

HOMEBOY: New Fiction from Mark Galarrita

I went home to Jersey only once since the enlistment. I had to see my Ma. Back in the summer of 2011 I finished Basic and Advanced Individual Training for Cav Scouts and thought I'd officially become a real patriot now. The son of Filipino immigrants transformed into a proud, government-paid U.S. Soldier. A real Soldier, though, I was not. Drill sergeant said that me and the rest of my squad back at A.I.T wouldn't experience anything too bad in Iraq or Afghanistan by the time we got in it. The War was almost up. When we deployed overseas, it would be like a vacation to Thailand, too easy. "Y'all are the lucky ones," she said. "You'll never see anyone die violently in your lives. You can thank Obama for that." Joke's on her, though. By the time I was thirteen, I'd already seen a few dead people in my life. My Pops for example. I don't need to speak on that, though.



I showed up to Newark airport looking like a civilian, not in my ACU's or my shiny class A's like the Budweiser commercials

have you believe we all come home looking like. Only poguees wear their uniform at the airport. Nah, I wore a grey fitted tee that felt snug and showed off my brown, ripped arms, and some boot cut jeans I picked up at the Fort Benning PX that were too baggy. It was like I was stuck in the early 2000s. Still, I had this image that Ma was going to be real proud of this new look on me. What I expected was love and admiration for the work I accomplished, the money I made, and the simple truth that I did it all on my own. Grown man now, no Pops needed, no bullshit. But when she saw me at the pickup gate with my assault pack and my Class A's in a garment bag, she stayed in her '93 ruby-colored Corolla as if she were a goddamn cab.

Woman who popped me out almost twenty-one years ago wouldn't even get out of her car. She unlocked the passenger door to let me in and only glanced at me once before she drove off. Ma was about five inches shorter than me, a light-skinned woman with black hair that stopped at the back of her neck. She always wore light turquoise blouses, even when it was shy of being cold as hell. In the winter she'd switch between three turquoise hoodies all the time and never anything else, even if the heat was on blast. Two cars in front of us, this college-aged Latino boy was coming out the gate with his mother, girlfriend, and whole extended family in tow like a Pharaoh had just arrived. I wondered about that dude for half of the ride until Ma spoke up.

"Have you eaten anything, Jason?" First thing she said to me.

"Pretzels—"

"What?"

"I had pretzels on the plane. They gave me that and a Sprite."

"Sugar they put in those sodas will kill you. Do you want to have your heart burst so young like your father?"

I had no answer for that. The main thing on my mind at the time was this: Big Jason Zobel was back in town, looking the part of a Cav Scout. There was a time when I did the whole college thing for a stint—even tried ROTC once—but enlisting turned out to be the smartest thing I ever did. When I completed Basic I went on Facebook and posted my graduation photo. My Facebook Likes lit up (104 to be exact) from a mix of people I never talked to before: high school people, Ma's side of the family, and even this one girl, Rebecca, who I crushed on all of my junior year but who never gave me a second glance in the hallways of Saint Barnaby High. Rebecca didn't just like my pic—she commented. She did more than just say, *Congrats!* She added: "You look so handsome, Jason." You best believe I saw that shit and sent her a message. I asked if she wanted to chill at Flannigan's Pub the day I got back to Jersey. Rebecca messaged back, "sure, let's hang," and yo, who am I to turn her down?

"You have to eat, Jason," Ma said. "I'll cook adobo for you at home."

I tried to turn the radio on, but she told me not to touch the dial or the air con. She claimed it would kill the battery. I tried to explain that that wasn't how cars worked.

"Those crooked mechanics changed my oil, and now half of the things don't work," she said.

"This is an eighteen-year-old car, Ma. That's what happens when things get old."

Ma immigrated to the Land of The Free in the middle of the Philippine dictatorship: President Marcos, military crackdowns on dissidents, drug violence in Manila—all kinds of shit. When I was about seven, she told me about a dude who owed this other dude a bunch of pesos and was straight up shot on the street. Not to say my family's blood country is Apocalypse Right-The-Fuck-Now but I'd trade Jersey smog over getting

gunned down for bad debt. I'm fifty grand in the hole since I dropped out of undergrad and I ain't paying shit because Uncle Sam said he'd wash it all away if I went off to War in some place he felt like sending me to. Some men have the option to get their slates cleaned after pushing enough paperwork; others have the option to run away from it and never look back. I chose to give myself up to a cause—if you could call it that—and if I get lucky I'll never even deploy. If I did, I'd deserve what I signed up for. Right?

