

New Fiction: “The List” by Andria Williams

✘ *Author’s note: I began this story in 2013, but eventually set it aside because I feared it would seem unrealistic, or possibly even quaint, to write a story about a Facebook group formed to [exploit female service members](#). This past year, for obvious reasons, I dug it up again.*

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Green cornstalks rolled into the distance under a heavy midsummer sky. From her metal seat, peering out the small window to her right, Captain Jessica Aras watched a lone white jet-trail make its way through amnesiac blue. Then the door to the squadron building clicked open, and she saw Airman Blakely slip in with a Big Gulp sloshing in his hand, which surely he had refilled four times already and would prompt him to make half-hourly trips to the little boy’s room for the rest of the day.

She could understand how a person might drift away from the base on lunch break and have a hard time coming back, especially if that person were a nineteen-year-old male on his first stateside tour of duty after 180 days in Afghanistan. But as he approached her side of the room, the door shutting behind him, he took a leisurely, gurgling sip through his straw, and the ice cubes clattered all at once against their plastic silo. This sound was the death rattle of Jessica’s patience. Just because a tour in southern Illinois lacked urgency did not mean that someone could glide off and install himself for two hours at the mall’s food court. Three times this week Blakely had come in late from lunch, and as she saw her other enlisted folks glance up, she felt a flare of irritation. She was his Captain, and his tardiness seemed a show of public disrespect.

Even though her better judgment told her to take him aside in private, she couldn't stop herself from standing and calling after him. "Airman Blakely," she said, "your break ended 45 minutes ago."

He pulled up mid-slurp and stared at her in startled silence. The straw twitched between his lips. When he lifted his head, the straw came up with it and he held it there as if unsure which would be less polite, to remove it with his fingers or to just let it dangle.

Everyone watched over the tops of their gray cubicles.

"Are we having a misunderstanding, Blakely?" Jessica asked, crossing her arms over the thick fabric of her cammies. He continued to stare, and she blurted, "Were you under the impression that lunch break was a free afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese's?"

It was a stupid thing to say; it hardly made sense. Their local mall did contain a Chuck E. Cheese's, but no one called it "*the* Chuck E. Cheese's," "the" tacked like a small fart onto the front of the name. She glared up at him, this gangly kid almost a decade younger and a foot taller than herself, who a month ago had been pulling military police duty in some village in Afghanistan and now stood before her, red-faced, a florid pimple blooming beneath one nostril, the straw projecting from his mouth like a sprig of wheat, the ice shifting once more, loudly, in his drink.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," Blakely said. "It won't happen again."

And it did not. But in retrospect, this was probably how she first got on the List.

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Jessica drove home every day with First Lieutenant Steve Hayes, her neighbor and a fellow officer. They both lived in

town about fifteen minutes from the base. A coworker once accused them of being too good for standardized housing, and maybe they did think they were; they shared an unspoken aesthetic, she thought, preferring older, quality homes to the base's sea of new beige construction. Of course, Jessica and her husband Halil liked the larger-than-base-housing backyard for their eighteen-month-old son, Omar, and Halil had a thing for crown molding and pocket doors. Jessica privately thought all these Victorian details were somewhat wasted on bachelor Hayes, whom she imagined hardly noticed them behind the flickering glare of his 78-inch TV and all his weight equipment, but perhaps he liked this side of town for its convenience to St. Louis, where he'd gone to college. He was in an MMA gym there, and he liked the comedy clubs.

Their tours at Bagram had overlapped by a couple of months, so she and Hayes had already known each other when they were assigned to the same security forces squadron in southern Illinois. He was blond, blue-eyed, and corn-fed, and Jessica had kept her distance when she'd first met him in Afghanistan, incorrectly assuming he was a frat-boy type. But he was more self-deprecating than she'd expected, and soon they were watching movies in groups on their off-nights and chowing on more Cinnabon than their perfunctory PT runs could comfortably support. Now that they were stationed here in Illinois, and neighbors, he'd suggested that they carpool together, alternating weeks—this week was her turn to drive. She found she rather looked forward to it. Hayes was single and had no kids, so he'd kept a lot of personal interests and hobbies and did smart things like watch "Meet the Press." He also had a wise-ass streak she enjoyed.

