

New Fiction from John Milas: “Burning the Dragon”

Stautner wasn't my friend anymore. He didn't get promoted with the rest of us on the first of the month. Now a fire burned between us. Stautner was a shitbag. Everyone knew it. He was a shitbag and we weren't. For this reason, it was his job to burn the day's garbage in a trash barrel, and today it was my turn to babysit him and make sure he didn't singlehandedly burn down Camp Leatherneck. We spent the evening burning MRE boxes and Stautner had tried several times to start conversations about times we'd gotten drunk together as boots, old Saturday morning cartoons, or times in high school we tripped on salvia or whatever else. He and I were the same age, so we had a few things in common. We had lost our virginity at about the same time, for instance, which he tried bringing up again. But talking about alcohol or drugs only made me want to get fucked up, and sex talk reminded me of my ex and the rumors that she was about to have a kid with someone else back home in Savannah, which I didn't want to think about. I wasn't having any of that shit, so I sat apart from Lance Corporal Stautner and chain smoked while ignoring him as best I could. All I wanted to do was smoke and sleep until the day I could use my GI Bill for trade school.

Our smoke pit was like any smoke pit in Afghanistan, a Hesco barrier courtyard set up by the combat engineers behind our battalion headquarters. We all spent time there hanging out in our little cliques, but the deployment was dragging on and we were getting sick of each other and sick of all the strange bullshit happening every day. We knew strange things happened all over, but things were different here. The feel of being alive was different, and there were small things too, like the rain. The rain was especially different. I tried explaining it to my parents over the rare email or phone call when I had the

time, but they didn't understand and didn't seem to want to understand, so instead I carried all of it inside me as if I were a shaken up bottle of coke.

The sun was down and everyone had hit the rack except the gate guards. Stautner sat across from me with his elbows on his knees as I finished a Newport and flicked it into the trash can. I pulled out another cigarette so he wouldn't think I was watching him, but before I could light it the smoke pit door flew wide open and slammed against the plywood wall. I turned around to see Sergeant Hodges stepping out of battalion HQ into the orange light of the garbage fire. In his arms he hugged a stack of flat cardboard boxes. A worn out spring whined and yanked the door shut with another bang and I thought I saw Hodges blink his eyes at the sound.

"Coleman, come get these fucking boxes," he said, so I got up and took the boxes from his arms before he could say it a second time, which he was liable to do if I moved too slow. He took off his eight-point cover and scratched the top of his head, then he talked in a low voice so Stautner couldn't hear us.

"Care packages for the platoon," said Sergeant Hodges. "Battalion passed 'em down, but I swear if I see Fat Body with so much as a fucking Tootsie Roll in his pocket I will hem your ass up, you hear me? I don't give a shit if he's your buddy from MOS school or wherever the fuck."

"Good to go, Sergeant," I said in a monotone voice. It wasn't the first time Hodges had chewed me out about Stautner not making weight at the battalion weigh-in last week. He had yelled at me the very morning it happened. The word spread fast. It was something everyone in our unit considered to be a big deal, even though plenty of people in the Marines were technically overweight based on BMI requirements. Stautner wasn't alone in that. Now that I was a corporal, Hodges could blame me for someone else's problems. Fuck him. I didn't know

where I would end up after this, if I'd become an electrician, a plumber, a carpenter, or whatever, but I knew I had more to offer the world than Sergeant Hodges did. I thought he was about to leave, but he had more on his mind.

"God, look at his face," Hodges said, so I did. Stautner's ass chewing at the weigh-in had been much worse than mine. It felt like everyone in the room was getting yelled at because the battalion sergeant major himself had taken one look at Stautner and thrown a tantrum directed at Sergeant Hodges, who subsequently directed his own tantrum at me. For what it's worth, I didn't blame Stautner. It was easy to skip the gym with our twelve-hour shifts on the flightline, and we had access to some serious food between the main chow hall and the twenty-four-hour sandwich shop in LSA3 with its unlimited supply of any breakfast cereal you could imagine.

"Listen," said Sergeant Hodges. "As a fucking corporal it would behoove you to unfuck your marines. He's in your fucking fireteam, right?"

"Yes, Sergeant," I said, wishing I had my cigarette lit so I could blow smoke in his face. How was I supposed to pull extra hours of the day out of my ass in order to PT Stautner or do whatever needed to be done to motivate him to lose weight? It was bullshit. Every sergeant in my life was like a bad parent who treated their kids like shit just because their parents had treated them like shit, which brought to mind the belts and wooden spoons of my childhood. It was an endless cycle of shit and Stautner was still at the very bottom of the hill waiting for it all to roll down on him. Even I saw him differently as soon as I picked up rank, and I wasn't the type to be like that, or at least I didn't think I was. But I started to get annoyed when Stautner's uniform looked dirty or if his chevrons were chipped. I didn't think I was brainwashed, but it was like a switch flipped in my head and I was now slowly becoming a sergeant. I figured Stautner would hold me back from getting promoted again if I hung around him

when we weren't on duty, so I stopped playing Counter Strike or watching movies with him. I didn't need him either way, as a friend or anything else. What did he have that I needed? The battalion sergeant major on his back? That was not something I needed.

