

# New Fiction from Brian Van Reet: "Lazarus"

We were the HMDs: the human mine detectors. In a sense the job was easy, but impossible to do well. There was no good method, for example, by which to differentiate animal carcasses packed with high explosives from those concealing only bloat and maggots. If roadkill was sighted, rather than stop to investigate, one of us gunners would shine a spotlight to indicate the location of the foul thing that might kill us as we drove past, taking the widest possible berth, clinching, waiting. If nothing exploded, we had not found an IED.

That was the job, repeated most every night, with every fresh patch of asphalt, each curb that looked like it might've been sledgehammered and pieced back together, every mound of garbage dumped on the roadside, each stray, suspicious length of wire. We didn't have the time or resources to search it all properly. We spotted the vast majority of devices when they were triggered, not before. It didn't take much more than a few catastrophes like that for us to reach the conclusion: the army must not mind us finding them that way. Why else would they keep sending us out there, if not for a deep appreciation of our talents as HMDs?

It was on one of these IED sweeps, not long after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, that I was standing in the gunner's hatch of our truck and someone first tried to kill me—I mean, deliberately tried to do it. I was fortunate enough as a cocky young volunteer soldier to sort of want that to happen, but wasn't awake enough to realize it had. I had nodded off on my feet, my IED-finding spotlight wedged between the roof of our truck and the gun mount, so it appeared I was doing my job, scanning the pavement and rubble for the fourth consecutive overnight hour, when in fact my head was drooping, bobbing, snapping up every so often with that sudden falling feeling

you get when you drift off someplace you hadn't meant to.

We were on the return leg of the sweep, nearing Checkpoint Delta, a traffic circle, when the first RPG woke me, the rocket engine hissing and shrieking as it flew like a high-powered Roman candle, missing the truck ahead of ours and striking an adobe shanty just off the road where it exploded in a flash of orange and dust. Half a dozen heartbeats and another rocket, this one missing our truck, brought me fully awake and cemented the idea. They were trying to kill me. Who, I didn't know. Someone I couldn't see and had never met hated me or the thought of me enough to want to end my life right there in an instant on that lonely stretch of road, like something out of loneliest New Mexico, if you must place yourself somewhere more possible than Iraq.

Below me in the truck our lieutenant was hollering, "Turn that shit off, man—turn it off!" and when he grabbed my leg, I saw he meant me, my spotlight. Not so effective at locating hidden bombs, it was far more useful to the enemy as a million-candle-power bull's-eye.

I switched off the light and set it on the roof of the truck, taking the gun off safe and fumbling with the tension knob on the gun mount for a few seconds until it came loose. I swung the mount toward the east, the direction I thought the rockets had come from. I couldn't see much past the starlit road. Beyond it was a farmer's field growing some kind of summer crop—muskmelons, I think it was—and on the far side of that, an irrigation canal I'd noticed in the day but couldn't pick out now. A cluster of electric lights on the horizon marked a squatter village we called Squaretown for no other reason than its geography.

One of the other gunners started shooting into the field, and even though I couldn't see anything out there, I followed his lead and opened fire, letting off a wild burst from my machinegun, I don't mean an M-16 but a truck-mounted

machinegun that could send bullets the size of fingers through engine blocks and concrete walls. Every fifth round was a tracer and there were several burning in the air at any given time, the smell of hot brass and powder, shell casings streaming out of the ejection port; somehow, one of them was ejected in such a way as to kick back and lodge under the collar of my Kevlar vest.

I had no idea what had happened. I yelled, my neck suddenly on fire; I ducked through the hatch into the truck's cab with the rest of the crew. In the front, Yarrow was passing the lieutenant a hand mic, while in the rear, Lorcin was discharging his M-16 rapidly on single shot out the passenger's side window. Martinez sat opposite him with his rifle between his legs and his hands placed calmly over his ears to muffle the noise. Ducking and stooped on my knees in the center of the truck, roughly at the midpoint between all of them, I spun toward Martinez.

"I think I'm hit! Can you see it, can you see it?"

The immediate burning sensation had subsided some, but it still hurt, and I was freaked, frantically lifting my chin to expose my neck to the medic, who always rode in our truck. That wasn't by accident. The lieutenant, top man in the platoon, also always rode in our truck. The lieutenant was slick like that: keep your friends close, your first aid closer.