So here he was, fiddling with her automatic windows and rummaging in his pocket for a toothpick which he popped between his teeth. He'd quit smoking since his return from Bagram, and there was always something in his mouth: gum, a toothpick, hard candy.

She wondered what he'd say about the incident with Airman Blakely: that her irritation was justified, but she should have spoken with the kid alone. Still, she feared that he might say something else, something like, *Actually, you were a little bit of a bitch.*

Instead, he said, "Did you hear there's a new food truck opening in town?"

"Yeah?" she said, relieved.

"Rico's Tacos," he said, spinning the toothpick between his teeth. "We getting some culture here in town, maybe?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," she said. She enjoyed their shared yearning for "culture," also a frequent point of commiseration for her and Halil.

He chuckled and sat in thought for a moment. "Oh, hey, did you remember?"

"Remember what?" Jessica slowed the car as the rural highway became the main road into town and cornfields gave way to gas stations, strip malls, a high school.

"Taco Tuesday at work tomorrow." His blue eyes grinned.

"Oh God, I always forget," she groaned. "Is it poor form if I just bring in a can of black olives?"

"You did that last week, Captain." He spun the toothpick between his front teeth. "Lead by example. Anyway, the enlisteds like them."

"The olives?"

"The lunches." He examined the frayed toothpick, chucked it back through the open window, and pulled a clean one from his pocket. "Aw Christ, now here's the band."

The high school band ventured out into neighborhoods every

summer to prepare for parade season, and here they were now, marching through the crosswalk to the measured rim-clicks of the snare drums. Their red-faced major, sweating continents into his T-shirt, held his hand to their windshield with grim, flushed solemnity, as if only this gesture kept Jessica from plowing into them all.

While the band crossed, Jessica prodded the bobby pins in her oiled bun, eager to get home and let it down. Her sunlit reflection in the car window showed the flat, rippled waves of hair across the top and sides of her head, like a shower cap made of satin and Kevlar. She liked her hair, its unique monochrome to her light brown skin, and wished it were the first thing people noticed about her. In reality, though, people probably noticed the broad, massed patterns of freckles across her nose and down her cheekbones, just one shade darker than her skin, like shadows through a screen above. She had nothing of her mother's smooth darkness or her father's peely ginger flush; and in fact, though she supposed they'd done their best despite their propensity for arguments and alcohol, she did not feel she was much like either of her parents in any way. After state school in Massachusetts she had joined the Air Force, and only her mother was left now, back in Boston near her Cape Verdean relatives, paranoid about "Arabs and Mexicans," smoking a pack a day.

Jessica said, "I love the band."

"Really?" said Hayes. "Why?" He squinted at the last of the kids as they marched past the windshield. "Don't worry," he shouted out the window at the drum major, "we aren't gonna run over your goats."

The drum major stood stoically, resisting the urge to make eye contact, as if he were guarding Buckingham Palace.

Jessica clicked her tongue, chuckling. "Leave the kid alone."

"Speaking of kids," He glanced at her, cleared his throat.

“You sure ripped that Jiminy Dipshit a new one today.”

“You mean Airman Blakely? Did I?” she said, distressed. “No, I didn’t. I said what needed to be said. He was coming in late every single day.”

“Yeah...” Hayes waited for her to continue.

“He’s only been stateside a few weeks. He was way out at some combat outpost, you know.”

“The hell was he doing out there?”

“Beats me.” Jessica chewed her lower lip. “Do you think he’s having redeployment issues?”

“Maybe he’s just bored.”

“That, too.” Jessica sighed, steering one-handed, her right arm across her lap.

“Those were good times,” Hayes said, meaning when they were in Bagram. She suspected that not all of his times had been good—he’d been tasked to drive convoys for a provincial reconstruction team and admitted once that it scared him—but people chose what to remember. Her own security job had been so boring it felt like psychological torture. She’d pined bitterly for her son Omar, who’d been a year old when she left; cried over videos of him shoving one cereal puff after another into his mouth until his cheeks bulged while Halil and his saint of a mother, who’d spent that year living with them through each of their deployments, laughed.

