seriousness, there is nothing that scares me more than Reed, except for maybe what the Captain’s got up his sleeves.”

“Two months,” Baker said, pounding Church’s fist.

Captain Astoukis, as if conjured by the very mention of his name, entered the operations floor with Gunny Derkler pointing to the AO map. Church’s contempt for the captain flourished with every successive mission, and the captain’s Californian inflection made operation run-downs that much more absurd, but he wasn’t alone in his dislike of the commanding officer, nor was he the most vocal. Baker hated the Captain with an intensity that made Church embarrassed on his friend’s behalf.

“I’m not saying he *is* racist,” Baker had said one evening when they were smoking cigarillos outside of their trailer, “but he refused to sign off on my MCIs. I’m trying to get promoted here.”

Baker’s contempt was less conspiratorial than Church initially thought, especially after their last mission when Baker had fallen into a canal and nearly drowned. The captain was so concerned about the loss of the radio Baker had been hauling on his back that he threatened to NJP Baker until Master Sergeant Bullock talked him out of it. Ever since Baker’s fall, the Captain treated him like he wasn’t even there.

“Task Force Orange has been working closely with the MEF and we’ve been able to confirm the location of Abu Ayyub al-Masri, AKA Yusuf al-Dardiri. I know you’re just as excited as I am to nail this prick, but it’s not going to be easy. Sgt. Church, you and Corporal Baker will lead your team in conjunction with 2/8 and see if you can use your gear to figure out when al-Masri is active.”

Church’s mind swirled with images of twisted metal and diesel fuel burning with thick, black plumes. The spider legs of pain at the base of his skull reached out and gripped at his brain, and for a moment Church felt as though he might pass out. He looked at Baker leaning back in his chair staring at the ceiling with dead eyes while the rest of the command floor turned back to their computer monitors.

“Sergeant Church?”

“Sir, isn’t al-Masri a high value target? Like, he’s on the deck of cards or whatever?”

“Your point?”

“He’s got the whole of the Mujahideen Shura Council at his disposal. Are we rolling with an entire company of 2/8? Because I don’t know if I feel comfortable—”

“The threat level has been assessed as notional, Sgt. Church. You should be lucky I’m assigning your team to the mission. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. If we get him now, this will mean big things at Battalion.”

“Uh, that’s great, sir,” Church said, his mind reeling. “Would there be any way to get another team to take this one? I just don’t have the best feeling about it.”

“You’ll give your mission brief in an hour.”

“Yessir.”

The captain pivoted back toward his office indicating the conversation was over. Church sat down and swiveled his chair back toward the computer next to Baker who was still staring at the ceiling.

“Well, shit,” Baker said. “We’re all going to get killed and the captain will probably get a medal.”

“Hey, that’s how it works,” Church said. “Notional threat level on an HVT? You’re damn right he deserves a medal.”

“I’m serious,” Baker said, sitting up, eyes wide. “We’re not making it back from this one.”

“Go tell the captain you don’t want to go.”

“Hell, no. Reed is out there burning shit because he left his weapon in condition one after he came in from the last mission. Safety off and everything. God knows if I tell him I don’t want to go, he’ll probably punch a hole through me.”

“He’s Greek. I think that’s against their religion,” Church said, tapping away at his dusty keyboard.

“Well, I suppose it’s either him killing me or it’s the terrorists.”

“Don’t say that, I hate that word.”

Church pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, trying to ward off the headache. When Church was promoted to team leader stateside, he stepped into the position certain that he would do a good job. And he had, though the training regimen that they had undertaken was an ineffective substitute for what operations in Iraq would actually look like, and the many necessary contingencies, the omnipresent dread of physical bodily harm for himself and his Marines, as well as the constant shit-rolls-downhill grunt work the captain gave them had started to wear Church down. He had started losing weight during his time in Iraq, and with every successive mission appeared gaunt and withdrawn. He hated interaction with the locals, not for a lack of trust, but rather his inability to look them in the eye and not feel immediate guilt. The in-country briefing that took place upon his arrival to Iraq informed Church that he must “Be polite, be professional, but have a plan to kill everybody you meet.” His friends joked about the maxim, and he did too, but not without a sense of remorse.

Once he made it to Fallujah, it became clear to him that money was the only reason people seemed to be dying, and money was something he couldn’t control. The true insurgency either threatened or paid off poor locals to attack the military, which suited the Marines who simply wanted to kill people or blow shit up. Iraq was a long way away from the free college he signed up for, and even though the price was right, he

started to wonder whether or not it was worth the moral baggage he was beginning to accrue.

“Fine. Al Qaeda, or whatever. They’re going to kill me,” Baker said, sniffing loudly.

