

New Fiction by Michael White: “Eid Mubarak, Merry Christmas”



My eagerness propelled me up the airplane steps. Eleven years to the day. Well, technically eleven years and a day. We assembled for the meandering trip to Afghanistan on September 11, 2012 but didn't take off until September 12. Close enough. I was finally on my way to join the fight.

The takeoff forced me back into my seat. Pushed the still recent news of Todd forward. “Fuck, I don't want to die.”

Sergeant Murphy, my perpetually pissed off platoon sergeant, veteran of the invasion and surge in Iraq, was already asleep in the seat next to me. His slight snore grew in intensity.

I thought of an old friend's dad almost eleven years ago watching footage of the initial combat in Afghanistan. “We'll

kick their ass and be home in a month.," he had said.

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Almost eight months later, with a few weeks to go in our nine-month deployment, my company was preparing to shut down the small combat outpost near the Pakistani border that had served as our home and frequent target for attacks. We'd be turning it over to our Afghan counterparts. Obama's surge in Afghanistan was over. The official line was we had created enough space for the Afghan military to operate. They were now prepared to take a leading role. At the soldier level, we saw things differently. Sometimes when our base was attacked, our Afghan partners wouldn't fire back. They didn't always know when an ammo resupply would come. We joked about how they'd pilfer everything they could from the bases we turned over. Then they'd sell it and desert before getting whacked by the Taliban or Haqqani.

Meanwhile, we had some surplus ammunition that we decided to use for training exercises before we left the base. This included a hand grenade familiarization training. Familiarization training is an ambiguously valuable phrase. For our grenade chucking platform, we used a dirt ramp built up the interior side of the base's HESCO wall. It was normally used as a battle station for an armored vehicle to return heavy weapons fire when the base was attacked.

First Sergeant Gholson was supervising the lobbing. Gholson was a freak. He ran ultra-marathons and was unusually strong for his wiry frame. He was a creative problem solver, he cared, and was a sarcastic dick. A model first sergeant. I walked up the ramp after my soldiers had familiarized themselves. It was a warm, sunny spring Afghan day. Gholson handed me a grenade.

"Try not to fuck it up."

"Fuck you, dickhead."

I prepped the grenade. Picked out a particular bush I didn't care for. I wound back and lobbed the grenade. Gholson and I braced for impact. We waited the customary amount of time. Waiting. Waiting. Then an explosion of laughter from Gholson.

"You dumbass! You forgot to pull the second safety pin."

"Fuuck, still a cherry huh?"

"Here, toss this one at it."

I prepped, then double checked this was one was ready to go. I found the same bush I didn't like, and let it go. We braced for two explosions. The grenade bounced in the wrong direction. A single explosion near a different defenseless bush.

"We uh, we don't have to call that in for EOD right."

Gholson paused. "Eh, fuck it. We're on our way out."

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They celebrated as they rushed away from the objective. The men scrambled along rocky ridgelines, moving south and east as quickly as possible while nursing injuries. The six men occasionally shook their rifles against the night sky.

"You got it on film, yeah?" The youngest of the group asked a more seasoned veteran.

"Yes, yes. Now keep moving. We're not safe yet." He replied, eyeing the dark sky.

The younger one smiled. He picked up his limping pace. The smile turned to a grimace as pain shot through his right leg.

The donkey in the group bayed. The noise broke the night quiet. The donkey was saddled with rockets and ammunition. It hadn't complained before.

"What's that?" A third man driving the donkey asked the group, or the donkey. He paused to crane his head skyward. Farther ahead, the cameraman continued pushing his younger companion.

The donkey's baying quickened. Its handler perked his own ears toward a faint whistle.

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The sun woke me. I felt a rock in my back through my body armor. I struggled to place myself and why I was tucked in the cracks of a craggy hilltop. My ears were ringing, my body ached, and my watch read 6:30 am on October 29, 2012. The day after Eid's culminating celebration.

Right. The previous night's "celebration" came rushing back.

I stood and looked down on the ridgeline below. The five bodies lay in the same position as we'd left them last night. They didn't smell. At least not from about a hundred meters away. At least not yet. I wondered again how someone had survived the bomb blasts.