Jessica pulled up at Hayes’s house and saw the ecstatic face of his terrier jumping again and again in the front window.

“Someone’s happy to see you,” she said, and smiled. He opened the car door, waved, and headed up the walk.

"Anybody home?" Jessica called in a singsong, minutes later, through her own front door, because this always made Omar squeal. "Oh, I guess no one's home. I'll just go back to work, then."

Omar tore around the corner at a toddler's breakneck speed, his legs kicking forward with a sweet, jerky, duckfooted motion as if not all their joints communicated with each other yet. Jessica picked him up, kissed his dark blond curls, brushed cracker crumbs from his cheeks.

The television was on in the large, mostly empty front room, still stacked with cardboard boxes in one corner, and toys tossed about as if one of those boxes had lightly exploded. She glimpsed the green of a baseball field on the screen, tiny figures running and diving, before it switched to a raucous commercial.

"Hello," Halil said from the couch. "We were just watching baseball and eating Ritz."

She set Omar down. "How was day care? Was there a good report?"

Halil made room for her. She perched lightly, still in her uniform and combat boots, with a long to-do list ahead of her before she could relax. "He had a good day," Halil said, and Jessica felt a smile spread across her face, "but he did not finish his lunch." Halil added, sounding almost sorrowful about it: "He never eats the oranges."

"Oh, I don't care," Jessica said. "How was your day?"

"Not too unusual. I briefed the Colonel," he said. Halil was on an Intel watch floor, which meant twelve-hour shifts. His eyes looked tired and heavy-lidded.

"Were you nervous?"

"Not too. I don't really get nervous anymore."

“Do you feel like people are taking you seriously at work?”

He looked at her curiously. “I think so. Does that surprise you?” He gave a quiet laugh. “I don’t think they say, ‘Oh God, there goes that clown, Halil.’”

“I know. That’s not what I meant. It was more about myself.”

He frowned. “You think people don’t take you seriously?”

“No, I think they do, it’s just” – Omar was climbing her legs now. She swung them up and down while he clung to her shins, and he laughed.

“Well, you scare the living daylights out of me,” Halil joked.

“Yeah, yeah.” Jessica swatted him, unwound Omar from her calves, got up, and headed for the upstairs bedroom to change. Her laced boots felt ridiculously heavy and assertive, out of context, on the carpeted stairs. Omar followed her, wailing. Now that she was home, it was Mama or no one. She handed him her phone to play with while she changed: pried her feet from the hot boots, pulled bobby pins from her hair one by one. Her head was tender from insistent pinning. She rubbed her scalp, pulled her hair through a band, and carried Omar downstairs. He still clutched her phone possessively, so she let him keep it. Halil had tipped his head back on the couch and was dozing. As she gathered ingredients for dinner her phone buzzed, and she pried it from Omar’s hands just long enough to see a message from Hayes. “Don’t let us down, Captain!” it said, with four taco emojis trotting along behind. “Go big or go home!,” and then three American flags. Jessica chuckled and wrote herself a note so she wouldn’t miss it in the morning.

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The next day at noon, she set a long rectangular tray on the buffet table and peeled back its foil blanket, steam swirling up as if she were performing a magic trick.

Her airmen inched around the table. Rows of warm, gently folded corn tortillas spooned each other beside shredded lettuce cheerful as Easter grass. There was a mound of shimmering ground beef and a lake of thick, grayish beans, sprinkled with authentic-looking cheese. Jessica felt a glow of satisfaction. She had single-handedly taken Taco Tuesday up a notch. She stepped back, clapped her hands lightly together, and said, "Dig in!"

"Goddamn, I love Taco Tuesday!" someone behind her said. "You're the best, Captain!" She realized it was Hayes and ignored him.

Murmured thanks came from her crew as they filed into line. "I love this place," Airman O'Donnell said, and because he was not a wiseass like Hayes, she felt nearly dazzled by his effusiveness until she realized that he meant the chain restaurant from which she'd bought the tacos, and not their cinder-block building with its belabored air conditioning and sagging motivational posters. Still, the spread was an accomplishment. It sure beat the previous weeks' limp tortillas and bags of shredded cheese. People heaped their plates, poured fizzing cups of pop. Someone turned on the stereo.

