

New Fiction by Benjamin Inks: Contract

On Monday I wore a cowboy hat to work—just to see if I could.

Employees at Brick Albert seldom break the unspoken dress code of a Costco button-down paired with either khaki, black, or navy-blue slacks. Once you get pegged as dressing a certain way, any deviation only invites conversation, and I don't like talking about myself.

New Fiction from Benjamin Inks: “Jack Fleming Lives!”

Okay—let me set the record straight. It started as a bunch of rumors first, before we lost control of it. But it really started as a stupid word game at a mission briefing.

“Your porn name!” LT began. “Pet’s name and the street you grew up on.”

He was keen on figuring out everyone’s combination. Mine was Bella Tulane. Not bad if I was a chick. We got some other good ones: Snickers Calhoun, Georgie Wilder, Sherry Potts. Then this quiet, young private comes in and LT demands his info.

“Uh. Jack Fleming,” the kid says, and our jaws drop.

There is a moment of silence before LT says, “My God, that’s a handsome name,” bringing fingertips to temples like it’s too much for his brain to process.

"*Jaaack Flemmming*," Sergeant Kim tries it out, and sure enough, it's as smooth on the lips as it sounds in the ears. A phonetic Adonis.



Jack Fleming Lives! A modern Adonis

Rivera starts slow clapping like this kid just did something Silver-Star worthy. And it wasn't just Rivera; we were all possessed by the garish weight this name carried.

"Jack Fleming could be an American James Bond," I say.

"Very classy, indeed," LT agrees. "The type of name that'll wine and dine you—before taking you back to its apartment for a tender pounding."

This poor kid spoils our fun by telling us that Jack is a fluffy white Maltese, and Fleming is a residential byway in meth-town USA. We get a few more jokes out of it and then stop laughing when the captain comes in so we can all shout "at ease" at the top of our lungs. Captain throws a pen at Rivera, who's the loudest, and we're once again reminded that people will most likely try to kill us on our next mission passing out rice and beans.

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We go about our business the next few days with no mention of Jack Fleming, that glorious gem we'd tripped over only to neatly rebury in the dirt for being too beautiful for any one man to possess. Like any good improv joke, it was kind of a one-time deal. Outside of that briefing room it wouldn't have made much sense.

Then the Battle of Jowgi River happens. You might have heard of this one: Taliban down a Black Hawk and decide to ambush the rescue party. You haven't? Well, we get out there; it's outside our A0, but we're available so we go. These pararescue

guys are dug in on the wrong side of the river. They had already recovered the pilot's remains and incinerated the bird, and they're taking heavy fire by the time we arrive, trying to decide if they should risk getting wet running or just fight their asses off. And Rivera—crazy sonofabitch—starts laying down 240, and he is just on-point, I mean—we're watching bodies drop while these PJs are stringing a rope across the river to exfil. I'm surprised Rivera didn't burn the barrel off—he was just rolling in brass by the end. So, the PJ guys get away, and they come up on our net flabbergasted.

“Who's the maverick on the 240?” they ask. “We want to know the name of the man who saved our lives.”

Rivera is just all pink. I mean, we respect the hell out of these guys, shit—most of us wanna *be* these guys, or Rangers or SF or what have you.

“Aw, geez,” Rivera says, twisting his foot like a schoolgirl. “Tell ‘em . . . tell ‘em Jack Fleming did it. Yeah, *Jack Fleming* is a machine-gun Mozart.”

It made us laugh pretty good.

And that was just about the birth of it. We can blame it all on Rivera. If he wasn't such a humble prick . . . You see, he set the precedent. Anyone did anything cool afterwards—Jack Fleming got the credit.

—Jack Fleming shot and stopped a VBIED, though it was really Kim

—he CPR-revived a choking baby; LT did that one

—unearthed and snipped an IED

—rendered aid to an Afghan cop with a sucking chest wound

—befriended a pugnacious village elder

-attended Mosque with a terp and locals

-found multiple weapons caches

-got all our confirmed kills

The list goes on. Anything even remotely noteworthy, we all just said Jack Fleming did it. Why? Fuck, I don't know. We were bored, I guess. Even I caught two dudes at 0300 pushing an IED in a wheelbarrow and said Jack Fleming spotted them. Saw them clean and green through an LRAZ atop a cliffside OP. Called it in; got put in for a medal. Though back at the FOB and outside of official paperwork, me getting these guys was a rumor added to the growing list of miracles performed by one Jack Fleming. For some reason this felt more meaningful than another stupid ribbon for my Class A's.

