

New Fiction by Cam McMillan: “The Colors of the Euphrates”



She came from the south, wearing a bright red dress and carrying a light blue backpack, weaving through the well-worn paths on the banks of the Euphrates that had been carved out by foot traffic and various other forces of erosion for millennia. The same ground carried her ancestors and bequeathed them their fertile crescent, upon which they birthed a cradle of civilization and set forth the foundations of human history and society, with all its triumph and suffering. For all that had changed in the sweeping conquest of ecological momentum and Westphalian geopolitics, the beauty of the Euphrates remained. Its flora flourished, hosting palm trees and wildflowers, poplar trees and different species of reed, camel thorn and prosopis, that all combined to a bright, magnificent green to the armed predator drone circling 25,000 feet above. She may have heard the slight hum of its engine as

it watched over her with its hellfire missiles and multi-spectral targeting system that held several high-quality cameras to broadcast the feed of her image to SPC Yates' screen, but it's unlikely. Drones circled over her head everyday while she went to school and went on with her life, oblivious to SPC Yates' existence as a set of eyes that was capable of seeing her every move and even ending her entire existence.

His real name was Brian. If it were not for the college loan forgiveness program that brought him into the Louisiana Army National Guard, that's what he would have preferred to have been called. But it did, and the Army named him SPC Yates. He sat at his desk in the base defense operations center (BDOC) of Al Asad Air Base and watched his screen. Around him, other SPCs carried out similar tasks, monitoring drone feeds and security cameras littered throughout their area of operations in Al Anbar province. Together, they looked for things that could kill them, rockets or drones riding in the bed of a Toyota highlander or being loaded into the back of a trailer. SPC Yates was good at his job. He tasked drone pilots, far away in their air-conditioned trailers on an air force base somewhere in Nevada, to survey certain areas and strike certain targets depending on the needs of the day and the orders he received from the battle captain that sat at the back of the room. He stared at suspicious trucks and dangerous looking people. More often than not, they were nothing. A group of insurgents loading rockets into a pickup would end up being a family moving a mattress. An individual fitting the description of a known terrorist would be an old man herding goats. Through these laborious tasks and the daily monotony of his screen, SPC Yates came to know the village of Al Baghdadi, ten kilometers to their north, its winding roads and paths, and all its nooks and crannies. He immersed himself in the foliage of the river that cut between it, colorful and bright, and yearned to be around the green of his childhood, the marshes and swamps around New Orleans where his father taught

him how to fish, instead of the bleak and barren landscape of sand and dust that waited for him outside the door of the BDOC. He came to recognize the people, the shopkeepers and merchants, schoolchildren and insurgents. But he had never seen anyone quite like this, the little girl in a red dress.

She walked with an ease and absolute lack of concern or awareness about the dangerous world around her. In the strikingly vivid and detailed quality of the drone's cameras, SPC Yates could see the pattern of her dress, floral and white, as it blew with the breeze that swayed the green all around her. She skipped up and down, and bobbed her head from left to right, holding the straps of her backpack with both hands as it bounced gingerly with each leap. She had dark brown hair that she let flow past her shoulders, free of a bun or head scarf, which was uncommon. Brian thought he could see the sun reflecting off of it when she tilted her head in just the right direction. Every few steps, she would stop, and pick a rock up off the ground and skip it across the water to her right. He found her fascinating. She was unlike anything SPC Yates had seen in his eight long months sitting at his screen in Iraq. The simplicity with which she existed astounded him. He wondered what was in her backpack, books about the history of Mesopotamia, or perhaps mathematics, maybe even literature filled with pros of faraway lands. The joy he felt in her orbit was almost unrecognizable after being away from his true joy along the Mississippi for so long.

Along that magnificent and mighty body of water that cut through his small town in Louisiana all the way to Canada, SPC Yates was home. He was Brian. He remembered skipping rocks with his sister as a boy. When he was older, they would play hooky and sneak down to the banks where they watched the barges go by, as they drank cheap beer and cheaper cigarettes, speaking of days when they would leave their Louisiana outpost along the river. He thought of his sister, Laura. She wanted to be a makeup artist and work on movie sets in Los Angeles.