Airman Mackenzie Stahl, with her severe bottle-black hair and thin overplucked eyebrows, was one of the few who did not seem pleased. Stahl was somewhere around twenty. She always seemed to have such a chip on her shoulder. It had almost startled Jessica when she'd once seen Stahl out with friends at the movie theater on a Sunday afternoon, laughing and carefree in a Loony Tunes sweatshirt and pin-thin jeans. Stahl possessed none of that lightness now. She thunked a jar of watery salsa onto the far end of the table and stalked past Jessica as if the lunch were not an act of generosity but some kind of pitiable dog-and-pony show, as if Jessica were performing an office striptease. From the other side of the room someone muttered, "Where are the olives? We always have olives."

Truth be told, Jessica felt she'd never quite struck the balance between authority and generosity. The female officers who made the best leaders, who stayed in twenty years or more, seemed to err on the side of toughness and they were often, she hated to admit, the more mannish women. They had odd, inappropriate senses of humor and short, dry laughs; they were overly attached to horses or dogs. Maybe Jessica was finding her own way, a middle ground where she could be both boss and friend, man and woman. Then she overheard airmen Blakely and Stahl at the front of the line.

Stahl asked, "You hear we're getting a Rico's taco truck?"

Jessica was about to pipe up Yes! She had heard that! It was the talk of the town!, but Airman Blakely, pouring neon-orange queso from a jar all over the delicate flavors of the more-authentic takeout Jessica had brought, spoke up first.

"What'd you say? Pink tacos?" he asked, grinning.

"Shut up," Stahl said, laughing.

It was obvious Blakely was trying to be immature. Sure, it was uncouth, but Jessica was in the mood to let things slide. She wouldn't have given it a second thought if it were not for what followed.

Blakeley widened his eyes at Stahl in mock surprise and whispered in a breathy, innocent falsetto: "What? You mean this isn't an afternoon at the Chuck E. Cheese's?"

Stahl pushed him playfully and hissed, "Oh, take it easy, Cocoa Puff!"

At this, several airmen turned toward Jessica and then quickly looked away again. She wondered what this had to do with her.

"Shit," someone muttered.

And then Jessica realized—her face burning, tears sparking in

her eyes—it was a nickname, their nickname for her.

Stahl turned and spotted Jessica, and her whole countenance changed. She ducked her head and, though there was only one tortilla on her plate, made a beeline for her cubicle. Blakely, his face red, did the same.

Jessica felt her body turn hot from her head to her toes. She poked at the pins in her hair, her eyes stinging. It's okay, she told herself, a habit under stress. It's okay, this is okay. It's normal to gripe about your boss behind his or her back. She would not cry over whatever stupid crap some kids from podunk towns said about her when they thought she wasn't listening. Maybe it meant her group had good camaraderie. But Cocoa Puff, Jesus. There was an edge to it she couldn't make herself think about. Her stomach turned.

Hayes, oblivious, wandered up with his own plate refilled and gave her a smile. "Hey, kiddo," he said. "This whole thing is a hit."

For a split second she wanted to grab his arm and demand of him: *Is this really what they call me behind my back? What else do they say about me? And please do not call your Captain "kiddo" in front of the airmen!* Instead she stood silently, relieved that, at least, her distress was not noticeable to anyone else.

"You gonna eat anything yourself?" Hayes asked, landing a curved, beef-filled chip on his tongue and crunching loudly.

"Of course," Jessica said, though she could not imagine actually choking down anything. She turned back to the table full of food: pale-green lettuce dropped here and there, the beef leaking orange-colored oil, her spectacular, now-picked-over tray.

For the next few days, there were no incidents. Airman Blakely was nearly tripping over himself to be punctual, returning from lunch with minutes to spare and often with a quarter of a sandwich in hand, as if putting his concern for promptness on display. "Nice touch," Hayes whispered to Jessica with a smirk. "The sandwich."