The door to the office flew open and in bounced Reed, sweaty and shirtless in unintentional blackface. Reed grunted and strolled over to his desk and began unscrewing the tops on the mountain of growth supplements piled next to his computer. He dumped a heaping spoonful of powder into his shake mixer and grabbed a carton of long-lasting milk from the small refrigerator in the corner, filling his cup to the brim.

“Gotta watch my figure.”

“Does he know that’s all fat?” Baker asked.

“No, of course not,” Church said.

Reed was the type of person who embraced the more sociopathic tendencies of the Marine Corps, which was precisely why he and Church didn’t get along. And though in private Church wondered whether or not Reed would end up getting him killed, he was happier to have him on his own side, rather than confronting an enemy made up of Tim Reeds.

“Do you think he realizes that everyone hates him?”

“Not a clue.”

As Reed bounded off, the air conditioners struggled under the plume of fetid air that trailed out the door. Church glanced over at Baker who was now cleaning his weapon. The scope reminded him of a hunting rifle, though the muted black of the weapon gave off a much more sinister vibe. He briefly recalled the time his father had

taken him hunting as a young boy, but the memory was tarnished by guilt—guilt from his reluctance to pull the trigger, guilt from the wet, raspy breaths of the doe when they had walked up to it, and a cracked collarbone to remind him of it for weeks after.

“... and I know I’ll probably never use the bayonet, but it just looked so damn cool that I had to pick one up,” Baker said, bringing Church back to reality.

Church looked at the long, black Ka-Bar. “That thing is pretty intense. How much was it?”

“Not too bad. Only \$140.”

“I think it’s time you start prepping the trucks.”

Baker scoffed and went out to the motor pool to begin stocking the trucks with supplies, leaving Church with nothing but his thoughts and the gentle hum of the computers. Church sighed, turning toward his computer to finalize the PowerPoint presentation. He cropped maps, put waypoints into his presentation, added graphics, modified his “TTPs”—tactics, techniques, and procedures—all so that the captain could forward Church’s work up to the battalion commander and take credit for it. Church had realized long ago that promotions and awards were almost always based off of the work of others, but he could see the end of his enlistment on the horizon, and hadn’t wanted to ruffle the feathers of the very people in charge of his fate.

He felt nauseated at the notion of heading outside the wire with Reed and Baker, even though he’d done it countless times before. Church suspected the advanced timeline was part of the problem, but it was mainly that dealing with Reed’s adolescent, hyper-masculine bullshit over the course of the deployment had begun to wear on him, so much

so that he couldn't sleep at night. Reed had cut the sleeves off of his cammies a few months into the deployment.

"It's so people can see my guns," he had said. "All three of them. Get it?"

The time Church had spent attending to Reed made the team leader feel more like a special education teacher than a Marine sergeant.

The homoerotic entendre that Reed inserted into every conversation would have qualified as sexual assault in any normal occupation, and it was only held in check by Church's near constant put-downs and assertion of rank. His heart rushed at the slightest disturbance, but Church bore his emotional baggage with the quiet dignity of a monk in a monastery. He had to guilt himself into believing the mission was more important than his health, but their job only made sense to him when he thought about the possibility of his teammates being injured. As idiotic as Reed seemed, he was still a Marine, one of Church's Marines, and that meant equal protection, equal consideration. But Church knew, deep down, that if anyone in his entire company were killed, he hoped it'd be Reed.

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Even well after midnight, the oppressive heat enveloped them as if they were in the direct path of a hair dryer on full power. The trucks were hot; the weapons were hot. Everything was hot. Sweat did little to cool anything down. Baker leaned on the hood of the Humvee loading crypto into the radios.

"Where the hell is Reed?" Church asked.

"Someone need a sexy beast?" Reed asked, poking his head up from the turret.

“Shut up. Take that ammunition off of your shoulders, this isn’t fucking Hollywood,” Church said, hopping up into the passenger seat. “Let’s go, remember the SOP. Fives and twenty-fives. Eyes on the road. Call out what you see.”

“Great,” Baker sighed, slamming the heavy door shut with force. “You cunts ready to get blown up?”

Church knew they wouldn’t be driving blackout until the convoy reached the road that led to Karmah, but he attached his night vision goggles to his helmet anyway, and assumed his usual half-shrug to avoid smashing the goggles against the roof of the vehicle. He tilted his head back in order to see out from under the brim of his helmet, constantly in battle with everything meant to keep him safe. The group of trucks rumbled to life and rolled out of the gate at Camp Fallujah leaving the giant stone barriers that read “Complacency Kills!” in a cloud of dusty heat. Beyond the barriers, Church knew complacency was only one of their enemies.

