

New Fiction from Matthew Cricchio: "War All the Time"

The Staff Sergeant shifted in his tight, class-A uniform and frowned. Phones rang and keyboards, the primary weapon of administrative Marines, clicked in the busy Personnel Support Detachment office. I said *please* a lot even though, if I hadn't lost my eye, I'd never beg a guy like that for a thing.

"Please, Staff Sar'nt. Who else can I talk to?"

"For what, Sergeant Bing?"

"So I can stay in the Marines. I want to do my job." I leaned in close so no one could hear me insisting, and pulled on the ragged border of my destroyed eye, the pink skin bubbling where the upper eye lid should've been. "I can still be a grunt."

"Yeah?" he said, holding his black government pen on my blind side. "Catch this." The falling pen disappeared into the darkness of my non-vision and he groaned as he bent over to pick it up from the floor. "The Med Board makes these decisions. Not me. But it's obvious you can't see out of that eye." He took one last look at my paperwork before putting it into a folder and handing it to me. "You barely have an eye."

"But they let wounded guys come back a lot. Last year in the Marine Corps Times they wrote about that Recon Gunny who went to Iraq with a fake leg." A line of Marines looking to sort out pay issues, Basic Housing Allowance disbursements, life insurance policies, built up behind me and the Staff Sergeant became anxious to move me along.

"Marine Corps says you gotta have two eyes for combat shooting."

I'd been to Iraq, two times, and Afghanistan. I had my Combat Action Ribbon. Even had a gold star device on the damn thing. This guy, whose uniform was too tight, whose hands were too soft when we shook, knew fuck all about shooting, let alone combat.

"All due respect, Staff Sergeant, your rifle range isn't the same as my deployments."

"I understand, Sergeant Bing. What I guess I'm saying is," he leaned down to his cluttered desk, grabbed the hefty wad of my medical record and pushed that into my chest too. "People come here every day wanting out. Faking injuries, getting arrested just so they can get kicked out. They want out bad. We process them quick so they can go back to whatever fucked up place they came from. But *you*," he came around his desk, put his arm over my shoulder and walked me out because I wasn't getting the point. "You'll be medically retired. Have free health-insurance until you die. Get a pension. The whole nine. This is your new life. You gotta embrace it." At the front door, he turned away and called the next person in line.

It only took walking those 20 feet and I wasn't a marine anymore.

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I was in the Holding Company for another week before they finalized my medical retirement pay. Legally restricted from driving, I had to ask my parents to pick me up from the base. We rolled through the gate, past the marines in formation, in pairs, in dress blues, class- A's, and cammies and I felt like the kid who was embarrassed to have his friends see his mom pick him up after school. They were in. I was out.

We drove from Camp Lejeune to Virginia Beach in record time if they give records for being as slow as possible. My dad was against me living alone, so during the entire trip he was stalling at rest stops, barbeque restaurants, and those giant

road signs marking long destroyed historical sites.

“I’ve always wanted to read these things. Haven’t you?” he yelled over the scream of passing cars on the highway as he read the tiny, raised print. My mom was quiet and probably just very happy I wasn’t in the Marine Corps anymore. What none of us ever talked about was the fragments, from the bullet that hit me, lodged in my brain. My parents were honest, even blunt people, but these fragments, which could migrate and possibly kill me, were something they were never honest about. Instead, they just talked about all the reasons me living on my own was a terrible idea.

Every time my dad slowed the trip down, I told him, making sure to thrust the badge of my eye forward, that I was still an adult. We’d lived in Virginia Beach when I was a kid. I knew the area and might even run into a few old friends. All I needed to do was dry out for a minute, get settled, and then start regular school. Through the internet I’d already rented a small, terrible apartment. Seriously, I’d been in much worse. When we got there they helped move my three cardboard boxes inside, took me out to eat, and lingered for a half-an-hour wanting to ask me, or tell me, to come home before they finally left without mentioning a thing.

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I took a job interview at a grocery store because I could walk there from my apartment.

The assistant night shift manager, an older lady who seemed afraid of me but masked it with a sample tray of rainbow cookies from the bakery she put as a barrier between us, asked me the standard questions.