Then the Major called her out of the blue for a meeting. He wanted her to meet him not at his own cubicle, but in one of the small conference rooms at the end of the building, which could not be good. She knew this would be about one of the airmen. At two o'clock she tapped baby Omar's sweet round nose in the framed photo on her desk, pushed back her chair and walked past the dark, reflective windows, pressing her bun into place.

When she opened the door Major Alvarez was already there, a dewy Diet Coke in one hand. He set it aside, stood to accept her salute, and apologized for interrupting her workday, as if Jessica had been doing something fascinating and totally unrelated to his instructions. Then he said, "We've got a little bit of an issue here with some of your men."

Her heart sank: more than one?

He asked, "Are you familiar with something called 'the List?'"

Jessica paused, mentally running through what might fit this name: a game show, a movie. Hadn't there been a self-help book of that name recently, some Christian thing? "No, sir," she said.

Alvarez sat down and Jessica did also. He said, "One of your airmen came forward yesterday. He said there's a, a game going around between a couple of the offices."

"Okay," Jessica said.

Alvarez cleared his throat. He was a fit man with salt-and-

pepper hair who often bicycled to work wearing the sort of giant, iridescent sunglasses favored by those who took both sports and eye health seriously. He linked his fingers on his lap and Jessica saw the ropy tendons in his arms, his remarkably clean fingernails, white moons, the beds a pristine grayish-pink.

“They’re keeping a list of the females in the offices, things they”—he paused delicately—“*notice* about the females, ideas of what the females might do.”

Jessica could feel her heart accelerate as he explained: The men in question had started a Facebook group, which they joined under decoy names. The site was “organized around sexual requests and gossip,” Alvarez said, “and inappropriate speculation.” Worse, however, the group was linked to another site where service members were apparently posting nude pictures of women—some obviously posed for, but others seeming to have been taken without their knowledge.

She couldn’t help but feel indignant on behalf of her men, in part for the absurd reason that the other squadron involved with whatever this idiotic game was had a much nicer, newer building with perfect air conditioning and sparkling, unchipped bathrooms. The airmen in the other building enjoyed such creature comforts all the time; what excuse did they have to idle their days away, dreaming up lewd nicknames and distasteful scenarios?

“It probably started as blowing off steam,” he said, “but it’s become something more.”

“All right,” Jessica said. She felt almost dizzy and cleared her throat. “Well, what do we do?”

“Airman Wallace, the one who came forward, will allow us to use his account for the next couple of days so we can figure out exactly who is taking part in this.” He scribbled something on a piece of paper and then handed it to her.

"Here's Wallace's information so you can access the account."

"His account name is 'SexualChocolate?'" Jessica snorted, picturing Wallace's egg white head, the way he seemed to stroke it into a point when he was thinking.

Alvarez denied himself the chuckle. "We'll go through it and identify who we can, and compare notes tomorrow," he said. "But wait until you get home."

Her protectiveness was replaced by a seeping disgust. "How many of my men are involved, sir? And what will the disciplinary action be?"

He counted in his head. "Right now I know of ten from your unit, plus fourteen from the other. There will be the typical non-judicial committee and appropriate punishment. And they aren't all men," he said, his eyes darting to her and away again as he stood and she did also. "Wallace says at least two of the participants are women."

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It was Hayes's afternoon to drive. Jessica followed him out of the building and across the parking lot, which wavered black in the midday heat. His royal blue Mustang, brand-spanking-new the month before, was waiting. It was more car than anyone needed, with all the bells and whistles, but that was not something she would ever say. Besides, being a grown man with no dependents, he could do what he liked.

"Another day bites the dust," he said, smiling faintly as they glided through the security gate, waving to Vargas and Swenson on duty. He glanced back in the mirror and switched lanes, his blue eyes light and sun-strained.

Jessica found it hard to keep up conversation, given the day's revelation. Alvarez had asked her not to speak of it before he took the issue higher up. She wondered if Hayes knew, if he'd

heard anything from the enlisted guys. She wondered, yet again, if he knew what they called her behind her back.