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We finished our patrols early on the final day of Eid celebrations. Eid al-Adha. We called it Big Eid because there are two Eids. The first celebrates the end of Ramadan. The second is a multiday celebration of sacrifice and family, our interpreters explained. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son. His son was prepared to die.

These days Afghans sacrifice goats, sheep, and cows. "Bismallah." Allah's blessing is sought before the sacrifice. Sons are no longer at risk of cold blooded murder. The purpose instead is to share. To welcome others into your home. On the final day of celebrations, the sacrificial meat is shared with family, and friends, and the poor. According to our interpreters, it was the Muslim version of Christmas. It

sounded less commercial, more selfless, to me.

Whatever it was, I was glad to have an evening off. Finally, no second patrol for the night with its necessary preparations and debriefs cutting into any downtime. Just a short morning walk from our company's small combat outpost for my platoon to a nearby village. We enjoyed some Eid chai with the locals wearing their best manjams. They invited us to chai with smiles. Their fingertips were a deep copper red from a fresh dip in hennai dye. A couple rocked socks with their sandals. Which was a first over here. It somehow looked classy. They seemed happy to share the day's tradition with us, but I wondered what role our weapons played in that invitation.

We'd been in theatre for over a month. We had launched at least two patrols a day from our small combat outpost near the Pakistani border. The only contact we'd made with the enemy were the roadside bombs they left for us. We were getting restless. It was clear from those bombs the enemy was watching us. We had no way of striking back.

That night, I settled into my small plywood-walled room to enjoy my first deployment movie. Goodwill Hunting. An old favorite. Something I could relax to. Shortly after winding down, there was a thundering crack that shook my room and me out of complacency. My heart rate spiked. I rushed to throw on my body armor and helmet.

A loud patter of dueling machine gun fire began. I grabbed my rifle as I ran out of my room and into the night. The sky was alive. Tracers on machine gun rounds streaked through the dark toward and away from our base.

I ran to the tower my platoon was responsible for manning. I felt as alive as the night sky. The tower was on the corner of the base closest to the ridge that appeared to be the source of the incoming fire. The previous unit had named it Rocket Ridge.

Inside the tower, Private Kilgour was working the .50 caliber machine gun. Sheer joy lit up his face. He was physically illuminated by the bright orange muzzle flash. I could make out fuzzy green movement on the ridgeline through my night vision goggle. The thud of each .50 round coursed through my body. The echoes of the machine gun in the tower went beyond noise. It was the only thing I could hear or feel. It felt like my heart rate was matching the rhythm of the rounds. The pungent metallic odor of gunpowder was all around me. I loved it.

I sent a status report over the radio to the company headquarters as I ran to my platoon's other battle station. My ears rang so hard I couldn't hear the response. Sergeant Lyons was directing automatic grenade launcher fire toward the ridge. I asked what he saw. He pointed out barely visible figures moving along the ridgeline.

I popped off a few rounds fully aware the ridgeline was outside my rifle's range. It still felt good. "We train hard, so we're prepared when we it's time to fire our weapons in anger." Our battalion commander repeatedly said. I wasn't angry. I was ecstatic.

A couple rushed hours later, I stepped over the last round of concertina wire that surrounded our base. The night air felt different on this side. The mountainous horizon was the same, but the sky seemed bigger, more open.

An F-15 had been in the air nearby during the attack. From thousands of feet in the air, the pilot dropped two 500-pound bombs on six men and a donkey hurrying toward Pakistan. None of our guys had been injured during the attack. It was a clean win. My platoon was dispatched to investigate the blast sites. Despite the late hour and waning adrenaline rush, there was still a sense of excitement in the air.

We scrambled up and over rocky ridgelines and craggy hills not

quite tall enough to be mountains. They were tall enough to cause a sweat in the cool night air. It felt good this night. The loose shale shifted underfoot as always. For once, I didn't mind.

Things got even better when the Company headquarters radioed to say they'd seen a heat signature with the company drone. They thought it could be a wounded enemy hiding because he couldn't keep up during the escape. The map grid headquarters sent threw off our planned route. It meant a lot more climbing. I briefed my squad leaders on the change of mission. We moved out with a fresh determination.