After an unplanned pregnancy and an unreliable boyfriend, she ended up staying on those same banks and raising Brian's nephew, Ben. Before he left for the deployment, Brian promised he would send him a picture of a camel, but he never did. He didn't even call for his birthday last month. It's not that he didn't want to. He just didn't have the energy to fake the smile and laugh he knew he would have to muster to reassure them he was okay. But, watching the little girl in the red dress prance along the Euphrates, Brian decided he would finally call Laura back and tell little Ben about the camels he saw in Kuwait to wish him a late happy birthday.

Then it happened. The alarm blared. He was no longer Brian.

"Incoming, incoming, incoming."

SPC Yates' heart stopped and jumped into his throat. Before he could think, he was on the ground where his heart raced again, beating like a drum into his chest that threatened to break through his sternum and spill onto the floor. He scrambled to reach for his kit, the Kevlar vest and helmet that lay next to his seat, reaching his left arm out to cling for the facade of protection. The explosions were distant at first. But as Brian pulled his vest across the plywood floor, they grew closer. The ground shook. The walls shuddered and the ceiling sagged with each thud that grew louder and louder. He couldn't make his hands work. He flopped and flailed on the floor, trying to get on his vest and helmet, grappling with clasps and fighting with clips in his desperate attempt to live even though he knew it wouldn't save him. Those around him did the same, completely disregarding their assigned duties and tasks as all semblance of order collapsed and everyone embarked on a journey of personal survival, no matter how in vain. The room filled with dust when a rocket impacted a T-wall outside, tearing a hole into their plywood fortress and filling it with smoke, soot, sawdust, and sand. Brian couldn't hear. He inhaled the toxic mixture into his lungs and nostrils. He gave up on the vest and hugged the ground as tightly as he could.

He made himself as flat as possible. He wished that he could dig through the earth and come out the other side. The ground around him continued to shake. The grains of sand in front of his face bounced with each additional thud and he felt that he was one of them, a victim of circumstance and location that left him completely at the whim of the explosions that rocked across Al Asad Air Base. He could hear again. People were screaming. *Help! Get the fuck down.*

They were anonymous screams that Brian could not identify. He was too paralyzed to try. His surroundings and all of his bodily senses collapsed onto him into a single mass of noise. The explosions. The screaming of orders. *Get that gun up!* The pleas for help. *Holy Shit. Jesus Christ.* The inaudible cries from friends. The beeps of the monitors and systems. The alarm. All of it, even the unheard, the smells and vibrations, combined into a terrible cacophony of noise that paralyzed Brian completely. Frozen and resigned to his own death, Brian thought of nothing. He did not think of God, or his sister Laura, or his nephew Ben, or even his friends who could be dying around him. Fear, fear, fear, was all his body could muster. The fear gave him no purpose or drive, nothing to combat or defend against. The fear simply was. It ate alive at his insides and propelled his heart harder and harder against his chest. Nothing in the biological array of his body, no organ, no frontal cortex, nothing, could sustain a thought or sensation other than absolutely paralyzing fear. And then it was over.

The explosions stopped first. And as the mass of noise evaporated, it created a vacuum that was filled with utter silence. The mosh pit of yells, and screams, and barking of orders was replaced by a tense quietude. It was as if anyone spoke or made a sound of any kind, it would all begin again. The dust in the air slowly settled back onto the ground as the earth no longer shook with fury, but instead lay there like the inanimate rock that it was before. The smoke began to

clear from the room. And in that silence, they were brought back. The fear and panic dissipated, replaced by a slow, burning anxiety that sat like a tripwire. It could be activated at any time when chance would again return the chaos. The people around Brian became aware of their surroundings. He himself was no longer paralyzed. Instead, he felt hungover. He was stuck in a deep sludge, like a dream where your feet never move fast enough, and you can't outrun the monster chasing you no matter how much you try to make your legs move. People checked themselves for wounds, feeling and looking for blood. They did so for their friends around them. Brian patted slowly around his torso and down his legs, praying that the adrenaline wasn't so strong that he hadn't noticed a chunk of flesh missing. He wasn't hit. Aside from a couple superficial wounds, lacerations to faces and extremities from shards of plywood and other shrapnel, no one was seriously wounded. They were alive. Finally, someone spoke. It was the battle captain.

"We up?" he spurted out through his cracking voice. "Everybody good?"