Baker began quizzing the other members of the vehicle on their roles in the event of an attack. Church wasn’t interested in hearing Baker worry because worrying was mostly the team leader’s job, so he ignored him, as did the rest of the truck.

“Fine,” Baker said. “Don’t get mad at me when we’re hit with mustard gas.”

After dropping off water and rations to the Iraqi Police station, the convoy pulled onto a dirt road that led to OP3. The trucks halted while the point vehicle examined a possible explosive device in the road. Church glanced out of the side window toward a collapsed building, his heart pounding in his ears. The eerie green light of the night vision made every shadow seem like a threat. It seemed illogical to him that driving without lights was supposed to make them appear less of a target. He would rather have had a

bank of lights shining in every conceivable direction. If something was going to happen to him, he'd be damned if he was going to let it sneak up on him. As Church tried to calm his nerves, the green light flashed so intensely that it momentarily blinded him. He flipped up his goggles to rub his eyes and heard a digital camera shutter from the turret of the truck.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Church shouted.

“They’re for Facebook,” Reed said. “My parents want to see what I’ve been doing.”

A second flash twinkled into view from the corner of a collapsed building on the right side of the vehicle, but this time the flash was accompanied by the hiss of a rocket propelling an explosive projectile through the air.

“Contact right! RPG!” Reed screamed. “Can I return fire?”

“Do not fire. Possible civilians in the area.”

Church felt the truck vibrate as the sound of machine gun fire blasted above him. Brass casings began to litter the truck’s interior as Church turned to see a few tracer rounds streak toward the corner of the building.

“Reed, cease fire, God dammit,” Church shouted into his radio. “Cease fire. You need positive identification.”

As the last of the spent casings clinked off of the gunner’s platform, Reed’s head poked down through the turret opening.

“They just fucking shot at me, Sergeant. How much more positive can it get?”

“No civilian casualties, Reed. Do *not* fire again.”

Church felt sick. The headache thrummed between his ears, and he felt cold sweat all over his body. Even though he knew, intuitively, that there was a chance he might have to kill someone or that he would be leading his teammates into danger, up until this point the threat had seemed abstract. In the intensity of the moment, he felt time slow down. *This is tachypsychia*, he thought. He was suddenly able to process thoughts that felt bundled up at the base of his skull, like he didn't have the power to tackle those unanswerable questions under normal circumstances. He thought of home, of his first girlfriend and her beautiful smile. He thought about college, and how it's where he wanted to be. And then the radio crackled to life and the convoy lurched forward, swerving down a side street in pursuit of the group behind the RPG attack.

"What should I do?" Baker asked.

Before Church could speak, the three lead vehicles opened up with heavy weapons.

"Just go. Go, Baker. Follow the convoy," Church said, slapping the side of his helmet and shaking his head.

"What are you doing? Are you all right?" Baker asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Church spat, focusing on the radio traffic.

"Get me a line of sight and I'll fuck these guys up," Reed shouted from the turret.

"Do not fire, Reed. Let the convoy handle it. That's what they're trained to do."

"Christ on a cracker. My team leader is a fucking pacifist."

"Shut the fuck up. Whatever happens, we do not fire. That's not our job."

The convoy commander ordered all trucks run lights on, so the team flipped up their night vision goggles and Baker flicked the light switch to reveal the rest of the

convoy as it veered down ever tighter streets. Whatever mission plan the team began with had now been superseded by the immediate threat of attack, and Church struggled to focus on anything other than how he'd probably get screamed at for taking part in an unauthorized raid. *If the captain had been pissed that Baker broke a radio*, Church thought, *how pissed will he be if I bring back some dead Marines?* The new priority became engaging those responsible for the attack. Their HVC would have to wait.

The lead vehicle rounded a corner, and immediately struck an IED. The vehicle was tossed on its side, the explosion ripping apart the engine bay and throwing the block out onto the street. The instant before the shockwave thumped in their chests, Church felt as though the entire world fell away down a hole until all he could see was a pinprick of light. He felt suspended in infinity, and the nothingness pushed and pulled at his consciousness until he was certain death was upon him, its bony fingers grasping at the life trapped in his throat.

The remaining five trucks slammed on their brakes and swerved to avoid the blast site. The overpressure from the IED had opened the armored doors on the disabled Humvee, and one of the Marines was hanging from the door, caught in the webbing of the seatbelt. The front half of the truck was split open and the contents of the engine bay were spread around, mostly still in flames. Church was taking giant, heaving breaths, but felt like he was running out of air. He looked over at Baker, who was gesturing wildly toward the destroyed truck and reaching for the door.