“Going into the city Friday night,” Hayes was saying. “Seeing the Cards game with some friends.”

Jessica managed to ask who they were playing. The Reds, he said. Cabrera was coming back in off the injured list, but he wasn't worried. She saw his eyes in the rearview mirror again, just a flicker, and he drifted back into the left lane.

“Well,” she said, feeling exhausted, “that sounds like fun.” Then she touched his arm. “You're driving serpentine,” she said.

“Oh, sorry. Old habit.” He shook himself, moved back into the right lane as if out of superstition, forced himself to stay there. The effort made him twitch.

She nodded, looked out the window. There were the cornfields, a half-vacant strip mall with a tanning booth and a Verizon Wireless, a pro-life billboard with a baby in a denim jacket and sunglasses. Sometimes Hayes would joke, “I've been wearing this jacket since four days after conception!!!,” which made her laugh.

“I know it's just a habit,” she said. “But you don't have to do it here.”

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Later that night Jessica sat in the green glare of her computer, her heart pounding. She was doing what Alvarez had asked her to: scrolling through the List, jotting down the names of contributors she recognized. None of this was what she wanted to see, and yet it was impossible to look away. She felt as if her mind were unfurling.

There was plenty of tamely inappropriate stuff, shots of service women at BBQs in low-cut shirts, holding beer. Two

female airmen Jessica recognized, tonguing for the camera, par for the course. Individual shots of women apparently oblivious to the commentary they'd inspired: *She a real ho slept with half the MPs. This one likes it up the ass. Bitch gives the best head in Illinois!!!*

She scanned through the page for links to specific pictures, trying to match her people with their aliases. Airman Rick Swenson called himself "Ron Swanson," she put that together pretty easily. There was Spaceballs, JFK, Matt Holliday. All these losers, she comforted herself, who would be found out, one by one. All she needed to see was there.

Airman Stahl was, optimistically, "Gisele." And it turned out she was quite active on the site, posting pathetic photos of herself in only lacy black panties, her scant breasts squashed together with her elbows in an uncomfortable contortion. Stahl posted these pictures even though the commentary was sometimes harsh – *You look like B-grade Victorias Secret, girl!*—or maybe because it was occasionally positive (*Super hot, keep 'em comin sweetheart!*). Then again, maybe she was getting money for them.

Jessica learned, too, that Airman Vargas had a real chip on his shoulder about an ex-girlfriend, a former servicewoman he referred to as "the evil bitch" so insistently that anyone wanting to see a picture of her called her that as well. Vargas had uploaded nearly all of the evil bitch's Instagram account to the web site before she could shut it down. Jessica lingered far longer than she needed to there, riveted in a way that felt both vapid and inevitable. She scanned backwards through the evil bitch's life, through her parties and posing with girlfriends at clubs (and yes there was a lot of cleavage and her skirt was far too tight, but this was on the evil bitch's own time and Jessica would have had no jurisdiction); she scrolled past the evil bitch cuddling with a large pit bull, the evil bitch posing with a nephew. The evil bitch dolled up, the evil bitch fresh-faced on a lawn chair. Jessica

felt startled when Vargas himself reappeared in this reverse-timeline—she'd almost forgotten he was involved at all, and wanted to shout, *Look out, don't you know that's the evil bitch?!*—he was oblivious, his arm suddenly around the evil bitch's slim shoulders as if they were on cloud nine.

She thinks she has privacy, Vargas wrote, but joke's on her! She blocked me from her Instagram means she basically WANTS a war now. Fine evil bitch, you want it you got it! P.S. \$\$\$\$ I got noodles on a film camera, will scan. \$\$\$\$

BIG MONEY, sonny!

Aw yiss , came the replies.

There was plenty more, things Jessica did not want to see. She found herself scrolling with a sense of distance, seeing all this from the outside. She tried to forget these were her people, that she had failed, that she had allowed such a germ to grow right under her nose—instead this was some unknown airman's strained, blurry dick before her eyes, some other unit's men who had paid one of their own to ejaculate on a hooker's face. There was no way these could be the people she worked with day after day. *Good morning, how are you, so-and-so* made fresh coffee, there's softball on Friday—

She had a strange memory of Hayes talking to her one afternoon in the car, something he had seen on Bill Maher, saying—*A dick, if you ask me, does not translate well to film. Anyone who thinks otherwise is kidding himself.* And Jessica chuckling awkwardly at this non-sequitur, thinking, *Where did that come from?* But so far, to her relief, Hayes was nowhere to be seen on the List.