Martinez leaned toward me and swept his hands over my neck and shoulders, feeling for blood and in the process discovering the hot shell casing, which had migrated off my skin and down between my uniform and vest.

"You're not shot, bro! It's just some brass!" Martinez shouted over the deafening report of the rifle firing inside the truck. Lorcin had dropped a mag, reloaded, and resumed shooting. He was nineteen, a typical age for a private, but

unlike any other I had met, he was technically still a French citizen, working on his U.S. citizenship (a fact he had been able to keep hidden from most of the platoon, not having a discernible accent, and which he had sworn me to secrecy about after confessing it one night on guard duty). The kid, Lorcin, had spent most of his life in Vegas where his dad worked as a chef. He was a good soldier. Martinez was, too. He actually was from some lonely place in New Mexico; I forget the name of the town but remember him turning twenty-two later that summer, making him about my same age. To my knowledge, it was the first time any of us had been shot at.

"Brass, what?" the lieutenant roared indignantly, turning his attention from the radios to the commotion over me in the turret. The LT was a big man who had played some college ball and was very physically brave. I'm not suggesting, with the thing about Martinez always riding in our truck, that the lieutenant was a coward, only that he was not above taking advantage. He distrusted the competence of others, is one way to put it.

"Goddamnit!" the LT yelled. "Get your happy ass back up there!" He slapped me on the helmet to hearten me. I got to my feet in the hatch, and he went back to making his radio report about the shit we were in, carrying on three simultaneous conversations: two by radio, with the platoon and higher headquarters, and also one with us, in person, in the truck.

No more rockets had been launched after the initial volley, but that didn't stop us from shooting up the landscape a while. I don't trust my memories of time in those situations, but it couldn't have lasted much more than thirty seconds after the point I'd mistakenly thought I'd been shot, burned by my own brass. You could try consulting an official report to get the army's stats on the engagement, rounds expended, an exact timeline, but that information, even if it weren't classified, would be no more reliable on the whole than what I have put down here. What happened at Checkpoint Delta was

altogether unusual but ordinary in at least one respect. The official version was riddled with omissions, errors, and lies.

“Cease fire, cease fire!” the lieutenant ordered. “Punch it around these fools! No, that way!”

Our driver, Specialist Yarrow, sped past the other trucks, leading them to the checkpoint, out of the kill zone, the roar of gunfire petering away to ringing ears and scattered pops. A short time later we pulled into the traffic circle, one truck stopping off at each of the four cardinal directions. To the west lay our camp; to the south, Baghdad proper; to the east, Squaretown; and if you took the northern spur, after passing through a number of other hardscrabble villages, you’d eventually reach desert as open and empty as the surface of Mars.

Some of us dismounted at the checkpoint to assess the damage, of which there was none. Not a single man or truck had been hit. No one had seen who had shot at us; many guys had seen the rockets, but our descriptions of their points of origin were in disagreement, and none of us had seen “an actual fucking bad guy firing an RPG,” as the lieutenant eventually put it, ending that line of speculation. Battalion ordered us to hold the checkpoint and wait there for the quick reaction force to arrive from camp. Only the throbbing red mark on my neck and our warm gunmetal yet proved the firefight was something other than a collective hallucination.

\*

Our reinforcements were late. According to the latest from battalion, the QRF was “spinning up,” whatever that meant. The transmission on their status was a bad turn and it came through on the radio not long before a pair of headlights appeared on the road leading to the traffic circle from Squaretown. The eastern road. We had been fired on from the east. There was a sundown to sunup curfew in place, and no

civilians were supposed to be on that road at that hour. Even without the preceding ambush, the sight of headlights approaching would have been alarming.

We prepared to face round two alone. On the lieutenant's orders, Yarrow moved our truck to the eastern spur, supporting Sergeant [Redacted]'s position there. [Note: The occasion for this account is truth-telling and the airing of long withheld grievances. With that being the case, I do not take the decision to redact lightly. But I've recently learned from a trusted source that this former sergeant is, for whatever reason, struggling with severe addiction. I make it a point to say Sgt. R. is addicted *for whatever reason* because, by his own admission before going to war, he was a drinker. The lingering effects of combat could not have helped his disease, which was nevertheless preexisting: who knows why he originally took to drowning his sorrows? I don't feel sorry for him, either; that's not why I've redacted his name. I've got enough on my conscience as it is, and the small portion of the truth that I'm blotting out is not worth being questioned someday by another ghost. His, waiting in the wings, whispering to me that I got it all wrong. What would be the point in opening myself up to that? There are untold thousands like the old sergeant, wandering free in the United States of Amnesia, and I have no evidence compelling enough for any prosecutor to pursue charges against him for something that happened fifteen years ago in a foreign country. If my source is correct about the state of his health, the judicial system might be the slower route to justice, anyway, depending on how you define it. Either way, I can't stand the thought of becoming entangled with his fate any more than I already am.]