We were winded when we hit the final spur before the heat signature's grid location. I directed a machine gun team to higher ground for overwatch while First Squad got on-line to assault through the objective. They advanced deliberately. My heart pounded. I braced for confrontation. First Squad approached the suspect bush.

"Stand down, stand down." The team leader called over the radio. "It's a fucking goat."

I deflated. No last-minute encounter with a live one after all. I sent a quick update to headquarters. Their disappointment was clear in the curt response over the radio.

"Stupid TOC jockeys don't know what they're looking at," Sergeant Murphy said.

We knew we were close by the sharp chemical smell in the air. There was a slight metallic taste as we grew closer.

"Two Four Bravo, set up on the hilltop at 3 o'clock." I sent the machine gun team to another high point.

The rest of us turned our headlamps on as we climbed the hill. Better to be thorough. No one else would be coming so soon after those bombs dropped. Debris littered the hill on the way

up. A sandal here. A piece of tactical vest there. Scattered across the slope by the whims of explosive force. We hit the first body where the slope levelled off to a long ridge. The explosion had blown his pants off. The exposed legs were so thin I struggled to understand how they propelled him up and down mountains while attacking us. "We need F-15s for these guys?" I thought.

When we flipped him over, his eyes were wide open but unfocused. The flat gray eyes confirmed death more than the charred hair, the blood, or the gaping wounds. Our biometric scanners couldn't register his irises. We were under strict orders to collect their biometrics. My soldiers dripped water onto eyeballs to lubricate them. Rigor mortis had set in. With some of the bodies, it took two soldiers to pry fingers back to snap them onto the equipment's fingerprint scanner.

Sergeant Murphy watched as two of our soldiers wrestled with a stiffened arm.

"They think this shit is cool now. Like they're too hard for it to matter. But one day, when they decompress, this shit is going to come back. Everyone up here tonight will talk to the battalion therapist. I don't give a shit if they say they don't need it."

"Yeah, that's a good call." I agreed. I didn't have anything meaningful to add. It was unspoken, but I knew he meant I should talk to the therapist too.

We systematically exploited the first blast site. The pants had been blown open on every body. Explosions behave in mysterious ways. Stephens, my radio operator, photographed the bodies—under clear no funny business orders. Cellphones, wallets, and notebooks were sealed in ziplock bags. Labelled by body and location. I sent a report to headquarters that site one exploitation was complete. Site two was about a hundred meters further south.

We followed a narrow, elevated path leading toward the second site. We walked in a file. My eyes were forward. Someone else was more observant.

"Nine o'clock, we got a live one."

The shock registered as immediate action. I turned to my left, raising my rifle in concert. I had flipped on my rifle's infrared laser without thinking. Through the narrow green tube of my night vision goggle I saw a body lying flat on the ground about fifteen meters away. The head was raised. He was staring straight at me.

What the fuck.

Within seconds the body was covered with infrared lasers. The head turned slowly. Proof of life. Bombs and their mysteries. I tensed the finger on my rifle's trigger. I scanned the body and surrounding area as quick as I could. His life was in my fingertip and the next words I spoke. I saw no weapon on him or in the immediate vicinity. His arms were down at his sides. Under the fuzzy green of my night vision it was just a body with a head staring at me.

"Hold your fire." I announced.

The lasers remained trained on the body. A fuzzy green figure lit up in a morbid lightshow of narrow bright green beams.

"Tell him to put his hands up," I said to my interpreter.

Sergeant Murphy raced up to me. "I should probably call this in." I said.

Sergeant Murphy's eyes remained fixed on the man, this mystery, this terrible miracle of life. He shifted as he spoke. "Roger, sir."

We looked at each other and back at the man. I paused.

"Stephens," I called. He hustled over. Passed me the handset.

"X-Ray this is 2-6, can you put on Choppin' 6 actual, over."

"Standby 2-6."

The body was moving. Lifting himself upright. SFC Murphy and I raised our rifles in unison.

He raised his hands above his head.

"2-6 this is Choppin 6 actual."

"Choppin 6, we have one EWIA, break. Appears unarmed, break. Condition unclear, I think he's messed up, break. We're currently about 15 meters away, over."

Silence.