“What’s your work experience?” “I’m a Marine.”

“Is that,” the assistant night shift manager touched her eye socket unconsciously, “what happened?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Oh, okay.” She marked something on her piece of paper. I had the job if I was willing to work first shift, ready to help open the store at 0600. That was easy. What was hard was the slow pace, old people in the morning, unemployed people before lunch, working people shopping with no time to be shopping when work let out. Every instruction was broken down Barney-style until even my dumbest co-workers could get tasks done with little supervision.

Other than being on time, I had no responsibilities. It didn't matter that I led a fire team in Ramadi or Musah Qaleh. No one cared that my platoon had captured six High Value Targets in Iraq. Or that we fought our way out of multiple ambushes in Afghanistan, including when I was wounded. I “didn't yet have the grocery experience to be a morning lead cashier.” Sitting back wasn't the way I had been raised to work so when I saw problems I addressed them at the lowest possible level. That went wrong too when they wrote me up for approaching a chronically late coworker:

“Listen, Robbie. I shouldn't have to tell you this, but you have to be on time.” The kid rolled his eyes at me. I moved forward, touched apron to apron. His eyes were brown and dumber than a blood hound's. “Don't fucking roll your eyes at me.”

“Listen man, you ain't the boss.” He smoothed his short moustache, licked his lips and stared at me meanly.

I clenched his apron. I was strong. He was not. Lifting him off his feet was an inevitable result of the laws of physics. “It's everyone's job to do their part. Don't be a Blue Falcon. Don't be a Buddy Fucker.” He was embarrassed, which was good—embarrassment is the truest motivation—so I put him down.

“This ain't the damn military,” he said without looking me in the eye. He walked away before turning to add, “bitch.” I'd

confronted him in the small break room in the back of the store, to avoid attention, but they'd heard the scuffle and the room filled with the fat ladies that worked in the dairy cooler. It took four of them, wrapping their soft arms around me, to hold me back from finishing him. I was suspended from work for a week.

Once a month, my father took me to my appointments at the VA Hospital. It worked out, because when the doctor asked if I was maintaining a "social support network" I could fake it and point to my dad who sat there, never betraying my independence, rubbing his face. I had the same doctor every time, which was good, but it was always the same speech. My scar would become less prominent. There'd be less fluid leaking. The unspeakable fragments in my brain couldn't be removed and our only option was to keep watching for migration. When the appointments were done, my dad would take me out to eat, argue cheerfully with me about sports, and as he dropped me off ask me to move to northern Virginia so I was closer to my parents. I refused, every time, and he'd nod sadly before driving away.

At night, in my apartment, I'd pace. I would pace for hours and be unable to control the energy of my legs, feet, and hands. I had no idea what I should be doing other than pacing.

*

When I first used the Adult Services page on Craigslist it was because I wanted to do something dangerous again. Something with a pay-off.

I only looked at the ads with pictures. They didn't offer sex, explicitly, but an hour of companionship. It was something they had to write in order to keep it legal. I called a few of the listed numbers to see what would happen:

"Yeah?"

“Hey, I saw your ad on Craigslist and was interested.”

“Okay sweetie, what time did you wanna come see me?”

“Hold on a minute. What’re your rates?” Money wasn’t really an issue for me. My apartment was cheap, I sat on lawn furniture, slept on a twin mattress on the floor. I had no bills. I just wanted to keep her on the phone.

“Everything,” she covered the phone and violently coughed. “Oh, ‘scuse me. Everything is on my ad, sweetie. I don’t discuss anything over the phone.”

“Will you give me a blowjob?”

The silence bulked between us. “I don’t discuss anything over the phone,” she said again, then hung up.



I kept searching and found a girl who called herself Octavia in her ad. 95 roses. Roses was code for dollars. I called, this time skipping the part where I asked for a blowjob, and she told me her motel. I walked there and called her again from the parking lot for her room number. Short and thick in a red velour jump suit, she was not as pretty as her picture. She had a tattoo of the Columbian flag on her neck.

“Columbiana?” I said.

“Ya,” she motioned for me to sit on one of the unmade beds in the dim room. “How’d you know?”