The NCOs responded in the affirmative. After the brief shock of realizing they were alive, their duties and responsibilities sprang back into their collective mind. The base needed to be defended. There could be more attacks. Accountability of personnel needed to be collected and the wounded tended to. The chaos returned. This time, it was in the form of orders being barked and confusion running rampant as people sought answers for important questions. Is that gun up?! Where did it come from, I need a grid?! Where's the mass cal?! Do we have a medevac en route to that location?! How long until the QRF is up?! Do we have air support on station yet?!

Brian sprang back up to his station and started directing all of his drones to various locations to find where the rockets had been shot from. He looked along the MSR that weapons were

regularly transported on. He scanned abandoned lots in Al Baghdadi. He searched known firing areas and recognizable landmarks where previous attacks had been carried out. He tasked his drones to every location he could think of, changing their course intermittently as orders and the person giving them changed by the second. He searched frantically for the mysterious ghost that could begin shooting again at any second. Every truck was carrying rockets. Every house was hiding insurgents preparing the next wave. Every individual was a spotter who guided the rockets to their target.

“Point of Origin located, prepare to copy grid!”

Finally, someone found it. As Brian directed his drones to the location, he heard people shouting. So focused on his own task, the words blurted out around him were blurred out. *Truck. Mosque. Burning. Civilians.*

When Brian finally got a predator over the location, he put the pieces together. He made out the scene through a cloud of smoke. The vibrant and gorgeous green that he had fallen into earlier was replaced by utter devastation and sheer turmoil. A truck blazed with a powerful surge of bright red and orange. Twenty meters away, a trailer smoldered, disconnected from the burning cab, and emitting a large and continuous plume of black smoke through its twisted steel. Secondary, smaller explosions set off throughout the frame. To the right of his screen, Brian saw a building split in half. A wall was caved in by the blast. Cinder, concrete, and wooden shards were strewn across the ground. Through the smoke, he saw a crescent moon on the remaining part of the roof and realized it was a mosque. It was a Friday, the holiest day of the week, and people were certainly inside. Zooming in with one of the cameras, he saw a mass of red. Body parts, legs, arms, and the unrecognizable alike, combined to make a ghastly mural of blood, flesh, and bone. Brian quickly averted his eyes and began dry heaving off to his right.

"SPC Yates, get your eyes back on your fucking sector!" shouted his sergeant.

Covering his mouth with his fist, Brian continued to gag as he resumed his scan of the area. The drone pilot was in control of the flight path and the cameras, so Brian simply watched the carnage like a helpless onlooker of an interstate car wreck. The pilot continued circling above the site as it completed its battle damage assessment, until veering off to the Southeast. The camera slowly followed a blood trail that led out of the larger, unidentifiable mass of red. The size of the trail grew. It began with small dots that grew bigger as the drone flew Southeast. Then it turned to a steady stream of dark red that grew thicker and thicker the farther it went. The drone slowly followed the trail down the banks of the river until it reached a thick area of brush where the trail stopped. As the camera zoomed out and the pilot reoriented himself, Brian noticed a red figure at the top right of his screen right along the water. The camera zoomed in and Brian saw her.

The little girl's red dress was still red, but there was a dark stain covering her right abdomen and the lower portion of her back. Her blue backpack was gone. She lay face down with her right foot caught in the root of a tall poplar tree. Her left knee was bent as if she was climbing up a steep cliff. Her left arm was curled under her torso and out view, while the right was sprawled out to her side as if she was reaching for something. Her hand was open and palm facing up towards the camera of the drone. In it, she carried something, but he couldn't make out what it was. Her face rested in the mud, inches before the river, and her hair was sprawled out into the water in front of her, revealing the back of her neck. The current slowly drifted her dark brown locks back and forth. As she slowly crept out of the frame of the camera, Brian watched the water ripple off the top of her head and the bottom of her dress blow delicately in the wind. Then she was gone.