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Now I first started to suspect we had opened Pandora's gossip-box when my little cousin serving in Iraq's drawdown messages me on Facebook. My deployment had ended, and I was back in Fayetteville being pulled around the mall by my preggers wife Christmas shopping. So, I check my phone while she's checking juicers or salad spinners or some such nonsense, and there it is.

[Hey Cuz! You ever serve with a Jack Fleming? Might have been around during your rotation?]

My first instinct—apart from laughing my ass off—is to push this farce as far as I can before coming clean with the truth.

[Fuck yes, I did! Jack Fleming is the goddamn patron saint of mayhem! You know how many lives he saved by being so deadly? No one wanted to do shit for ops without Jack Fleming covering our six!]

Now, what he says next causes me to pause. Maybe I feel chills, too.

[Well, he's here in Iraq! Must have volunteered for another deployment. I haven't met him, but it gives me peace of mind knowing he's out there.]

So, once we get home from x-mas shopping, I call up LT, Kim and Rivera and tell them we might have a little problem on our hands.

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We figure it's highly improbable that our collective imagination gave birth to some sort of phantom Fleming—if that's what you're thinking. More likely there's some poor bastard in Iraq who just so happens to be named Jack Fleming. Some unwitting private who we just turned into a wartime legend. You hear our rumors, then you pass a fit-looking kid at the FOB rockin' *Fleming* nametape, and you think: *could it be?*

We figure it's probably best just to let this one run its course. We've seen a few shenanigans in our time. For a hot minute, after this one episode of *Family Guy*, everyone was shouting *Roadhouse!* at anything requiring the least amount of physical effort. Well, we stopped saying roadhouse after so long, so we figure we'd all stop with the Jack Fleming bullshit, too.

But uh. . . man. Was I ever wrong on that account.

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We get sent out to endure us some more freedom, this is over a year later, mind you. Different crew, but still got Rivera, Kim, and LT is now a captain.

We land in country eager to meet our ANA counterparts and quickly realize the whole Jack Fleming thing has turned somewhat cultish. Beyond your desert-variety war stories. I'm talking mythic proportions. You can't so much as take a shit

without seeing graffiti about an impossible sniper shot made by Jack Fleming. You hear people in the chow hall chatting about orphans he carried out of a fire or the high-risk livestock he helped birth. Stranger stuff than that, stuff people have no right believing in. How he shot an RPG out of the sky. That there's really three Jack Flemings, triplets who enlisted at the same time. One Jack Fleming donated a kidney to another Jack Fleming who got shot—I mean, it's just getting bizarre. Kim comes up and swears he saw a Jack Fleming morale patch worn by some Navy Seal types. Apparently, it's a cartoon face of a sly 1950s-era alpha male: Ray-Ban sunglasses, a dimpled chin and slicked-back hair. An acronym in gold underneath: *WWJFD?*

Even the ANA are hip to the Fleming mania. We'll be sitting before heading out on a patrol, and they're rattling off Pashto: *"Something, something, something—Jack Fleming!—something-something-something,"* and they all start laughing.

The more this goes on, the more I rue the day we ever discovered the name.

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It's worse for Rivera. While it annoys me, it terrifies him. Maybe it's his strong catholic morals, prohibitions against lying and all that, or maybe he feels more responsibility because—as I said—he started all this.

"I'm freaking out, man," he says. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. I'm not worried about getting schwacked by the Taliban, I'm worried about what people are going to do when they find out we've been stealing our own fucking valor."

"Wait now," I say. "Do you really think people believe in Jack Fleming?"

"The other day I saw two local national kids huddled over a

drawing book. I approached with a smile expecting to see Ninja Turtles or some shit, but—*no*—it's a custom-made Jack Fleming coloring book. Someone designed it and ordered up a plethora online. They're all over Afghanistan, man!"

"Okay," I say. "But what can we do? This is bigger than us now."

"We have to put Jack Fleming to bed."

"Yes, but how?"

"I don't know. But it has to be huge . . ."