Hodges grunted and turned to walk back inside, but stopped short and said, "By the way, have you seen my hot sauce? I left it in the office and now it's fucking gone."

"No, Sergeant," I said, but I was lying to his face. I was the one who stole it. Of course I did. I sprinkled it on the shit food they brought us for noon chow at the flightline, and I wasn't about to share with anyone. I could have asked my parents to send me some hot sauce, but I didn't want to owe them something later, so I took the bottle and hid it behind a shelf in our office all for myself. No one else knew.

"My fucking wife sent me that shit," said Sergeant Hodges. "Someone knows where it is." He glanced at Stautner one more time and then he disappeared through the door, flinging it open and saying, "Go Longhorns, bitches," before walking through and letting it slam shut again. He was always starting shit like that.

"Oh, that motherfucker," I said as his heavy footsteps trailed off on the wooden deck inside. Stautner heard me and laughed, but I stared back at him and told him to take the boxes from my arms just as Sergeant Hodges had told me to do. Stautner set the boxes on the ground, which is what I would have done with them if I hadn't made him do it.

"Let me see your Gerber," I said, and he handed it over. I was pissed at everyone, but I didn't have a plan yet. I popped the knife out of Stautner's Gerber multitool and I knelt down. I cut through the packing tape and I handed the knife back before I opened the box. In the dim light I could see a sudoku book on top of all the other crap that someone back in the

States thought we needed. There were socks and bags of candy and a stack of blank loose leaf paper torn from a notebook. I picked the box up with two hands and dumped it out.

"Pick up all that candy and throw it in," I said, pointing at the barrel.

"What?" Stautner narrowed his eyes and said, "In the fire?"

"Make me say it again."

"Come on, man," he said.

"Don't talk to me like I'm your friend," I said, which sounded worse than I thought it would, but I stood up and folded my arms like I was in charge.

He gathered the bags of candy together and whispered something. I should have called him on it, but I didn't want to be up all night getting this done, so I let it slide. He could say what he wanted as long as I didn't hear him. Stautner stood up straight, his hands clutching bags of chocolate such as Hershey's, Reese's, the stuff that goes real quick.

"Really?" Stautner said.

"Burn it," I said. "Save the socks and the razors. Wait, cancel that," I said. "Burn that too. Burn everything." Fuck it, I thought. If we stayed comfortable, then we would never want to leave this place.

Stautner didn't move at first. He stood with his fingers curled around bags of candy instead of a rifle, his body soft under his uniform instead of lean and hard-edged. I shook my head. I ripped the bags of candy from Stautner's hands and I threw them into the trash barrel. Twinkling sparks surged up from the fire after me.

"Now dump out the other ones," I said, pointing at the

remaining boxes. He had taken a step back, but then he got his Gerber out again. I went back to the first pile and sifted through it for shits and giggles. I grabbed the sudoku books and a package of pens I initially thought were black, but were in fact blue, worthless to us because only black ink could be used for official logs and documents. What was I supposed to do with the blue pens, write a fucking poem? A letter home? Yeah, right.

Stautner dumped the second box on the ground and I watched him separate the candy. Sorting through it was pointless once I decided we would throw it all in, even all the shit the kids made for us. Both boxes held collections of drawings mailed in by school children. I sorted through the drawings of battleships and airplanes and people in camouflage holding machine guns. Happy families stood together in front of their houses, waving goodbye to us. The drawings reminded me of grade school art class, but I tried not to think about that.

“Thank you for your service,” I read aloud from a postcard written in sloppy handwriting. I flipped to another one. “Thank you for my freedom and thank you for killing the Germans. Jesus Christ.” Stautner chuckled. I crumpled up the drawings and threw them in.

“Damn,” Stautner said. “The kids’ pictures?”

“Fuck the kids,” I said. I looked over the edge of the barrel. A brown wave washed over a crayon drawing of a airplanes as the paper curled up. These kids didn’t know what was going on here. They didn’t know who we were, how bad we were, or what we were doing. They didn’t know I wanted to kill people. I hadn’t just been trained to kill people, I had been trained to *want* to kill them. But I worked in logistics and us poguees didn’t have a release valve like the grunts did when they were outside the wire.

“That’s fucked up,” said Stautner.