Brian finished the rest of his shift. He sat there in silence, staring at his screen until his replacement arrived a few hours later. He grabbed his rifle and his kit and walked out of the room, noticing the full scope of damage for the first time. He saw splinters all over the dust and sand covered floor. He saw the hole in the wall at the other end of the BDOC where the rocket's blast had blown through. When he walked out, he saw T-walls blasted and Hesco barriers torn apart by the more immediate blasts. Further off, he saw smoke from small fires that continued to blaze throughout the base. He walked back to his chu and saw he had a text from Lauren. He ignored it. He laid down in his bed and rubbed a picture of him and Ben playing fetch with his parents' dog in a creek bed that ran off the Mississippi. He took a bottle of NyQuil he had stored under his bed and drank the half bottle that was left. He opened the bottle of sleeping meds that the base doctor had prescribed and swallowed a handful. He fell asleep.

That is how Brian finished the last month of his deployment. When he wasn't on shift, watching his sector, he'd go back to his room and take enough sleeping meds to fall asleep. He would direct drones over to where the little girl in the red dress had died every once in a while. There was nothing there. Just an empty patch of mud and a tall poplar tree. Sometimes Brian would stare at the empty space and dream of sneaking off the base and leaving a flower at the site, or maybe a book that she would have liked to have in her backpack. The rest of the deployment was uneventful. There were no more attacks. Their replacements eventually arrived, and Brian did his best to teach the new SPC that sat in his chair everything that he could. But the kid didn't really listen. His name was Hanson and he talked about wanting to get into a fight. He wanted to get attacked. He wanted to transmit an order to a drone to conduct a strike. He wanted to see the blast and carnage. He wanted to feel the power of holding death in his hand. He talked about the Iraqis he saw on his drone feed like they were actually just little specs in a video game. Brian ignored

him.

Just before he finally went home, Brian went down to the bomb yard where they kept blown up vehicles and trash. They had brought the truck that shot the rockets at them there the day after the attack. The insurgents hid all thirty of the rockets behind bags of flour to get through a checkpoint, causing them to ignite and cook off the rockets inside halfway through their launching. That's why the truck blew up, the mosque was destroyed, and the little girl in the red dress slowly bled out alone on the banks of the Euphrates. It's also probably why Brian survived. He stood there at the gate of the bomb yard and stared at the smoked out twisted steel that remained of the truck that tried to kill him and his friends. He wondered if it was a piece of shrapnel from the twisted mess that had pierced the little girl's red dress and dug into her liver or another vital organ. He thought of flour and how a simple cooking ingredient had decided who would live and who would die. He considered how and why no combatants from either side were killed, only innocents. He thought of the fourteen innocent men, women, and children who had been torn to shreds in that mosque. He wondered how many more had been wounded. He thought about how he could find no mention of it in any US news sources. He thought of his friends and fellow soldiers he didn't even know who were wounded. He remembered the little girl in the red dress.

Two weeks later, Brian was home. He moved in with Lauren because, after he gave up his lease for the deployment, he had nowhere else to go. He was remote and cut off. She would try to get him to come out for social occasions or family get-togethers, but she couldn't even get him to come outside of his room for dinner. She left a plate outside his door every night. Eventually, the extra sleeping meds he stashed from Iraq were gone, and he had to come out. No longer able to sleep, he set himself out to fix Lauren's crumbling porch. He used up about half of the money saved from the deployment on

lumber, tools, and finishing, and got to work. It was August in Louisiana, and it was hot. Unlike Iraq, it was humid. He demoed and worked to put in a cinder block foundation so that it could ride out the hurricanes and flooding that had brought it to such a state of disrepair in the first place. Lauren would bring him out water and plead with him to get out of the heat and come inside to the air conditioning. Anything to get him to talk. But he just kept working.

Finally, in October, the work was done, and the deck was finished. Brian had done an outstanding job. The foundation was solid. From it, six solid posts of cedar rose up. A finished staircase led up to a deck of pressure treated tropical hardwood. Ben helped him build some Adirondacks out of fresh pine. Together, they sanded and treated the wood, so the chairs looked rustic and modern at the same time. Once the foundation was finished, Lauren planted a garden around it of beautiful hibiscus and phlox. With all the work done, Lauren was worried what Brian would do next. He hadn't returned to school like he planned. He was going to study to be a marine biologist and move to Miami. After getting back, when he would answer her questions, he'd just say "eh, I'll figure something out." But she wasn't so sure. She often thought she questioned him too much and should leave him alone, but she was genuinely worried and felt a responsibility as his big sister. She decided to take a family trip to Brian's favorite spot on the river to celebrate the completion of the porch and Ben's good grades from the fall term. She was surprised when Brian agreed.