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said, never taking his eyes off the approaching headlights. "Throw a couple flares out. Far as you can."

R. opened the hatch of his truck and found a stash of road flares in an oily canvas bag he kept there. He struck a flare

to get it going and lobbed it end over end, burning bright red into the spur ahead of us. He did another, and another, a line of flares intended to signal to the approaching driver that the traffic circle was off-limits: turn back immediately.



The driver did not turn back. He did slow down, then stopped, then lurched forward again but slower than before, and continued to vary his slow speed erratically after the appearance of the flares, as if he had obviously seen them and our position, yet still insisted on approaching, albeit indecisively.

“Hold fire! Fire on *my* order!” the lieutenant yelled up and down the line. “Don’t come any closer, you dumb son of a bitch,” he said to himself. Only those of us near him—meaning Yarrow, Lorcin, Martinez and me—heard him say that last part.

The driver stopped again at about a hundred meters. Redacted

had gone out ahead of our trucks to toss the flares, which were at fifty meters. In their backlight I could make out the shape of the car, which looked like an old Volkswagen sedan. Those were everywhere in Baghdad. We were thinking it might be nothing, but who knew. Worst case, the car was rigged to blow, the driver getting cold feet, or maybe stalling purposefully, and the second wave of the ambush would hit us at any second, a mistimed Trojan-horse-style scenario.

The driver rolled down his window and stuck out an arm, waving in apparent distress. None of us budged. He took his foot off the brake and idled forward.

"The fuck's he doing?" Yarrow said.

"Could be wounded," the lieutenant said. "Could be one of the guys who shot at us."

"Or some random drunk asshole."

"Flash your brights at him."

It was at that point—the lieutenant telling Yarrow to flash his headlights—that I remembered my own spotlight. We carried no brighter light than the one I had with me up in the hatch, and I flicked it on and shined it at the Volkswagen. The car dipped to a stop. Another gunner turned on his light. Our crossed beams penetrated the windshield to meet on the driver, no longer a dark silhouette but a young Arab man squinting and turning his head. The hand that had been held out of the window was now raised to his face, shielding his eyes. He appeared to be alone, upset, confused or traumatized or drunk or all of the above, dazzled by the spotlight's glare. Nothing changed from one moment to the next. Then, Sergeant R. opened fire.

Only a handful of people have ever read the official report on the incident. This exclusivity should not be attributed to its juiciness, more the opposite. It's hard to overstate how



successfully the army reduces even spectacular violence to a series of boilerplate phrases that signify little about the reality of war other than its essential bureaucracy. Like all such reports, if this one still exists, access is restricted. It's not in the trove of documents famously leaked in 2010, not even tracked there as a serious incident in the master list, as no U.S. personnel were wounded. I haven't seen the report since 2004, when the lieutenant asked me to proofread it before he submitted it to our company commander in the form of a sworn statement, but I remember it, and other similar reports, well enough to recreate the crux with some accuracy.

*The local national driving the vehicle approached a U.S. position after an RPG ambush on Route Predators near Checkpoint Delta. The vehicle failed to stop after being warned repeatedly to do so with flares and lights. Deadly force was subsequently used by soldiers of 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon, Alpha Company, 1<sup>st</sup> of the 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, who reasonably believed they were at risk of death or imminent great bodily harm.*

Once R. started shooting, two other men in the platoon did as well, and between them they discharged a dozen or more rounds before the lieutenant could scream "Cease fire!" loud enough to stop them. Our rules of engagement stated that a vehicle or person could be declared hostile simply by the act of one of us shooting at him/her/it. So, when R. opened fire, those other two soldiers followed their training and his lead. The sergeant might've seen something they had missed: a detonator in the man's raised hand, wires running into the car's trunk, a group of insurgents creeping toward us in the dark muskmelon field.