When we got home, Ma ordered me to pick up groceries since there were no chicken thighs and vinegar in the apartment for the adobo she promised me. I would've said sure and gone off, but I got distracted by the horde of boxes stacked throughout the living room. They stretched from the front door all the way to her shrine of the Virgin Mary facing the parking lot. It was a warehouse. One side near the living room couch was stacked with cardboard boxes labeled by QVC, Amazon, and a bunch of stores I've never even heard of before. Cases loaded with questionably-made jewelry cushioned by styrofoam packing peanuts; old hardcovers from libraries across the country that rotted at the spine; vinyl discs from bygone musicians I didn't even know. A brown maze of receiving and no shipping.

Before Benning, Ma had checked out a bunch of books from the library on entrepreneurship and reselling crap on Amazon to turn a profit. She got really into it, first time I'd seen her happy in years. I didn't stop her. Her 'business' had gone on for so long, I almost felt guilty whenever she told me to just wait until "the money comes in." But we're both still waiting.

"Where did you get all of this stuff?" I said.

It had been a little over six months since I drove a civilian car, so instead of going to the Wal-Mart five minutes down the road, I plotted for the Target in Lawrenceville, a good half hour away. Some alone time was in order. First, I went to the Wawa for gas, a hoagie, tall can of Monster, and a pack of

Marlboro Reds; wouldn't be a trip home without the essentials. Pops used to smoke a pack of Reds a day, they turned his heart black. Course he never knew about it until it was too late to quit. Unlike some fathers who change and give it up the day their child is born. I figure if Pops could live until the end of his days with tobacco and bad diets, why shouldn't I?

All him and Ma used to talk about was me being independent and successful one day because they were hard-working immigrants, but what did that mean? When I dropped out of college and told Ma I wanted to enlist, she pretended like she didn't hear. Instead she avoided me by praying to Momma Mary's statue plus her whole holy gang. Sometimes she'd leave me for hours at a time: lost in prayer or driving to different churches throughout the county as she never stayed at one parish for too long. I'm amazed I got through high school without asking for her help—like SAT prep, or which college I should go to, or how to interview for a job. That kind of small shit that adds up to big shit after a while. Sure, physically she was there, and she signed checks and authorized payments on bills (sometimes with my money), but on life advice or what I should be doing—she was a ghost.

As I drove, I tuned the radio until I landed on a public station. Two British women were in the middle of a discussion about troop drawdowns in Iraq and what that meant for Afghanistan. I tuned it up to a sound that was slightly short of max. They spoke in gentle voices about the history of The War on Terror. They sounded as if they were reviewing a television show, and not their topic: the wedding massacre in Mukaradeeb by coalition forces. One of them asked, *What happens to our children during a time of War?* out of nowhere. The other lady paused for a bit and that's when my fingers turned the knob left, right, and back again before I tuned it off. I struggled to pull one of the Reds out of the box, but I yanked it out and smoked it until it was a brown stub.

When I got back with fifteen or so bags of groceries wrapped around my fingers, Ma was still on her laptop. As I stocked the groceries, she called me out.

"What took you so long? You're putting miles on my car." She clicked away without looking up. "Took your uniform out. So dusty! I cleaned it up a bit."

My blue Army Service Uniform was unpacked, hung up on the frame of her bedroom. She wanted me to explain it all to her. Last time I'd worn it was for the AIT graduation party.

Ma stood by me and touched the uniform's lapel. I explained what every trinket stood for: the name tape, the rank, the flimsy ribbons I sort of earned just for being a living soldier. Ma's head shook once. Twice, maybe? There was a semblance of recognition I needed—balance, I guess. Part of her eyes got really big then super small, staring at the cross and silver on my upper left chest. When I told her it was a marksmanship badge, meaning I was a good with a rifle—the badge that I'm proud of the most, being a small town Jersey boy with no history of handling a gun, let alone an assault rifle—there was no wow or pause to congratulate me. She asked: How did I pay for this (out of my government stipend) and when do I wear it (things graduation, weddings, or military funerals.) Ma wasn't too pleased with that last statement. She went straight to bed. I put the ASU back and took her car keys.