“Took a guess.” I didn’t know what to do next. I took out the 95 dollars and put it on the bed. She didn’t look at my face, my eye. She looked at the money. Then she looked at my cock.

When it was over, I walked home slowly in the delicious quiet. I’d tempted risk and won. It was good, felt like the old days. That night, in my rat-fucked apartment, I paced the beaten brown carpet. I felt like myself again. If I’d turned out the lights I would’ve sparked through the darkness.

The next escort I saw was a brunette. She had a tattoo like the other girl, except on her tit, but I couldn’t even tell what it was because it looked like she’d done it herself. It was gray and, in the dim motel breezeway, looked like scratches over her stretch marks. When I knocked she swung the door open all the way and stared at me with her hands on her hips.

“Hi.”

“You da boy dat just call me?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t move out of the doorway and I couldn’t see inside the room except for the reflection of street lights on a mirror.

“What happen’ to ya face?” She crossed her arms over her chest and the tattoo swelled out of her low-cut shirt.

“I kinda got shot.” My skin prickled. I looked over her and nervously scanned the dark shapes in the room.

“Oh f’real? Damn. You got ma money?” I nodded and she suddenly dropped her arms to her sides and jumped out of the door way, jamming tightly against the frame.

A huge man ran out from inside the dark motel room and punched me in my destroyed eye. I heard his boots squeaking then there was a flash of white light, searing pain and heat. I fell down and couldn't move. He stomped on my legs and ribs.

The girl was screaming, "take his shit! Take all his shit!" He lifted me up by my belt, almost ripping my pants off, taking my wallet and phone. He looked for car keys and, not finding any, kicked me harder. When he found the keys to my apartment he threw them down into the parking lot.

"Not even a fucking car!" The girl screamed.

The man dragged me to the stairwell at the end of the breezeway. He punched me again in the eye before he threw me down the steps. I never saw his face and I can't tell you what he was wearing. But I can still smell his dusty breath and feel the drip of his sweat on my face as he worked me over. No one came out to investigate the screaming at that cheap motel, though there were lights on in some of the rooms when I walked up. No one cared about me.

I was bleeding heavily from my face. Even my ears bled. I didn't try to find my keys. I limped as fast as I could through some woods to my apartment and kicked in the locked front door. I'd tell the complex manager to fix it in the morning.

The last time I'd been hurt this bad was when I'd gotten shot in Afghanistan. After I was hit, PFC Meno dragged me down a wadi for cover, treated me for shock and held my hand until the medevac helo arrived.

Inside my apartment I wet some towels in hot water and mopped the new wounds. That Admin Staff Sar'nt who processed me out was right: this was my life now. I had to embrace it. I was alone and nobody was coming to save me. I had to adapt or be killed. I'd continue doing this dangerous thing, because that's who I was, but I decided that something like this would

never happen to me again.

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I developed selection methods to help pick the escorts I would meet. I bought multiple Trac phones and called the girls from those. I'd never use a personal phone again. I set up a Tactical Operations Center in my living room. Multiple dry-erase boards hung from the walls listing phone numbers, girls they belonged to, and the copy from their Craigslist ads. I searched ads by phone numbers in other cities and states to develop a pattern of life analysis on which girls shared phones, worked with each other, or how often they left town, where they went, and when they came back. I had huge maps of Virginia Beach with acetate overlays so I could mark in wax pencil their motels. There was a kill board too, if something happened again while I visited a girl and my parents came looking for me they would know where I was last.

I called multiple girls to ask for the rates and chose to engage only the politest. This was no indication of safety but it was a method and better than my previous efforts. I'd send them to the wrong address in my apartment complex and watch from my window what they did when they got here, who was in the car with them, who followed them in another car. If a girl came to my fake address with a man in the car I never called her again. If a man followed in a separate car I never called her again.

Another thing I did was sit counter-surveillance in restaurants near their motels.

Sometimes late at night I'd hide behind a dumpster in the motel's parking lot and blow an air horn to see who came out of their rooms. If, after I blew the air horn, she came out with another man I'd never call her again. I mitigated risk at all cost.

I was visiting one escort a week but stopped having sex with

them. It wasn't about that anymore. We'd talk for an hour and I'd pay them for that and leave. I really was paying for the company.