I had seen nothing like that and was not one who fired at the car. I might've done it—probably would've, by twitchy nervous reflex—if my finger had been resting on the trigger when I'd heard the shots, instead of being curled around the handle of my spotlight. Unintentionally, it had served to pinpoint the

target, increasing the accuracy of R. and the others, their gun smoke wisping and curling in the unsteady beam that magnified the trembling of my hands into the world.

The Volkswagen's windshield, now frosted with bullet holes, obscured the man inside, slumped over the steering wheel. The car's horn bleated pathetically and continuously under his weight.

"What happened?" the lieutenant asked, his voice missing its usual bravado. "What the hell'd you see?"

"He wouldn't stop, sir." R. said it with such perfect conviction that—though I'd just seen the car was stopped, had been completely stopped and the man had had his hand up, shielding his eyes—I wondered if I had missed something crucial.

"He was stopped," Martinez said.

"Bullshit," Redacted said. "He did for a second before he floored it."

"Yeah, *after* you started shooting."

"Bullshit."

"Sergeant R.," the lieutenant said sternly, "You and Yarrow go clear that vehicle."

R. gave the lieutenant a questioning look that turned sour as the lieutenant made no move to reconsider his order. Typically, a squad leader like R. would not have been given such an immediately dangerous job as clearing a possible suicide car bomb. The lieutenant was breaking protocol and assigning this duty to him as a kind of rebuke, I thought. The implications of that were disturbing, but at the time no one said anything more about the circumstances of the shooting. We were not out of the woods, providing over-watch as R. and Yarrow hunch-walked down the spur toward the Volkswagen, which

had come to rest with one of its tires wedged against the curb.

"There's someone in the backseat!" Yarrow said. "Some dude hiding in the backseat!"

"Get out, now! Ishta!"

"I think he's dead, man. Fuck. I don't know."

"Open that door. I'll fan out and cover you."

"*You* open the motherfucking door, brah. You're the one shot these motherfuckers."

R. outranked Yarrow but put up no more argument. He crept against the car and popped the rear door latch. Nothing happened. He nodded at Yarrow, who took up a good angle. He flung the car door open. Still, no movement, and Yarrow repeated his opinion: the man in back looked dead.

Hearing that, R. glanced in the car, stood to his full height, and poked around in the backseat with the muzzle of his rifle. I was a ways off and didn't see it clearly, but heard Yarrow tell it back at camp. R. poked one of the dead guy's eyeballs with the muzzle of his rifle. Not hard enough to pop it out of his skull, but hard enough. I was told it's what hunters do with large animals they've shot, to make sure they're truly dead before letting their guard down. Now satisfied the man in back was not merely unconscious or faking, R. went to the driver's side door, opened it, and pushed the other dead man off the steering wheel to stop the horn sounding. The noise had been uncanny, the steady accusation of a machine.

"Ain't shit in the trunk but trash and shit," Yarrow said. "It's clear, LT."

The lieutenant and the rest of our crew moved closer. The inside of the car stunk of burnt cloth and blood. The man in the driver's seat who'd been shot was in his late twenties or

early thirties. He wore a wedding ring. His eyes were half-lidded, and the expression on his face made it look like he'd died in agony. It was the first time in my life I'd ever seen anything like that, and it shook me up, but not how you might expect. The lows came later. In the moment, the feeling was nearly the opposite. I felt so high I was almost sick, not from disgust, but the nauseating thrilling impossibility of being alive while this other human being was suddenly not.

"Gimme a hand here," Martinez said. He was attempting to drag the other dead man from the backseat. That guy was older than the driver, not quite elderly but almost. Though the two were separated by decades, some of their features bore a close resemblance, too much for a coincidence, I thought. They were probably a father and his son.

We dragged the old man out of the car, onto the road. He looked beyond saving, his skin the color of a pale blueberry, but Martinez went through his checks, patting him down systematically, searching for blood by touch. He turned his head and held it over the man's pale blue lips, feeling for a wisp of breath, using two fingers to check for a pulse on the carotid. Nothing.

"He ain't shot," Martinez said. "I think he had a heart attack or something."

"Because of the firefight?"

"I doubt it. Probably just bad luck."