I imagined Captain Tallant in the monitor filled plywood walled operations center in a hurried discussion with First Sergeant Gholson.

The silence dragged. It was broken with a question.

"2-6, Choppin 6, are you sure he's alive?"

Was that an innocent or targeted question? Radio traffic wasn't built for ambiguities.

"Roger."

"Positive?"

I drew a deep breath.

"Roger, he is staring right at me."

Another pause.

"Roger, we'll work with Battalion on extraction."

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"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. I don't want to die." He thought. He then worried that thought was too loud.

"Please don't see me, please don't see me. I just wanted to have a little fun."

He had crawled away from his weapon and gear once he'd heard voices. Whatever adrenaline had carried his wounded body this far had been knocked out by the two explosions. All he could manage was to crawl a few meters closer to Pakistan, still miles from its safe harbor.

"Are they laughing? These godless heathens!"

He stewed in anger and fear. Then the voices grew closer. Worry overtook anger. He saw a line of armed men less than twenty meters away. Then a voice shouted something unintelligible. The line halted. In the blink of eye everyone was facing him with rifles raised.

"Fuck. This is it. This is how I die."

"What are they waiting for?"

After we confirmed that he was unarmed, I approached him with Sergeant Murphy and Favre, the platoon medic. When I looked in his eyes, I realized I had never seen sheer terror manifested before. His eyes darted back and forth assessing us as threats and the whites were prominent beyond reason. We were surrounding him, strapped with weapons and body armor. Everyone around him had been killed by massive explosions. He must have heard us laughing about the dead and already bloated donkey as the group ringleader.

"I am here to help." Favre said. He began assessing for injuries. Once Favre's hands touched his body his eyes darted

back and forth. The whites of his eyes grew another size. They slowly returned closer to normal as Favre treated his wounds. It seem like he was slowly realizing these Americans weren't a bunch of bloodthirsty, Muslim-murdering animals after all. His name was Mahmoud.

"I swear I didn't really know these men. This was my first attack. I swear. It was supposed to be fun." My interpreter relayed.

We didn't believe him. I figured Battalion would eventually get some actionable intel out of him. It seemed like the right choice as a medical helicopter flew him away. I wasn't aware of the conversations being had back at headquarters.

Battalion said they wanted us to overwatch the bodies that night, in case their buddies came to collect their friends and anything incriminating. That didn't make much sense. How would they know these guys were dead and where they were? And there had been helicopters flying around all night. But whatever, we were too tired to walk back that night anyway. I directed the rest of the platoon to the machine gun teams overwatch position. We settled in among the rocky hilltop for a few hours of sleep between guard rotations.

Third Platoon arrived energized and carrying body bags the next morning. They laughed at the donkey, and all the missing pants. We laughed together, but I felt they were partial intruders. They weren't carrying the full night before into this day.

Sergeant O'Keefe, Third Platoon's wisecracking Mexican-Irish platoon sergeant, walked straight up to me.

"Hey, sir," he said in his usual casual tone. "The battalion commander called the CO after you reported homeboy wasn't dead. He said, 'why the fuck did they call up he was alive.'" O'Keefe barked his signature laugh. "Hope your officer eval don't suffer." He laughed again.

"Oh, by the way, some locals are coming out to collect the bodies. CO agreed to it with a village elder to show respect for them Islamic burial rites."

We walked Third Platoon around the blast sites. We pointed out the mystery head at the second site, perfectly intact but missing a headless body. We divvied up the evidence to carry back. Third Platoon graciously volunteered to lug the recoilless rifle. As we chatted among the bodies, a stream of villagers emerged from a dry wadi leading toward the ridge.

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The conversations among the villagers were quiet as the group wound through the wadi.

"It was good of the elder to host us for goat and sheep last night." Mansoor said as he looked at Haji Ghul leading the procession of his villagers.

"Yes, yes, very good. I spent all my money on gifts for the kids, and fresh robes. We had no money left for good meat," Abdul responded.

"Inshallah prosperity will come." Mansoor replied.

"Inshallah."

"I am surprised the Americans are allowing us to come for the bodies. It wasn't always this way." Mansoor said.

"Yes, this too is good. Though I do not know these men."

"Allahu Akbar."