My focus returned at the grocery store and around the same time I got an award from management. We even had a ceremony like the ones in the marines. I was the most productive worker for January. Everyone forgot about the time I'd been written up.

Besides the first one, the only other escort I had sex with was blond and slightly taller than me. She called herself Starr. Her thighs were thick and she had a small belly. Her face was beautiful and her hair wasn't brittle like the others. It was long and full and it looked strong, bouncing in the pony tail high on her head. She'd been drinking wine and watching television when I knocked on the door. She hugged me after I said hello, told me to sit on the bed.

"You're in the military," she said. "Why do you say that?"

"They hurt you."

"That was a long time ago." The room was dim and the fine smell of cigarettes came up when we shifted on the bed. It was warm. "Believe it or not it used to look worse."

"Either way it's no good." She reached up and touched my cheek. "My cousin is a Marine."

"Really? No way. I'm a Marine," I said.

"Oh, *you* must be the hot guy in his unit he was always telling me I should call." We laughed. "Come on." She kissed me, which no other girl ever did. "Let's have some fun."

When we were done I paid her for the hour even though I didn't stay. She insisted I keep half of the money. "Really, it's no big deal," she told me.

I usually showered immediately after I came back from a motel but I could smell the wine, cigarettes, and the lived-in feeling of her room. I went to sleep with all my clothes on.

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The Motel 8 was on Virginia Beach Boulevard. It was L-shaped with rooms that faced a large parking lot. Every room had two windows, four feet by two feet, on either side of the door. All the windows had red curtains except rooms 108 and 222's were blue. The doors had hinges that opened to the inside. The six-digit grid for the Motel 8 was: 18SVF657453. I wanted 10 digits, which would be accurate within 10 meters, but my civilian GPS couldn't do it.

The maids began cleaning the rooms without Do Not Disturb signs around 0730 and usually finished at 1000. There was one maintenance man, black, 45 to 55 years of age, 5'8 to 5'10, 165-175 pounds, athletic build, short salt and pepper hair, goatee, glasses, thin gold chain around his neck and left wrist, usually in a gray button up shirt and black pants. The name "Sam" was stitched in red thread over his left breast pocket. Noticing these types of details kept me safe and tactically proficient.

The escort I was meeting in that Motel 8 posted a Craigslist ad titled JuSt wHaT YoU nEeD J . She offered half hour incall sessions for 100 roses and hour outcalls for 175 roses. An incall was me coming to the Motel 8, outcall was her getting into a 2002 sea green Honda Accord, license plate WSJ-1463, and driving to my apartment.

I was watching the motel from the Denny's across the street, shifting uncomfortably in the booth from the taser in my waistband digging into my hip. I almost left it at my apartment because when I got beat up the guy didn't use weapons but I'd just bought it and it was cool. I grabbed it, figuring it was like the intelligence I gathered; just another

way to diminish the danger.

I finished the runny eggs from my Grand Slam and called the escort on my cellphone, scanning the motel windows for movement. It rang four times as I slid down the sticky green vinyl booth to avoid the constant hover of the waitress refilling my coffee cup.

"Hullah?" She answered softly in a lilting southern accent.

"Hey, I called you earlier about meeting up." The blue curtain, room 222, second floor, north side, moved. That's where I had guessed she was staying. "Yep. I'm pulling up to the parking lot, just like you told me." She scanned the parking lot from her window. "What room should I come to?"

"222. The door's open, just come in."

"Be up in a minute," I said. I waited for her to close the curtain, took a last bite of a burnt sausage link, threw down twenty dollars and left the Denny's to go to her room.

Climbing the stairs to room 222, I unzipped my jacket. I wore the taser on the right side of my body, streamlined, low profile, and accessible. It was barely noticeable and I needed the extra seconds it would've taken to unzip a jacket in case something happened.

When I knocked she cracked the door and stared at me.

"Are you Krystal?"

"Maybe, are you James?"

"Yessum," I said. "My name is James Webb."

"Come on in, James." She smiled, opened the door and motioned me inside. Petite, her brown hair was teased into an obnoxious wave and held in a pink, ruffled hair tie. She looked *exactly* like her picture, which'd never happened before. The beds were

made like they hadn't been slept in. There were no suitcases in the room. I immediately didn't like the situation.

