

New Nonfiction by Bettina Rolyn: “Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?”



I have come to do a writing residency at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* in Molise, southern Italy, in a remote mountain village to escape the distractions of Berlin. Just as every writer does when they go off for a residency, in this case, with the added burden of Covid having prevented me from escaping myself for eleven months straight. I had been fighting the need to flee from myself for years, yet Covid closed my usual escape route outwards and made me turn inwards. And towards depression. It wasn't just the desire for Mediterranean sun but the name of this residency that got my attention: Loss and renewal. I am working on a memoir about my three-and-a-half-year stint in the US Army as an enlisted soldier during the early years of the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but it was not proceeding smoothly. For over two years, I reread my journals, wrote up notes and insights in fits and starts, fought back various pains, and despite writing fifty-thousand words, it wasn't moving forward after the bleak winter of lockdowns and isolation. I decided to focus on one chapter during my trip to southern Italy.

I arrive at the *Museum of Loss and Renewal* on a hot afternoon in July and after getting settled in my room, the curators show me around the little town. In the morning, I awake to the sound of tractors passing in the street below, the neighbor's chickens clucking, and roosters crowing as the village comes to life.

There have been periods of my life where every day, I consider my own death. *Should I stay, or should I go now?* Suicide is on

my mind a lot. I can't remember the first time I thought about killing myself, but I was surprised to discover in my "self-research" that already as an angst-ridden teenager, I had written about it in my journals.

Watching the cult classic *Harold and Maude* as a teenager, I was less interested in the age gap between the titular characters and more in Maude's status as a Holocaust survivor and Harold's fixation on death by suicide. I spent several years in high school consuming every story and image I could get my hands on about the Nazi era. Photos of dead bodies, emaciated prisoners, piles of teeth, glasses, and shoes—it all fascinated me.

The iconic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, traditionally aired on TV every Christmas, was also part of my childhood. The pivotal scene, of course, is where James Stewart's character wants to kill himself by jumping off a bridge because of the impending financial ruin of his community bank until his guardian angel intervenes. This is what crisis looks like: suicide as a solution to our problems arises naturally in the human mind. Despite the taboo on discussing it and for its potential contagiousness, I'd like to think that I came up with the idea all on my own sometime around the age of nine or ten when I began contemplating my existence. You cannot contemplate life without death; being without non-being.

The curators of the residency have a well-stocked library and leave the novel *The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)* by Vladimir Nabokov out on the table, somehow reading my mind. The book of notes for a work-in-progress was posthumously published by the author's son Dmitri, who wrote the introduction. Nabokov—who likes the em-dash as much as I do—always held a curious fascination. He also spent fifteen years writing in Berlin and lived a life of displacement; the loss of his homeland and the themes of sex and death echo in

his work. In this story, the main character is an obese cuckold scholar who resorts to the pleasurable erasure of himself, a process that occurs in his imagination but fictionally appears real. *"The process of dying by auto dissolution afforded the greatest ecstasy known to man."* By the end of the book, he claims, *"By now I have died up to my naval some fifty times in less than three years and my fifty resurrections have shown that no damage is done to the organs involved when breaking in time out of the trance."*

I have suffered uncountable imaginary deaths. Sometimes by my own hand, other times in perfectly acceptable, nay, even understandable ways. Cancer is a top contender—even as loved ones die for real around me from the disease. There isn't a pain, bump, ache, odor, or other bodily irregularity or phenomenon that I don't suspect of being cancer at some point.

Although my ten-year-old self wasn't familiar with French philosophy, later, when I read that Albert Camus says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the most fundamental question of philosophy is whether to commit suicide, I thought, "Well, duh." Camus concludes that the most urgent of questions is the meaning of life because whatever higher purpose we ascribe to our lives will determine whether we will live (not kill ourselves) or even die willingly (in war) for that meaning.

In college, I took a seminar called "Theories of the Good Life," where we read, among other texts, Victor Frankl's famous book about finding meaning in life. He wrote it after surviving the Nazi death camps. He was already working on suicide prevention amongst students in Vienna before he was sent to Auschwitz, where his new wife and family were murdered. Later, he developed "logotherapy" and "existential analysis" wherein he identified three main ways of finding meaning in life: making a difference in the world, having particular experiences, or adopting particular attitudes. A

helpful attitude may be, "The universe is fundamentally good." Or, "Every human being brings something unique to the world." I was down with that.

In the military, which I'd joined at the age of twenty-five seeking to "make a difference," I hoped to deploy and was prepared to die honorably, heroically even. I fantasized about stepping on a landmine in Afghanistan. I would welcome either death or to at least be rid of my right leg, which had been giving me so much pain during my enlistment. But because of the leg and back troubles, I instead was medically discharged.