And here was Gisele, Airman Stahl, again. A post from a couple of weeks ago: *"Cocoa Puff's Nipples – Black or Pink?!!!"*

Jessica felt the blood drain from her face.

Oh please no, she thought.

It was a popular post. People were making guesses. "Black," "pink," "vagina-colored," they speculated, some obviously pleased with their own cleverness. One asked, "*Do you think she has splotches all over her WHOLE BODY TOO?*"

Jessica felt tears spark in her eyes. Her face burned.

But then Gisele/Stahl reappeared and put the guessing game to rest with a heavily cropped photo. It was blurry, taken with a cell phone Stahl had apparently set in her locker, but Jessica could see that the series of three photos were of herself.

The first was taken from behind and was unimaginably awkward: a surprisingly pale figure stepping forward into her PT shorts, the ass a sloping ramp, pocked with minor cellulite. Then it got worse: two frontal shots, the moment before she grabbed a towel, in which Jessica's torso seemed to make a haunting, disapproving face at the camera. She wished the body had been mercifully headless but there was the lower half of her face, unmistakable, caught in what looked like a moment of mild strain. Her breasts hung dead center in the picture, like two startled, spacey eyes, while her unguarded stomach made its slack and gentle descent towards her crotch. For a moment she could not breathe. It was the worst way to be caught, in that wet, gravid moment between shower and towel, the moment you rushed through because it was so ugly; and there she was, frozen in time, evaluated by countless eyes, judged for the horrors of her normal body. She felt captured. She felt lynched.

PokerFace—OMG this makes me so hot I need to jack off and then kill myself

Holler Uncle —At the Chuck E. Cheese's?

*JFK—KILL ****ME***** FIRST!!*

Spaceballs—oh God, I can't unsee it

PokerFace—Ladies and Gentlemen, you have seen the face of terror.

This, from a particular wordsmith— the existance of the allusive Locker Room Sasquatch has now been prove. Approach with extreme caution!!!!!!! If it comes near you, throw food to it then back away. LMFAO

Yet another—How can she do this to us?????

The responses ranged from that sort of prudish hysteria—as if the images had been thrust upon them from the outside, by a calculating third party, the pervert in the movie theater or the creep on the bus, and not sought out and encouraged by themselves – to a chuckling, jaded cruelty, a voice that was calm and sexually wise, somehow above the other banter. Jessica didn't know which was worse, and she couldn't bear it anymore anyway. She needed to get out of there.

She clicked back to the Facebook page and was about to close out when a new post caught her eye. Unrelated to the main content on the page, it was just a casual conversation between two members. But a sudden suspicion made her read on.

Spaceballs—Hey Matt Holliday you got those tickets for Friday?

Matt Holliday—yeah

Spaceballs— 8 of us right?

Matt Holliday— yup

Spaceballs— What, you didn't invite Cocoa Puff on the way home? LOL When you gonna bag that?

Matt Holliday— Shut up. You're an ass

Spaceballs— She's into you, you know it

Matt Holliday– proolly

This conversation had ended half an hour before. Jessica waited a few more minutes, but nothing else came up. She recalled seeing “Matt Holliday” elsewhere on this page; it was the name of a star Cardinals player and, she now knew beyond a doubt, that it was Hayes’s moniker as well. She began scanning the list frantically for Matt Holliday’s other posts. They were infrequent and rather passive, in occasional response to others. He had not commented on the more illicit items, including the naked pictures of herself. But he had seen them. He’d known about this for some time.

She resolved to click out once and for all, but the cursor in the top bar blinked like a challenge, a dare. *SexualChocolate, how are you feeling?* it asked, with all the saccharine remoteness of a non-human.