"Well, shit ya don't mind if ah smoke, d'ya?" I said, faking an accent. The room smelled like it had been scoured with chemicals.

"Honey, this isn't a smoking room." I knew something was wrong. I hadn't met an escort yet that didn't smoke. She went over to the bed and patted the cheap, magenta comforter. "Come over here, James. Right next to me. You got the money?"

The hair on my neck went stiff. My balls tightened into a knot. "Money for what?" I scanned the room. The bathroom door was closed. There was a door in the wall beside the two twin beds that led to the adjacent motel room. The chain lock was unlatched.

"We need money if we're going to fuck." She rubbed her face nervously. "Come on, take off your jacket."

"No. You take off your shirt, Krystal." I took a step back toward the front door.

"No, no, no, James. Not without money. You did come to this motel room to pay me to fuck, right?"

I started to breathe heavy. My hands clenched and unclenched. I threw my jacket open a little and it caught on the taser under my shirt. "Take your shirt off, Krystal."

"What's under that jacket, James?"

"My cellphone. See ya later." I reached for the door knob.

She quickly stood up from the bed, walking backwards to the door that joined the two rooms. "*Brisket.*"

"What the fuck." I drew my jacket completely open.

"*Brisket,*" she said again and the connecting door exploded

inward as a tall, fat, bald guy pushed it until it was completely open. Another man was behind him. He had a blonde handle bar moustache and a jean shirt. They both pointed pistols at me.

When you're in an ambush, particularly a near ambush, the only way to survive is to rush that ambush. I crouched and combat-glided toward her pimps, reaching for the taser.

When I was an E-2 or E-3 and deploying to Iraq for the first time, a psychologist gave us a lecture on something called Cooper's Scale. It's a color-coded scale of mental states in stressful situations. It started with white, which was being completely in la-la land and progressed to yellow which was having your head on a swivel. Next was red, when you focused in on one thing to the slight detriment of other events around you. You usually went red when you were engaging the enemy in combat but it was best to be there for just a moment and quickly peel back to yellow. The spectrum ended with black. Black was pure dumb instinct. If you went black you had no recollection of what you did. Go white or black in a fire fight and you will die. Yellow and red are fucking fun. When that connecting door opened and I saw those guys with guns I went pure yellow, like the color of melted butter.

"He's going for something!" The big, bald guy screamed. He was in Weaver stance with his gun on me at center mass. That's when I knew they weren't pimps. Pimps aren't tactical.

The two cops cleared the corners and moved down the wall just like they were supposed to. The girl was gone. I dropped the taser and raised my hands. I'd seen enough movies to know what to do next.

"I hate to break it to you fellas," I lifted my shirt above my chest to show them I didn't have anything else. "But this isn't the first time people've put guns in my face." That wasn't the truth. I hardly ever saw the people who'd shot at

me. It just sounded badass.

Do you see how war works? You train to fight an enemy by transforming yourself through pain into whatever it is you need to be to win against that particular foe. But, when you have worthy adversaries, there's always something else waiting to surprise you. I assumed I'd get beat up and robbed again. Getting arrested never even crossed my mind.

I was cuffed after they punched me a couple of times for scaring the shit out of them.

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Later, the big, bald cop interrogated me in a barren room at the police station. "Your name's Rod Bing, right?"

"Yep."

"Not James Webb."

"No, but it was clever wasn't it?"

The bald cop snorted like a bull. "Do you regularly see prostitutes?"

"Maybe."

"Do you pay them?"

"Perhaps."

"Do you see a lot of prostitutes in this area?" "Possibly."

He slapped the table forcefully. "I can't help you if you don't help me, Rod." "Help with what?"

"You seem like a smart guy. In shape, good looking."

"Damn straight."

"Why would you do something like this? Don't you have friends?"

Girlfriends?" "I was trying to figure out my next move before I got around to that."

"Tell me what's going on. So I can help you."

"Sure," I said. "But you're not going to get a narrative response out of me by asking leading questions. That's amateur shit. Didn't they teach you how to interrogate?" I threw up my cuffed hands and smirked.

