

New Fiction by Paul Rabinowitz: Little Death



Each night our mascot—a black and white cat—sneaks into the base searching for a warm lap and scraps of food. Tonight our reconnaissance unit joins an elite group of combat fighters. These guys volunteer for their unit with the promise of death missions into enemy territory. I wonder why the cat isn't afraid of these men, their lack of fear, so thick it sets me on edge. Our orders are to confiscate cars and drivers' licenses from local farmers. This allows us to drive through villages undetected and gather information about terrorist activity. I know what hasn't been said. I know these guys in my ranks feel untethered, buzzing with adrenaline at the implicit license to do whatever it takes.

"Be careful tonight," our captain warns. "When you get back there'll be hot chocolate on the stove."

Darkness falls. We set ourselves into ambush formation and wait for our prey.

I sometimes think I was crazy to sign on for this.

"Get out of the car and hand me your license," the commander barks.

"By whose authority," the farmer says.

"Fuck you—that's whose authority."

He slowly gets out of his car and looks into the commander's eyes. "If I give you my car I can't get to work, if I can't get to work I lose my job, if I lose my job I can't feed my family—no, I can't give you my car."

The commander waits for him to finish and then cocks his gun and points it at the ground.

"If you don't give us your car you lose your foot," he says.

The farmer looks at the ground where the commander is pointing the rifle and says, "I can't give you my car."

Suddenly there is a rustle in the bushes and the little cat appears, a flash of black and white. For a moment his meow breaks the tension and there's nervous laughter from everyone—except the farmer and the commander, locked in a staring contest.

"Let's return his license and move on," I say.

He looks at me as if I am less than a soldier—but agrees. He gives the farmer his license and slams the butt of his rifle into his stomach. The farmer doubles over and falls to his knees.

We return to the base before dawn, sip hot chocolate and sit around recounting the mission. Suddenly there's a noise in the nearby woods—the commander tells everyone to get down and be quiet. Our mascot comes prancing into our party, rubbing his body against the commander's leg. We all break out in laughter. He looks at me with a forced smile, cocks his rifle and with one shot silences the cat forever.

Somehow I knew this would happen. I knew the cat's lack of fear was strange.

I panic at the thought of what else I know.