SexualChocolate–YOU ARE ALL FUCKING ASSHOLES she wrote, and closed out of the computer at once.

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There was no way that she could sleep. She sat up with a glass of wine and tried to calm herself: the List would be shut down the next day. She’d watched it from the outside with a superior glow of knowledge, seen its deathbed tremor. Those boys thought they were so clever, thought they could keep their fun little club on life-support, but it had only a few hours to live. And she had snuck in among them and deceived them, too.

Why had she expected Hayes to snitch on the others, anyway? She and Hayes carpooled to and from work because they lived a block apart; she’d been stupid to think they were *friends*. They did not get together on weekends or BBQ in her backyard or hang out in bars. But they talked, and something about the way their conversations bookended the day made her feel that these chats were significant; they checked in with each other

because being in the military, in their squadron, having done a tour in Afghanistan, was like being in your own little country, a specific world that made you somehow equal. They were the yolk of an egg, she'd once thought, and the white of the egg was all the diffuse civilian-ness around them, the tanning booths and the Dairy Queen and the high school band and all that shit the military made possible for their indulged, beloved, oblivious citizenry to enjoy.

But right now, she hated him. She hated him more than she had hated anyone in her life.

Their service didn't make them equal. She'd always known that perfectly well, and just sometimes forgot. He'd sat by while people joked about her, while nude pictures of her scrolled before his blue, blue, American, baseball-loving eyes, as if what she didn't know could not possibly hurt her. But that was the *thing*, she thought tearfully, feeling bitterness rise up through her body. That was the thing about being a woman: what you didn't know did hurt you, over and over.

She tried to imagine how things would go from here: The List would be shut down, effective immediately. The transgression would be discussed at work in endless conferences and reprimanding e-mails, and everyone would be very, very serious. They would hold a non-judicial disciplinary committee, and there would be docks in pay, maybe even someone getting held back in rank for a few years. For Hayes, as an officer, the punishment could be severe.

But these were her people, also, and there was a chance she would be punished as well. She was supposed to be in charge of them, to know what they were doing. She'd helped create a culture. Hadn't she?

*

She didn't sleep. Hours later she stood by the back door and watched the sun rise in a pink smudge from the direction of

the base. A distant cargo plane climbed into the warm, heavy sky. Beneath it swayed the drying cornfields, waving their crinkled arms as if to remind everything above them that they were there.

Halil would be home in a few minutes from his night on the watch floor. When Omar woke up, Halil would toast him a frozen waffle for breakfast and take him to day care before falling finally into bed to sleep the day away.

By then, Jessica would already be at work. Hayes was coming by to pick her up soon, and he was always on time.

Photo Credit: United States Air Force

In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national

frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states

struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support "pre-emptive strikes" still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush's U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community's long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), "Generation War" follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to "Our Fathers, Our Mothers." It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn't fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany's "Band of Brothers" is a dark anti-Epic that follows the birth of modern Germany through the struggle of those citizens who were of fighting age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given

that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as "camp guards." But this isn't a Ukrainian version of WWII—it's *German*. Didn't Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there's always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children, and that policeman is always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it's not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they

shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there's always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it's either his job, or he's a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren't clean, either, regardless of Poland's experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would

need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18th century might return as a Russian during the season that deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.

New Poetry by Yael Hacoheh



Fortitude

Seven times I've been to the Wall
to scribble my prayers
and fold them into
the seams in the yellow stones.
The walls of Jericho fell on the seventh
so I elbow my way through the crowd
to put my ear to the stones
and hear the horses surround them,
but the wail of sirens drown out the hooves
the herds disperse from the plaza
and I forsake the Wall
to let it stand on its own
an ancient olive tree
straining against its plot in the dirt.

Pre Traumatic

The first time I shot an M-16
it was the heat of summer in the Negev.
Gas-operated with a rotating bolt,
five-point-fifty six caliber,
with nineteen bullets a box.
I could shoot like an angel,
I could hit a running target
at six-hundred-fifty meters.
I cried the first time.

I was eighteen.
Already, my hair in a bun.
You didn't stand
a chance.□

Photo Credit: [Friends of the IDF](#)