To me, however, it remains an open question, one of many from that night. Did we (and the militiamen who'd ambushed us) literally scare that old man to death as he slept in his bed and we sent rounds downrange in the vicinity of his home in Squaretown? Was the driver of the car really his son? Had he brought his dying father to us at the checkpoint in the hope we could save him? Iraqis sometimes did ascribe miraculous technological powers to U.S. foot soldiers, including when it

came to medicine—or was it just the driver's terrible fate to have taken a route to the nearest hospital that happened to cross our path? Was it a series of unfortunate coincidences, or a tight chain of cause-and-effect? In the end, no one could say. They couldn't tell their story.

Martinez unzipped his aid bag. He removed a ventilator mask for CPR and three clear packing tubes that held epinephrine autoinjectors for the couple guys in the company who suffered from dangerous allergies. He cracked each tube and shot the injectors into the old man's thigh. Then he straddled him and with the heels of his palms started chest compressions, counting them out. Something like a tree branch snapped in the dead man's chest. Yarrow gagged. He was holding the mask over the man's nose and mouth, pumping the ventilator ball to breathe for him when Martinez said to.

They went through one cycle of compressions and ventilations, then another.

"He's gone, Martinez," the lieutenant said respectfully.

The medic acknowledged that likelihood but kept working. We were still waiting for the QRF to arrive and there was nothing better to do, so the lieutenant let him work. Someone actually said it was good training, like it was good the guy had croaked so that Martinez could practice his CPR on real flesh. Some of the men stood watch, facing out on the perimeter; others followed the lieutenant's lead, drifting away from the Volkswagen and its gruesome scene to attend to their trucks; and still other soldiers lingered or moved closer to the bodies, beginning to get comfortable in the presence of death. Sergeant Redacted went back to his truck and found a digital camera he'd bought in Kuwait. The lieutenant stopped him on his way back to the Volkswagen.

"What're you doing with that, Sergeant?"

"We should get a few pics of their faces," R. said. "We might

have to ID these guys. They could be important.”

“Put that shit away,” the lieutenant said.

“Sir?”

“I said stow it. Now.”

R. pocketed the slim silver camera. He elaborated no more on his intentions but it seemed unlikely he had meant we might have to identify the dead men to their next of kin. Either he was lying about his reasons for wanting a photo or he genuinely believed, despite all evidence to the contrary, that he had just shot two insurgents who were big-time enough to be known by face to military intelligence.

I have an opinion on why the camera came out, but it's only that. By way of factual background, I can say R. was a self-described good old boy from Tennessee who liked to hunt and fish and whose dream, after serving out his twenty years, was to open a bar with a veteran's small business loan and his pension. He hated politicians and especially liberals. Along with his outdoor hobbies he liked all things Star Trek, pulp sci-fi, tabletop wargames, and was, surprisingly, a gourmand: sort of a dorky redneck, you might say, if forced to sum up a personality in a few broad strokes.

Once, in the lead-up to our deployment, I'd heard the sergeant say he wanted to “stack a few bodies over there” as revenge for 9-11. As far as he was concerned, that was why we were in Iraq, and he was fine with it. There'd been a lot of that kind of talk going around, and it was hard to know who to take seriously. It seemed incredible to think his vicious streak ran strong and dumb enough for him to murder a man in cold blood in front of fifteen witnesses before attempting to photograph the evidence with his own camera. Then again, a state of war does afford the psychopath much leeway.

A few days later, I brought up my concerns with the lieutenant

in the privacy of his room when I returned the incident report with typos and awkward phrases marked in red.

"You don't think he did it on purpose," I said, somewhat between a statement and a question.

"Of course he did it on purpose," the LT said.

"I meant—"

"I know what you meant."

"Oh."

"Listen. I've talked to Sergeant R., okay? I talked to him for a very long time. I have no doubt he was in fear for his life when he made that decision."

"He didn't seem that afraid to me," I said, skirting the edge of insubordination.

"You're forgetting that two other soldiers fired as well."

"Only because he did."

"You weren't afraid at all then, Corporal? Can you honestly say that?"

I shrugged, not knowing how to answer that question without sounding snippy or absurd. I was afraid every single time we went outside the wire. You learned to deal with it. Fear didn't give us a license to kill.