"I'm going out, Ma," I called.

"What did you say?"

"I'm going out. See what's changed around town for a bit."

"Do not destroy my car."

I arrived at Flannigan's off 295 in Ewing shortly after 1800. By the time I got there, happy hour had started, an hour

before Rebecca would show up.

Flannigan's was a remnant of a New Jersey bar that once was—a replica of what could've been a local's hub straight from a television sitcom, but the idea was scrapped after years of just trying to get by. Bartender didn't even look at me when I sat in a corner section, far from the Rolling Rock lights and the empty crimson red booths cushions that sunk and tore where your ass was supposed to be. Last time I came around, I was just shy of finishing off high school at eighteen. They didn't have a guard at the front checking ID's, it was up to the bartender, but everyone in school knew that no one checked; it made 'em more money that way. Now the staff changed, the only person still around was one of the regulars: a crusty-looking bald dude with blue eyes and dry skin. Didn't recognize me though. I ordered a High Life on draft and finished half of it before five minutes passed. The bar's floor hatch opened from below, and a white boy about my age with a short blonde crew cut emerged. He wore a fitted black tee with the pub's logo on the front and back.

"Kowalski, can you go back and bring up two more Miller kegs," the bartender said as he changed the channels from ESPN to Fox News, "they're tapped out."

The barback didn't say a word as he marched back down. I tried to listen to his voice to make sure it was him; but when he came back around to face the door, we stared one another down. Ben Kowalski was a junior when I was a freshman and he used to harass me and other kids in school for the fun of it. We were on the wrestling team together but never got along as I was the most out of shape in the group, chugging behind while he led the team in sprints, suicides, and up-downs. Outside of the sport, he'd pick me out in the cafeteria and chide me, asking if I needed any food today or he'd say something to his group in the hallways whenever I'd pass by, something that made them laugh when my back was turned. It went on for a few months until he got a DUI one semester and he couldn't act a

fool anymore, he'd become one.

At the bar we scanned each other for signs of life's wear and tear. The Marine was three years older than me, but looked twenty more.

"No shit," Ben said as he leaned against the bar. "Hey *sir*, I thought you were trying to be an LT? Least that's what Facebook said."

"And I thought you were in jail for selling pills," I said.

"Murray's dad helped me out on that one. The Corps a hand in it too."

"Good for you."

The two of us slapped hands and hugged, like all that past didn't make a difference. Ben had developed into a sturdy, wood-colored deck of a man, polished with pink along the edges you can expect—the neck, the ears, and the side of arms. Once he got that DUI, he spent his senior year brawling with people over his ex-fiancé and doing pills with a couple of other oxygen thieves who were either in AA, in jail, or on house arrest now. Sometime after he signed up for the Corps and deployed a few months later.

Ben was getting off work in a few, so I told him I'd wait around. Rebecca was late anyway, I figured she was stuck in traffic or something. I thought about texting her or sending her a Snap, but I didn't. On the TV, a Fox News reporter in Manhattan said that a former Marine fractured his skull at a California Occupy Wall Street Protest and when I finished my third High Life, the bartender shut it off and called them all a bunch of communists who got what they deserved.

It was Ben's war anniversary, and also around the time he got out of the Corps, so he was thrilled to tell someone about it. After four years and two deployments on him, he got out so he

could work a second shift job at Flannigan's and third shift at the Buffalo Wild Wings on Route 1, slinging boneless fried chicken and watery beer.

"What about your G.I. bill?"

"What about it? Who needs college?" Ben said.

In the Marines, his role was in signal operations between the various services. He claimed to be a master of the phonetic alphabet, and when I called bullshit, he bought three shots of whiskey and drank them in a row—waited five minutes for it to settle—and proceed to utter each letter backward and forwards, twice. It was like putting together Legos for him.

I was so impressed I offered to pay for the shots, but he kept saying no, no. "It's OK, brother," Ben said. "Too fucking easy. It feels like tricks like that are the only thing I'm good at anymore."