"Do the other boxes," I said. I threw in a few bags of tortilla chips and a rubber-banded clump of number two pencils. I found several bags of beef jerky when Stautner dumped out the next box and I threw them into the barrel. There were a few stuffed animals scattered around. I grabbed a little gray bulldog with a frown on its face. Two soft white teeth poked up from the dog's lower lip, its blank plastic eyes reflecting the fire. Bulldogs were the mascots of the Marine Corps. In fact, most of the mascot bulldogs I'd seen outranked me, literally. I dropped the bulldog in the barrel and watched as the flames swept over. It squirmed and then turned black and shriveled into ash.

"Here's a dragon," Stautner said, holding it up in the dull light. I took the plush purple and black dragon from his hands. It felt soft like a dragon should not. A red line squiggled from its mouth, either its tongue or a pathetic little flame. Look at all this shit, I thought. No one even cares to understand. They think we need puzzle books and stuffed animals. I flung the dragon at the trashcan but it bounced off the rim, one of its plastic eyes smacking against the metal. I was still as bad at making free throws as I'd been on the junior high basketball team.

Stautner sorted through a pile of cheap razors and brown boot socks. I grabbed a stack of paperback novels and dropped them into the fire without checking the titles and then a leather-bound Bible with gold-gilded pages caught my eye. It looked expensive like a gift and I knew burning a Bible would piss off my parents, but there were plenty more at the chaplain's tent, so I spiked it into the barrel as if I'd scored a touchdown. I dodged a surge of fluttering embers that shot out in response. Stautner shook his head, but worse things had happened here and we all knew it. Who cared about this junk? No one would miss it. The pile of burning garbage shuddered. I thought about making a list of things people could mail. Most of us wanted the same shit: booze, cigarettes, porn. I'd take

the substances any day, but porn would make me sad.

“What are you doing?” I asked Stautner. He was making little piles of things like he was saving it for later. I told him to stop fucking around and I started grabbing everything he had organized. He looked at the trash barrel and then back at the razor blades and tooth brushes. I picked them up and stuffed them into an empty box and then dropped the box in the fire.

“All this shit makes us soft,” I said. “What good is that? What’s the fucking point?” Stautner’s hands hung at his sides. He didn’t answer me. He glanced at the postal boxes burning up and he looked at the other care packages stacked on the ground. I could tell he didn’t get it yet. I told him to come with me and we left the smoke pit fire unattended for a moment.

I flung open the wooden door to the building and let it slam against the wall as Sergeant Hodges had done. Stautner followed me down the hall where I burst into battalion HQ. The officers and senior enlisted were all asleep now, but a few clerks sat at computers like drones, working a late shift through the night because of bad luck. They slowly turned their heads in our direction as if they were tranquilized. They did not ask why we were there, so I got to work immediately. I began unplugging computer monitors and CPUs from the unoccupied wooden desks around the clerks until I cradled several computers in my arms. I told Stautner to grab as many as he could carry.

“Help us or sit there like assholes,” I told the clerks, all lance corporals. They stood up in a daze and ripped out the cords of their own computers and gathered them up with their monitors and keyboards. We carried it all out and stuffed it in the trash barrel and shortly after we could smell the fumes of melting plastic, which I felt made no difference considering all the smoke and diesel exhaust we breathed daily. Then we went back in and ripped out the VoSIP phones

and tossed them in. We took every phone in the building, including the XO's and the CO's, even the sergeant major's.

We didn't discern between official and personal items either. The CO had a poster up in his office from the tiny D3 school where he played defensive back. I didn't have to tell the clerks to tear it down and burn it, and I told Stautner to dump the sergeant major's challenge coin collection. He didn't have a problem with that. We took the swivel computer chairs from all the offices, rolled them out, and stacked them in the barrel. I needed junior marines jumping on top of the fire to cram the whole pile in, otherwise we would never fit everything.

"Fuck Sergeant Hodges," I called out. "Fuck the sergeant major." The junior marines cheered. More of them had joined us. They woke up in the commotion and carried their sleeping bags to the barrel and burned them. They folded up their cots and burned those too. Marines from every LSA in Camp Leatherneck showed up. They lined up for a quarter mile along the road, waiting to burn their books and their candy and their personal laptops. We dumped our ammunition in a pile off to the side and burned our empty magazines in the barrel. We carefully lowered in our M16s and it felt wrong to be without them at first, but then it felt wonderful. We burned our boots and our cammie blouses and trousers. Our brass rank insignia melted in the flames. Some of the marines had illicit drugs and paraphernalia. They threw it all in the barrel, the joints, pipes, pills, needles for injecting steroids in their thighs. We even threw in our cigarettes and dip, and that was tough because everyone was addicted. We collected all our cash together in one thick rubber-banded stack of green bills and we dropped it into the burn barrel. Our wallets followed with our IDs, credit cards, insurance cards, family photos. Everything we could fit, we stuffed it in and watched it burn. And there was nothing we couldn't fit. We had a system going.