"Okay, maybe you don't want me to help you." He looked around like he was searching for something that had just been in his hand. The room was as tight as a broom closet and the cinderblock walls were sweating with condensation. "You smoke cigarettes, Rod?"

"No."

"You want a soda?"

"Never."

"What the fuck do you do other than meet prostitutes?" He slammed his hand again but not to scare me. He was genuinely frustrated.

"There you go! An interrogative! *What* do I do? Look at me, I'm a beast."

"So you like to work out? Okay. What're your favorite supplements?"

"Fuck that," I said. "If it had a face, soul, and a mother I eat it. If it grows out of the ground or you can pick it from a tree I eat it." I smirked again. "All that other shit'll kill you."

"You like music?"

"Sure."

“What type?”

“I’ll be that asshole and just say I listen to everything. That’s what everyone else says, right?”

“You look like a rock guy.”

“Uh.” I shrugged. “Okay.”

“Who you like?”

“I don’t know, man. Okay? I like fucking music.”

“You were in the Marine Corps, right?”

I nodded.

“I’m in the Army Reserves. I’ve been to Afghanistan twice. You deploy anywhere?”

“Iraq twice, Afghanistan once. Marine Corps Infantry, man. You see? *That’s* what I’m really supposed to be doing. Not this prostitute shit.” I leaned across the narrow table. “You know what a Pashtun is?”

“They’re the people in southern Afghanistan, right?” “You got it. What about the Popalzai?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know what those are.”

“The Popalzai are a Pashtun tribe. See, that’s what I do. I try to be the best at my job. So I studied Afghanistan harder than my officers because knowing everything would keep my marines alive. I was good at my job because I put in the work. That’s who I am.” I placed my cuffed hands on the table, pushing them toward his scribbled note pad. “The Pashtun tribal structure is tight because it’s really what they all have in the end. Without your tribe you don’t exist. If you’re a Pashtun that gets kicked out of your tribe, you might as well be dead. It’s like being shit out.” I licked my dry lips. “Do you know what it feels like to be *shit out*?”

"No," he said.

Of course he didn't. But I did.

*

"Turn here," I told my dad. He hadn't said a word since he picked me up from the police station. "You want to get something to eat?"

"Nope."

"Yeah, you're right. I was only in jail for 36 hours with no food." I stretched in my seat. "But then again I'd rather be a skinny dog in the streets than a fat dog on a leash." He was mad so he was giving me the dramatic silent treatment. Typical for my dad. "It's just a misdemeanor."

He accelerated to a red light and stuck the brakes hard. "How are you going to keep your job?"

"The grocery store? Fuck that job." Turning into the parking lot of my apartment complex, he found a spot and threw the gear violently into park. "Look, I know it took you awhile to get over me being hurt," I said. "You were mad I even joined the Marines. But being in the Marine Corps was good for me. Really good."

"Shut up, Rod." He sat back and exhaled loud. It was all fucking drama. "You're being a stress monster, dad."

"Yeah, really? What'd I tell you would happen if you lived on your own? Look at this place." He motioned through the windshield at my rundown apartment complex. "You can't live here. You need to come back with me."

"Fine, whatever." I pulled the handle on the car door. "Not much left for me here anyway."

"Rod," he whispered. Still all theater. "You're not well."

I opened the door and swung my feet out, back turned. "You need to understand that I'm only coming to live with you because I don't want to live here anymore. Not because you're asking me to."

"Rod, you're in a lot of trouble."

"And you're more drama than Shakespeare." I got out of his car. "Come inside and help me with my stuff."

My dad lost his mind when I opened the door to my apartment.

"Holy shit, Rod. This is bad." He spun in place, taking in the entire living room, the maps, the kill board, the six digit geocords of motels on white boards, the picture printouts.

"This is bad bad bad." He walked over to the comms gear on the sagging card table. "How many phones is this? You got a dozen cell phones?" He picked two up, raising them over his head, and turned toward me.

"Trac phones," I said. "Throw-aways. The primary communication method of drug dealers, insurgents and terrorists at large. And this guy." I smiled at him, his shock, but also at the order and symmetry of my work. He dropped the phones, their backs blowing open and lithium batteries spilling on the carpet. I stooped to the ground. "Come on, these are fragile."