I bought us a round of Miller Lights and he talked about Afghanistan, his last deployment. "We dropped so many rounds on the enemy, but I never got to see any of it up close. Pissed me off. They'd relay back to command how many targets they supposedly took out, or the LT's on the ground would radio back if they could engage a fucker, and I was pretty much the link between the green light and the action and—" Ben stopped to take out a Marlboro Red and offered me one too. "It was all indirect, never up front, you couldn't see them. I know I got 'em because I'd hear the report on the comms or watch the video a few days later. Every shot hit home. One minute a dude is running for his life in a poppy field and then out of nowhere...his remains are painted all over the flowers. Yeah. Yeah. It was fun. Hey man that's sick you went enlisted man, you'll fucking love it and then hate it a few days later. What did you sign up for in the Army?"

I told him about the cavalry.

“You went Cav? Cav? Why the fuck would you sign up to be a bullet sponge, homeboy? You should re-class and go M.I. They got the hottest chicks in the Army. Bar none.”

I offered to drive Ben home but he said, “I’m Good to Fucking Go.”

He got in his green Jeep and swerved out of the parking lot while I waited past twenty-three hundred for Rebecca to show up, except she didn’t. She didn’t text or nothing. About an hour in, ex classmates from high school came into the pub and passed me by—they looked at me, squinted, and walked away. Few people remembered me, can’t blame ‘em. I only had about two hundred or so friends on Facebook, perhaps eighty percent or more of them I didn’t even talk to. It could’ve also been the beer and Ben’s shots that must’ve given me some kind of funk for people to keep their distance, but by midnight the buzz went away, and I started sipping on another light beer minding my own until this brunette approached me to say *hi* and she called me Eduardo, and when I said I wasn’t him, she apologized, turned, and went to her friends by the pool tables. I finished another pint and drove to Ma’s with the windows down. The night’s chill pressed against my face and tickled my scalp. A Statey followed my ass on Route I-195 from Trenton to Robbinsville until it zoomed around me to pull over a speeding Camaro. An ambulance roared by in the other direction. Where it went, God knows.

I got home a quarter past one. Five thick red candles flickered along the apartment’s window sill. The Venetian blinds swung in a lazy, steady motion, guided by the wind. I unlocked Ma’s the front door and listened to the soft murmurs of prayer in a mix of Tagalog and English. She was in a nightgown, her knees pressed against the carpet, praying to the Virgin statue; tiny candles lit around Mary’s ceramic feet like beggar children. Her eyes remained closed as her index fingers clutched the red rosary beads, her lips lost in the movement of The Lord’s Prayer. She didn’t stop or look over

until I locked the door.

"You took my car without permission," she said.

"You said I could take it."

"No. I asked where you were going," she took a deep breath and turned back to the statue. "Come here. Pray with me, Jason."

My walk must've been awkward, gaited even, but I got on my knees next to her. It must've been the smell of candles that had me all fucked up still. It had been a while since I'd done this. I tried to recall how to pray and what to pray about; Hail Mary, or Our Father, or The Apostle's Creed. They all sound the same. Ma tapped my closed fist. "Pray," she said.

Prayer is an eerie and intimate feeling with another person next to you. When Pops was still around, we went to Saint Barn's as a whole family. We knelt in the rows at the front, not too far off from big Jesus himself looking down upon us. We recited the rosary, bead for bead. When it was done, Ma went up to the rows of candles and lit one up for her sister, another for her home in Manila, and another for Pops. Come up, Ma said to me, and I lit one up for my future, whatever that looked like. Another for Ma. Another for Pops. The light glowed in front of me as if it were a power that only I could hold; a thing that I could control.

After extinguishing the candles, I helped her to the bedroom. Her body felt grainy against my shoulders, light in weight but uneven and hard. I laid her down upon the mattress, stacking the pile of self-help magazines and business textbooks on her bed to the floor. As I tucked her in, she grabbed my wrist.

"When are you leaving me, Jason?"

"Soon. Back to Texas. Army life. Afterwards, maybe I'll deploy. I don't know."

She rubbed my wrist. "You've always had dry skin problems,"

she said, "you need to put on some lotion. My boy. God, you're my only boy. My only boy is going away." Her hand flowed down onto the bed in a slow, fluid, motion like a fat droplet of Georgia rain water off an up-armored Humvee's roof. I closed her bedroom door with my body upright, my neck tight and my eyes salty with sweat from the whiskey or the candles or I don't know. In the darkness of her warehouse, I sat on the couch and wrapped my left hand around the straps of my assault pack and tapped my fingernails against my knee with the other.