We were almost done, but I noticed we had forgotten the

packages that had kicked this whole thing off. There were still two. I grabbed the first box and dropped it in the barrel. It was heavy and something rolled around inside, but at this point I was too tired to care what it was. Then I noticed the other box was addressed to a specific individual, unlike the others which were meant for everyone. Why did we end up with someone's personal mail? We were going to burn it anyway, why wouldn't we? But I held it close to take a look. It was addressed to some pogue lieutenant. I didn't feel like caring, but I was curious to know what was inside this one.

"Fuck officers," I said, and I meant it. The junior marines around me cheered because we hated officers with their convertibles and their mansions and their AmEx golds and trophy wives. They thought it was us who weren't welcome on their turf, at their special beaches, in their special clubs, in their suburban neighborhoods, or in "Officer Country" aboard a Navy ship. Wrong. It was they who were unwelcome among us. So I wondered, what did people mail to officers, to future lawyers and doctors and airline pilots? What could they possibly need that they didn't already have?

"Fucking lieutenants," I said. "What do we think is in here?" I held the box up in the air for everyone to see. Our uniforms were long gone and we were naked in the garbage fire light, bare skin coated with dirt. My nostrils were dry and full of dust and I missed the nourishing ocean breeze back home. There was not a trace of home here. The flames crackled as the others watched me. I cried out again. "I bet it's full of credit cards and investment portfolios!" They cheered, so I kept going. "I bet there's a hundred investment portfolios in here!" Now I had them riled up and snarling. If I didn't open the care package soon I knew this pack of rabid dogs would tear me and the box to shreds.

Stautner waited nearby. He wasn't keyed up like everyone else, so I handed him the box and told him to open it because he was part of this too. A helicopter rotor thumped somewhere far

away as he hesitated. Everyone waited for something to happen. I tried to convince him that he *wanted* to open the box. I read the lieutenant's name.

"Look," I said. "Just another officer who spent the deployment making twice as much money as you. You feel bad for him? He's probably back home already." Stautner held the box, but he didn't move. The trash fire crackled inside the barrel. Someone in the crowd uttered a low growl and the generators hummed around the base. I checked the address label. I knew the lieutenant's unit; they had returned to the States before our unit had arrived here.

"See?" I said. "They've been gone for weeks. He's not even in country anymore. Someone forgot to give him his mail before he went home to his house in the Hamptons." I took the box from Stautner and threw it on the ground. He was still holding his Gerber. We would burn that next, but I took it from him again and I ran the blade through the packing tape. Stautner stepped away from the box as if it would explode, so I opened the cardboard flaps myself. The inside smelled like perfume and I almost smiled. There was a large envelope on top with a red lipstick kiss smeared across the front, and I thought it might be full of glossy nude photos. We would burn them, absolutely, but not before passing around the collection. I tore open the envelope and reached in. There were indeed glossy prints stacked inside, but when I pulled them out I found that it was a stack of sonograms. The crowd watched me flip through the images in silence. There was really no shape to them, but I knew there was an infant hidden somewhere within the fuzzy blur.

"I'm gonna go take a shower, Corporal," Stautner said. Actually, he wasn't. We had thrown all the shower heads into the fire. He realized this before walking away and then he looked at the ground, defeated. He didn't want to be near me anymore, but he had no excuse to leave. I wondered if all we had been was drinking buddies, not real friends, and if so

whose fault that was. I dropped the sonograms into the fire. Then I dropped in the Gerber. Stautner didn't react at first, but finally spoke up as the crowd dispersed a bit. They were getting bored.

"Why didn't he get his mail?"

"I don't know," I said, and I wasn't lying, but I guessed that this particular officer had probably gotten killed and the people left behind didn't know what to do with his belongings. Maybe it wasn't that bad, but I didn't know how else a box of mail could get lost. Mail was one of the few things you could count on here. Many of us either forgot what went on outside the wire or we never knew to begin with. Things happened out there that we couldn't comprehend from our seats around the smoke pit. Turns out a bottle of hot sauce was all it took to distract me from that. I thought about my ex and my parents and my old friends and I wanted to burn my memories. I realized this would be the first year of my life missing the St. Patrick's Day parade back home and I wondered if it would matter to anyone that I was gone.

The burn pile collapsed and settled inside the barrel. A few embers trailed into the air. The flames reached out and beckoned for more, but we had burned everything except the stuffed dragon. Somehow we missed it. I should have chewed out Stautner for his poor attention to detail, his lack of situational awareness. Not acceptable. Unsat. It was my job to behave that way towards him, but I walked over and picked up the dragon, patted dust off its black wings and purple tail. There was probably a kid outside the wire who wanted it, if there truly were kids running around out there. We had no place left to keep it, so I just held on for a moment. I kept the dragon low at my side, but then the crowd saw it in my hand. They closed in around me as Stautner pointed at the fire.