"Well I was," the LT continued. "And you know what? If I, as a reasonable person, believe R. might've been right—not that he was, but *might've been*? Well, you better believe I'm not gonna accuse him, or any of you guys, of a thing like that. We need men like Redacted. I can't have you all hesitating in a decisive moment."

"Sir. The car was stopped."

"Briefly. You saw the guy; he was driving all fucking...herky jerky and weird."

"You said to fire on your order, sir."

"Do you know something I don't, Corporal?" he said, a tired-sounding challenge.

"No. I saw what you saw."

"Exactly. So we're done here. Go tell the guys we've gotta go out tonight at zero three hundred. Another IED sweep."

"Roger, sir."

"Hey. Wait. I know this isn't easy, okay? It's a terrible thing, but we have to put it behind us. We don't have a choice. How do you think Sergeant R. feels about it?"

I said I didn't know, while secretly doubting the LT's considerations were all so selfless as he made out. We were at the very beginning of our tour, with forty-some-odd weeks left to suffer the war and each other. Any serious accusation or investigation would've torn the platoon apart, guaranteeing discord, scandal and ruining the lieutenant's command reputation, no matter what, if any, justice was ever done. Given the circumstances of the shooting and our rules of engagement, the scales were tipped toward R.; without a confession, there was no hard evidence he had acted with malice. The sergeant wasn't exactly popular among us, but there were those in the platoon who would've had his back with testimonies of the shooting to counter any accusing witnesses, which, though some of us talked privately about our misgivings, never emerged publicly to point a finger. Even those men who had misgivings and didn't care for the sergeant on a personal level were reluctant to inform on a fellow volunteer-prisoner, both for the sake of upholding the inmate's code—you don't rat, no matter what—and for fear of violating it and incurring reprisals.



There were none for the shooting. Nothing formal, at least. The killing near Checkpoint Delta went unpunished and was only avenged in a proximate and random way by the IEDs that picked us off by ones and twos every few months for the rest of the year. R. was never so much as wounded on that or any of his deployments. We are not friends, but I can see his profile pic on Facebook. It's him looking sharp in his dress blues; the photo might have been taken at his retirement ceremony, two years ago. He made it to the finish line and got his pension, but from what I've heard, he blows it every month on bar tabs, and not at his own watering hole, which he's never gotten around to opening. I think his drinking picked up so dramatically after he left the service, not because he was so torn up about what had happened overseas, but because he thrived on that sort of thing, missed the thrill, the absolute sense of purpose, and felt bored and aimless without it. He is doing now what he did back then, times he was bored and free to drink, only, there are many more free nights now, post-retirement, for him to burn out his liver with Old Crow and hillbilly heroin, neither of which should be mistaken for karma.

The only other time I heard the sergeant talk about the shooting was the day after. He was eating chow with a few of the other squad leaders from our company. One of them asked him about it, and after a little prodding, he told them the story. The way he told it made no mention of the car being stopped. Instead, he focused on its erratic approach, how close it had gotten.

"You know the deadly radius for exposed personnel in a car bomb blast? By the book it's like three hundred meters. Dumbass hajji—how was I supposed to know?"

His story had changed in a day's time. Whether or not the car was stopped had been the sticking point in the immediate aftermath. Now, that point had been dropped entirely, in favor of the maximum effective range of car bombs and the

situational difficulty in determining whether a stranger's baffling actions indicated hostility or foolishness.

If the Volkswagen really had been loaded with explosives, it might have killed some of us, it's true. The sergeant's new explanation for why he'd fired was stronger and more valid than his original one, but mostly it struck me as a red flag, upon hearing it in the chow hall, precisely because the explanation had changed. To my mind, this shifting logic suggested R. had been lying from the beginning. He had refined his initial story into one more plausible with the benefit of another day to think it through.

In that case, he is guilty of a war crime: shooting a civilian, knowing the man was probably not hostile, exploiting the uncertainty of that night's events to get what he had wanted all along. Here was his chance to stack some bodies. The facts do fit that scenario, but I must admit they also fit one in which the sergeant acted honestly (and stupidly). It could be the lieutenant was right and R. truly had believed we were in imminent danger when he pulled the trigger. If so, the conversation I'd overheard in the chow hall was not evidence of premeditation; rather, a state of denial, which had lifted enough, in a day, for the sergeant at least to acknowledge he'd not killed an insurgent, while at the same time continuing to blame the dead man for what had happened.