"-Is this a HAM radio? Is it? What is this for?" His mouth hung open in surprise. I put the reassembled trac phones on the card table and took hold of his wrists before he broke something else. He let me move him, like a tired child, toward the single nylon lawn chair in the middle of the room. Seated, I placed the HAM radio on his lap.

"I bought it on E-Bay for like 20 bucks. It's fucking useless. Just looks badass." I sat at his feet, cross-legged on the brown and dirty carpet, looking up at his face for something more than terrified shock.

“Rod, son.” He placed the radio at his feet and looked away from what he must of thought was a terrible sight. “Not good. None of this.”

I laughed when he said that to convince him that this wasn't a problem. It was cool. This stuff, this way of life, was cool. “Look.” I swept my hand across the space. “You're getting a glimpse into what I did for 6 years. Welcome to my TOC.”

He stood from the lawn chair, stared at me. His eyes were lined with tears and he tilted his head back to keep them from spilling out. “Come here. Stand up,” he said. I grabbed his hand and he took my shoulders for a moment before pulling me against his body. “This is not the only thing you have to be.” He pushed me away to see my face and held my head on the wounded side. My dad rubbed my scar softly. “You can be something else.”

I slapped his hand away impulsively then grabbed it again, pushing it into the thick bands of my scar. The tear ducts in my wounded eye were gone but I cried from the other. “But I didn't want to be anything else, Dad. This is what I wanted to be.”

“Come home with me. We'll figure it out.”

Just like mom, my dad had never wanted me to become a Marine. He didn't get it, never had any desire to do it himself, hadn't ever even known anyone in the military except for my grandfather who was in World War II but never talked about it—like *everyone else's* fucking grandpa—and had spent his life wearing a collared shirt and some khaki pants hanging out in an office and drinking coffee with co-workers he called friends but never came over to our house for birthdays or holidays or even a summer party, let alone hide him in a wadi and keep him alive as bullets screamed over their heads. And he was convinced I would get PTSD, probably because he'd watched too many sad Vietnam movies. I couldn't explain to

him that machine guns had made me excited the same way footballs and baseball bats or SAT prep had for other kids. And sometimes I wish I hadn't been their only kid, had an older brother or sister that joined just so I could blame it on them and make it easy.

But when I graduated boot camp, and *especially* when I started to deploy, my dad became prouder than anyone I knew. He bought a Marine Dad hat at Parris Island and a t-shirt too, put my goofy looking boot camp photo on his desk at work. My mom once told me that he faced it toward the opening of his cubicle just so people could see it when they walked by and would ask him about me.

Later, when I was wounded, my dad barely came into my hospital room in Germany, and when he did, he'd spend five minutes there, never sitting, looking out the window before leaving again. I thought he was an asshole. Really, he just couldn't stand seeing me hurt.

Standing together in the living room, my dad asked me what I wanted to pack, but I was crying so hard I could barely talk. He took my clothes and we left as soon as he was done stuffing them in my sea bag. I never went back to that apartment in Virginia Beach. We went to my parent's house in Fredericksburg and they set me up in the newly finished room over the garage.

That first night I slept well and in the morning I could hear him downstairs talking to my mom before they went to work. It was the first morning in eight months I hadn't woken up alone.

Both him and my mom eventually went back to Virginia Beach and cleaned out my apartment, throwing out all of the TOC gear and bringing what was left home. There were boxes full of uniforms. The three boxes labeled *Afghanistan* had frayed, dirty cammies I'd worn for five months straight.

When my parents were at work I put one of the cammie blouses on, pulled a pair of the trousers up to my waist. In front of

the bathroom mirror I almost looked like myself. There was my wounded face and the muscle I'd lost but I was almost myself. It was the uniform that was wrong. On the chest there was the left name tape with my last name, BING, and another on the right that read US MARINES. I found my pig sticker knife in the same Afghanistan box and used it to cut off the US MARINES. I pulled the rest of the uniforms from the box and cut US MARINES off them too. I went back to the bathroom mirror. With just my last name the uniform looked much better.

I looked like who I was. I was good to go.