Round after round of enemy fire snapped and drummed off of the vehicle, the armor too thick to let AK fire penetrate it. The radio spat out coordinating information, and Baker had lined up broadside so that Reed could have full movement to return fire,

but Reed was pinned down inside the protective sheath of the turret. Church felt obligated to jump from the passenger seat and return fire from over the hood of the vehicle, but the gnawing sensation at the base of his skull kept him pressed into his seat, waiting for a break in the gunfire before he would proceed. He felt slow again, embracing neither fight nor flight, choosing a benign acceptance of his position and fate as he saw it unfold in front of him.

An MRAP pulled up in front of the disabled Humvee to protect the wounded from small arms fire and the turret gunner swiveled the Mk-19 grenade launcher toward the windows the gunfire was coming from, the distinctive CHUD, CHUD, CHUD, hurling high explosives toward the building.

The structure's sharp, utilitarian lines became blurred and foggy as the grenades struck the target, and the snapping of enemy fire was immediately silenced. Marines poured out of their trucks and breeched the building's rusty iron gate. When the convoy commander finally announced the all clear, Church realized he was crying, hoping the relative darkness obscured the tears from his teammates. Shouts for the Intel team, for Church, echoed up and down the convoy, so Baker and Church exited the vehicle and made their way toward the building. Church's legs felt molten. He was wobbly under the weight of his gear, and steadied himself as he entered the first floor, momentarily stunned by the number of women huddling together beneath a Marine's raised weapon. As they ascended the narrow staircase, the rooms became dustier, a residue from the 40mm grenade explosions that peppered the house. Remnants of men lay at their feet, and moaning came from inside the first room.

“Baker, search for hard drives, cell phones, paper, anything,” Church said, finding his authority. “I want to know who these guys were and if they’re connected with the Shura Council. Get a fucking ‘terp in here. Check the bodies. I want it all.”

Two younger Marines struggled to lift an older man to his knees while Baker stood nearby, rifling through a small desk. The man looked stunned and strangely compliant. A gash above his left eye leaked blood down his front, splattering his dusty clothes like a melted crayon. The age of their prisoner left the Marines who held him momentarily complacent to the danger of their situation, and the old man twisted out of their grasp and lunged forward, grabbing the pistol out of Church’s thigh holster. Church turned as he felt the tug of his pistol lanyard pull on his leg and saw the Marines dive on the old man, but the semiautomatic weapon discharged during the flurry of activity and the whole room flinched. The pistol dropped to the floor after one of the Marines delivered a butt strike with his weapon to the man’s temple, and Church’s lanyard pulled it back toward him, the barrel still smoking. He watched the pistol recoil slowly, but it snagged on an outstretched leg, peppered with the fine spray of blood. Someone was screaming, and only until he was forced to recount the raid to members of his command much later, did he realize it had been him.

Church rolled Baker over to his side and saw blood spilling from a ragged wound on his throat. Baker pawed at his neck, too shocked to feel anything but panic and sputtered on blood that gurgled from the side.

“No, no. It’s OK, Baker,” Church said, slapping his hands down over the worst of the bleeding. “Corpsman up! Get a fucking medic in here now!”

He couldn't help but stare into Baker's eyes as he choked on blood, and it wasn't more than a few seconds until Church felt Baker's pulse become nothing. He continued to clamp down on nothing, squeezing the mass of inanimate flesh harder and harder until the corpsman finally pushed Church off of him.

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“For exceptionally valorous action in the face of overwhelming odds against the direct threat of hostile forces as Team Leader for Advanced Collection Team 2 in combat operations in Iraq. While under direct enemy fire, Sergeant Church infiltrated an enemy stronghold to search for a high value target. Despite a member of his team being mortally wounded in the search, Sergeant Church alone managed to secure the area by dispatching hostile forces through close, hand-to-hand combat. The intelligence cache collected by Sergeant Church and his team has proved invaluable to continuing operations in the Anbar province. Sergeant Church's actions reflect great credit upon him, First Intelligence Battalion, and the United States Marine Corps.”

As the captain placed the medal onto Church's breast pocket, Church lowered his head to avoid direct eye contact with him. He saluted quickly and marched back into formation with little precision. The back claps and handshakes wore on him, and he felt fraudulent and out of place. For years after, Church would sometimes come across the medal in various desk drawers and backs of closets as he moved from place to place, and he would feel the same gnawing guilt that he did when it had been pinned on him. He thought of Baker, of Reed, but he never spoke of them, not even to his wife. He would place the medal back into its hiding place and feel the pain at the base of his neck relax its grip.