Enough conjecture. It can be tediously endless and abstract. I was an eyewitness and should lay my cards on the table. In my opinion, the man is a murderer, though I don't believe he's ever thought of himself as one. To this day, I imagine he remains the beleaguered hero of his own story, or the victim, or something like both, simultaneously. Anything but the villain. Few of us can stomach being that.

\*

"I've got a pulse!" Martinez said. I had moved off from the

Volkswagen to monitor the radios, listening for any word on our reinforcements, but now I rushed back to see for myself. The old man remained unconscious and laid out in the road but his skin had lightened up, no longer so blue, and his chest was rising and falling rapidly.

"Holy shit. You brought him back."

"What were those shots you gave him?"

"Epi-pens. Basically, pure adrenaline."

"Good work, Martinez. Yarrow. Goddamn outstanding work, you two."

"He's not out of the woods yet, sir. He needs evac'd. Like, now."

"The QRF are two mikes out. Soon as they get here, we'll take him to the CASH."

And so we did. And I cannot tell what happened to the old man after that. He was alive and unconscious when we left him at the combat support hospital. For all I know, his heart might've stopped again, shortly thereafter, or he might've wound up living for years but as a vegetable. I suppose he could have recovered from the episode only to have suffered another, more horrible death in wartime Baghdad, anytime from 2004 to this writing. Statistically, it's unlikely, but he may still be alive. He would be a very old man for Iraq in 2019.

His revival was one of the more incredible things we were involved in during our deployment. Throughout the rest of the year, the story came up often. Hard and cynical as some of us were, I think we liked to fall back on telling it to feel better about ourselves, if you can believe a person might be comforted by the events I've just conveyed. Like any story, how it's received depends on how it's delivered, the focus of it, and where the listener is, the context. We were all eye-

deep in the shit and generally proud of Martinez for what he'd done, one of the few acts of redemption we accomplished in a year of waste and toil, or so we thought. With more distance, it's easy to realize the old man might've rather stayed dead of a heart attack than come back to life to learn of his son, killed while delivering him to an unlikely salvation.

We left a dead son and, in the best case, his father to live another twenty years with a cruel debt he couldn't repay. From where I stand now, our one act of grace, that resurrection, seems closer to a tragic curse. I can't remember anyone insisting on that obvious point, back then. Nuanced consequence was lost on most of us. We were in our teens and early twenties, even our leader the lieutenant, and the stakes were too high and stark to accommodate the over-contemplation of grey-shaded outcomes. I imagine we all would've preferred to be revived if it came to it, and so naturally, whatever we thought and said privately about the shooting itself, when we recalled the story as a group or to outsiders, we focused on conjuring the thing we most wanted from its elements that were actually true.

That was life. Survival. Fortunate, unexpected, persistent life, snatched from the jaws of death by a feat of willpower and know-how. A charm against death was what we all wanted, and we told our buddies in other platoons about Martinez and the old man, the incredible thing we'd seen with our own eyes, while minimizing the tragedy of the dead son and R.'s role in making it a tragedy in the first place. Instead of the one time over there when we might have saved a life without taking more.

"You hear what happened the other night?"... "Naw, he wasn't the one shot. Heart attack or some shit."... "It was crazy. Freakish, really. Dude was fucking blue, right, like his ticker *had been* stopped, and this sumbitch right here, *this* motherfucker, he brings him back from the dead, man." "Best medic I ever saw." "For real. Dude's a miracle worker."

"I don't do miracles," Martinez said once, fed up enough to overcome his usual reticence. "I did what I could, and it worked. He wasn't meant to die. That's all it is."

As word got around, someone started calling Martinez, Lazarus. The nickname stuck and was perpetuated within the platoon by a certain dominant clique that referred to him that way almost exclusively for the remainder of the tour, even though Martinez hated the name, and even though, according to the Bible, Lazarus was the man Jesus raised from the dead, not the one doing the raising. For the allusion to make sense, we should have called the old man Lazarus. More than once, I said as much to the guys, but nobody who had gone over to using Lazarus, primarily, ever changed his behavior and went back to "Martinez" as a result of me pointing out the inherent error.

"Come on, Professor," they said, using their nickname for me that I hated. "We're not calling him Jesus. That's just dumb. He's Lazarus, brah. Seriously. Don't overthink this shit."