When they got there, it was exactly as Brian remembered it, a small hideout in the River State Wildlife Refuge where the noisy barges couldn't be heard, and the drunk New Orleans' tourists wouldn't be found. Sitting in the blue, still water, oak and cypress trees let their leaves sway back and forth in the wind while the wildflowers bloomed on the shore. Lauren set down a picnic blanket and took a couple of beers out of

the cooler for her and Brian. There was a juice box for Ben. She prepared both of their favorites: fried shrimp po'boys. She looked over at Brian, who stood on the shore of the river delta, and thought she saw a slight smile. Ben ran alongside them chasing a dragon fly.

Brian looked out at the still water and smelt the air through his nostrils as he inhaled deeply. He looked down at his feet and saw the water slush up between his toes as it mixed with the mud and turned into a milky brown. He looked up at the sky and wondered what he and his family would look like to him from a camera on a predator at 25,000 feet. He knew the answer was specs among bright green. All around him was the beauty of the wildlife that he had yearned for in that desert where nothing lived. He looked back at Ben, who was now running around Lauren and playing with her hair and thought about how carefree his nephew was. He considered whether that was for the better or worse. Brian crouched down, placed his fingers in the water, and started making little circles in it. He bent down onto his knees and sunk his fingers in the mud. He dipped his hair, now long and curly, into the water and felt the ripples wash up against it. He felt himself in the river, in the mud, in all of it.

As he closed his eyes, he saw himself amidst the beauty of the Euphrates, surrounded by the same luscious green. He walked the well-worn paths he had watched on his monitor for countless hours during those 9 months. He followed a pair of footprints along the water that did not have a discernible pattern, zigzagging back and forth, stopping and starting, and leaving rocks unsettled from their natural place. He kept walking. He heard laughter. As he turned the corner around a tall poplar tree, he saw a little girl in a red dress dancing in a clearing of mud between the foliage. She laughed as she rocked her head from side to side and twirled in circles, amused by how her dress flowed up with her movement. Her innocent smile and sparkling eyes were oblivious to Brian's

presence until he took another step and snapped a branch. Surprised but not startled, she turned towards him and smiled, saying something in Arabic that Brian could not understand. She giggled again and reached her hand out towards Brian, gesturing him towards her. Unthinkingly, he followed, taking her hand and following her down to the water. They walked out into the river, as the water passed her ankles, then her knees, and eventually rose to her hips. She let go of Brian's hand and leaned back, floating atop the water, and let the current take her downstream. Brian began to follow.

"Hey, you okay?" Lauren whispered into his ear. She was crouched beside him with her hand on his shoulder.

Brian pulled his head out of the water and sat up on his knees, turning towards her, tears bubbling in his eyes.

There was a long silence before he said, "there was this little girl."

Lauren got down on her knees with him and nodded her head earnestly.

"Over there?" She asked.

Brian nodded, "she was just so little, not much bigger than Ben. And she was beautiful, Lauren." A slight grin broke through his tears.

"You know, just this beautiful little girl skipping along the river. And she had on this red dress."

He paused before exhaling sharply and looking out at all the green across the water. He gazed at the oaks and the cedars and the cyprus. He looked at the marsh land's vegetation sticking out from the river's surface. He looked up at the sky and thought he heard a slight humming sound.

"Would you look at all that green," he said to Lauren.

“Yeah, it’s really something isn’t it?” She responded.

Brian took off his shirt and slowly waded out into the still water until it reached waist height. Lauren looked on from the shore. With his jeans still on, he leaned back and let himself float freely, completely at the whim of the light tide. He stared up at the sky around him and saw nothing but clear, blue air. He imagined himself riding the river all the way down to the Gulf, getting caught in the loop current and finding his way to the jet stream that would carry him across the Atlantic. From there, he’d latch onto the warm water flow around the horn of Africa and go up into the Indian Ocean, where he would have to find his own way to the waters of Oman and all the way up through the Persian Gulf. At the mouth of the Euphrates, he would travel north along its banks until he found that inconspicuous patch of mud on the shore just south of Al Baghdadi.