The conversation ended as the curving wadi opened to a view full of soldiers on a ridgeline.

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They were all still wearing their best Eid clothes. The couple

of villagers I'd shared chai with the day before recognized me. They smiled as they waved. Sergeant O'Keefe started passing out body bags. I began speaking with the village elder.

He disavowed the attack. Swore the villagers knew nothing of it, or any of the men. "They are from Pakistan. They were running to Pakistan." He said. He was solemn, and genuinely appreciative we were letting them collect the bodies. "Even though these are very bad men, it is very important they be given a proper Muslim burial. We are truly grateful for the opportunity. Dera manana." For one of the first times in country, I didn't sense a hidden motive. In most conversations, I could tell something was being withheld, if I wasn't being outright lied to. This was genuine.

I watched the villagers place the bodies and parts in body bags and on top of the wicker bedframes they'd carried. Their best holiday clothes and their objects of rest collected bloodstains. A deeper red than the hentai on their fingertips. Their smiles remained.

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When the villagers finished, we began the long trek back to base. The sun was up and warm. It was still early in the day. I was so tired I had to reach back to my time in Ranger school to keep moving and issuing orders.

"That was a hell of a night, huh?" I posed to Sergeant Murphy as we walked back.

"My wife is going to be so pissed." He responded.

"Huh?"

"We were on the phone when we got attacked. I'd been telling her this deployment was safe. I ran out with the phone still connected."

“Damn, that sucks.”

I wasn't prepared to respond to that. I couldn't shake Mahmoud's eyes. The smiling villagers lining up to collect bodies. The day after their Christmas. No gifts to return. Assembled for a morbid collection.

We were heading home. The return walk was largely downhill. But I felt heavy. My body armor was dragging down on my shoulders. I was weary beyond the lack of sleep. It was both a physical and mental challenge to raise my legs for each step. Something had changed. I needed time to place it.

Several months later and a few weeks before we left our outpost, a village elder informed us of a death. An old man. He made a living selling the casings from rounds ejected during firefights. He was carrying a sack of casings when he triggered something. An improvised bomb buried by the Taliban or maybe an old Russian mine. The wounds proved fatal. A villager heading toward the mountains to gather rock and sticks came across his body.

I was eating lunch in our small cafeteria when Gholson walked up with an odd grin. “It wasn't an IED, it was a new UXO.” Gholson said.

I finally made the connection. A fresh unexploded ordinance. Maybe a grenade. I looked down at my tray of mini pizzas and fries. I pushed it away.

“You're uh, you're not gonna say anything right?”

“Ha! What do I get out of it? Relax, I'm joking. Your secret is safe with me. Besides, maybe it was the Russians.”

“Ok, cool.” I said, staring at my tray.

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“So, did you kill anyone?” My high school friend Mike asked.

I was gathering with a few hometown friends about a month after returning to the states. We stood in Mike's driveway deep frying wings and drinking beers.

Mike would never deploy. Never even join the military. He'd failed out of college but landed on his feet selling used cars. The auto industry and demand had recovered from a few years back. Business was booming. Life was good back home. But when Mike logged onto Call of Duty, if he was the friend of a real-life killer, the war could be real enough for him.

His interest in a greater than a decade -long war came down to a single issue: how many dudes did you kill? In Mike's mind, Afghanistan and Iraq were where Americans got paid to kill people. Like so many Americans, these conflicts occurred in the background. A novelty addressed with a "thank you for your service."

My hands reached for the rifle that had been slung across my chest for nine months. I felt empty, alone. Powerless. My authority, my purpose, was nowhere to be found.

"So, did you kill anyone?" Mike repeated as he leaned toward me eyebrows raised.

"Mike, come on man," Geoff interjected.

"Nah, it's all good. I knew if anyone would ask it would be Mike." I took a long swig to finish my beer. Mike could be an idiot sometimes, but he didn't mean anything by it. "Not me personally man. But my unit, we got six and a donkey in one night." I reached for a new beer.

"Oh, woulda been cooler if it was you." He didn't bother hiding his disappointment.

I was still seeing the terror fade from Mahmoud's eyes and bloodstained Eid clothes. In place of the cold beer, I felt the heft of a grenade in my hand on a warm spring day.