"We're going to have to kill Jack Fleming."

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So, we put on our murdering-hats and spend an inordinate amount of free time scheming how to pull it off. It sort of feels like trying to kill King Arthur. You can't just make up lore; these things unfold organically.

And then OP Tiger Eye gets overrun. Now, I know you've heard of this one. It had been hit once or twice before, yet from what I gather it was a fairly chill place to kick back and survey the land. Well, the boys up there at the time get ejected, practically tumble down the mountain. A Taliban flag flies up the pole. Prudent thing to do would be to send out a drone, forget we were ever up there. Well, when QRF responds they light up the mountain with indiscriminate 50-cal, just as an f-you on their way out. This starts up a damn-near four-hour firefight neither side wants to break from. OP Tiger Eye is a landfill by the end of it. We take some casualties, and there's even an MIA who never made it off the mountain. Real *fog of war* shit. It's the perfect opportunity we need to kill Jack Fleming.

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We spread the seeds of hearsay far at first, and it's amazing how quickly it doubles back to us. Any FOB we visit outside of our AO we circle up and gab about Jack Fleming's untimely demise. We write in Sharpie on DFAC tables:

Jack Fleming, KIA OP Tiger Eye.

God rest his beautiful soul

And you know what? It takes. Better than we could have hoped. A little too well. People go into public mourning. FOB Fleming gets erected. I'm seeing little candle-lit vigils outside of MWR hooches. It seems the only thing we did by killing Jack Fleming was to further cement his legacy. Looking back, I'm not sure why we expected a different outcome. Course, everyone present at OP Tiger Eye claims "It's not true. Jack Fleming wasn't even there. Which means . . . he's still alive!" This—I guess—is how a series of counter-rumors gets started. Kim tells us that he heard from a Marine out in Helmond that his terp heard from a jingle truck driver that Jack Fleming secretly married a war widow and now lives peacefully with the local population out in Mazār-i-Sharīf. Luckily, these marriage rumors are branded conspiracy and most go on believing Jack Fleming perished.

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We edge closer to heading home and it becomes increasingly clear we must do the right thing and shatter the Jack Fleming mythos. People can't go on believing something that doesn't rightly exist. Also, Rivera will probably need psychological counseling. Not for PTSD, but he can't live with these lies any longer. They're corroding his insides.

A soft-spoken ANA sergeant approaches and asks if we know Jack Fleming's wife and children back in the States, and Rivera starts trembling like he's about to spontaneously combust.

"Please tell his family," this sergeant says to me, "that we

are praying for God's peace to surround them during this sorrow."

"That's such a kind sentiment, Hakim. I'll make sure they know!"

And Rivera stares me down with the look a man makes right before he stabs you in the fucking face. I tell him it just wasn't the right time or person.

We decide the "right time" is conveniently our last day in country. Captain—formerly LT—holds an emergency formation, a "family meeting" as he calls it. The ANA form up, too, and Rivera, Kim and I march out, somewhat informally.

Kim starts us off. "We wanted to say a few words about . . . Jack Fleming."

Heads lower in reverence.

Kim looks at me, looks at Rivera. No one wants to be the one to squeeze the trigger. Rivera stands in awe before this humble formation of both Afghan and American soldiers. Hard-working people, a little rough around the edges, who believe in a better world so much that they're willing to die for it.

"Fuck it," I say, using aggression to hype me up. "Listen here, men. You people need to know that Jack Fleming is nothing but a big, fat—"

"American hero!" Rivera practically pushes me over shouting this. He looks left, he looks right. "And Afghan hero," he says. "A hero to two nations. And I'm proud to have served with such a man. But he wasn't extraordinary. He was just like you and just like me. Having Jack Fleming on our side didn't give us a superhuman advantage out there. He was a simple man who only wanted to do his best. And his best was pretty damn good. *He* wanted to be good. As we all aspire to be. And I think you know that deep down we all have the capacity to be

our own Jack Fleming.”

The formation ends in mass applause. We’re clapping, some are crying. As this goes on, Kim leans into Rivera and says, “So, I’m pumped and all, but what happens when we get back and the president wants to award nine posthumous Medals of Honor to Jack fucking Fleming?”

Rivera bites his lip. “We’ll cross that landmine when we come to it.”