With each episode of depression and crisis—when my suicidal ideation usually appears—I'm surprised at what challenges tear apart my ability to withstand the strain of existing in this human body, one that comes with so many pains and issues. One common denominator is that I have a tunnel vision of self-absorption and a warped sense of my place in the world. A combination of "I don't matter" and, "I am the center of this universe of pain." The first such experience as an adult happened while I was in the pressure-cooker of army basic training. I had been under the special "tutelage" of a female drill sergeant who informed me that I was a piece-of-shit soldier one too many times. I snapped and believed her. I wanted to die. I considered how best to do so, and settled on our rifle marksmanship training, when we were given live ammunition. But I also wanted to take her out with me. There was even a moment when she crouched behind me on the firing line, ostensibly to help me make it through the test with a malfunctioning rifle and I could have turned around and shot her. I did not. Perhaps it was that spark of anger at her and the army for putting us both in this situation that got me through the ordeal with no-one the wiser about what had transpired in my head. By now, I have envisioned my own death in a million ways. Preferably an accident, but that's a fine line to walk. I used a lot of energy imagining my demise, and

here Nabokov's description of Philip's exercise in *Laura* is apt: "*Learning to use the vigor of the body for the purpose of its own deletion, standing vitality on its head.*"

According to the various spiritual and religious beliefs toward suicide, it is considered either a sin, self-defeating, or ineffective. In the view of the world and afterlife that I was raised with, I knew suicide was frowned upon. It does not solve a problem; instead, it takes away the ability to solve it, ridding our souls of our body—which we need to live out this incarnation on earth. Later I learned the line, "Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem."

In much of the literature I have read about near-death experiences, when people return to earth and report on what they learned in their "preview" of the afterlife, the stories are similar. They say that souls who die by suicide are often tortured while stuck in between heaven and earth in a sort of purgatory. They are unable to comfort those left behind nor move on to higher spiritual realms—for how long differs based on theology. Now, that's a bummer. This belief that our souls are eternal (and reincarnate) and the attitude that there's no quick fix to end it all kept me alive for a long time, but it did not prevent me from turning to such thoughts when in crisis. I have come to view the siren call of release from earthly chains now more as an indicator of how bad my situation has become. It's time to make necessary adjustments—even major ones that make other people unhappy, and also cause me to lose face. I must cancel plans, disenroll from school, seek help from professionals.

In 2012, I volunteered on a crisis and suicide hotline. I was contemplating a career change from linguist in the defense industry to therapist in the helping professions and wanted to

get a taste for the job. Before being let loose on the lines, we trained in the Carl Rogers method of unconditional positive regard and learned that the fundamental goal of the hotline was to preserve life. One policy was that as hotline listeners—that's what we were called—we would not accompany people while they killed themselves. We were trained to intervene, by—in the most extreme cases—calling 9/11 and sending the authorities to the caller's house while we had them on the phone. This only happened once or twice during my tenure.

Figuring out how to answer people's concerns and know what to say was anxiety-inducing. I sweated through one hundred logged hours of answering the phones in a dank hospital basement in suburban Virginia, though the amount of time I spent on actual calls was probably only one-third of that. Those thirty hours were enlightening. Hunched over in a booth, organs on high alert as I strained to hear my way into the pain of another soul, I learned how a suicidal crisis goes in waves or cycles. The trick is to remove the means to implement the urge and ride out the wave to safety.

During my hotline training, I also learned that in the US, more people kill themselves with guns than die in car accidents or homicides and I changed my views entirely on the second amendment. I learned compassion but also just how frustrating people who are in need can be. I was having a good year in many ways and ended by making a major decision to go to Europe to theological seminary and not study counseling. But a year or two later, amid a toxic relationship-induced crisis, I learned that it's difficult to do the trick of de-escalating on oneself, or rather, only possible to a point.

In late 2016, after deciding to take a year break from pursuing ordination into the priesthood after three years of seminary, I was searching for something to do for a year and

processing a breakup. I decided to finally visit Spain for a week and check that off my bucket list, and on the descent into Madrid, we hit turbulence. It was the worst I'd experienced in all my years of flying. As the plane shook back and forth, up and down, and people cried out—I was perfectly calm and ready to die. I have done everything I came here to do, I thought as my stomach jumped up to my throat. I have traveled the world and followed my major impulses (to serve in the military and go to seminary). If this plane crashes, I won't have any regrets. And it was true, but it was also because I had ended a life chapter but wasn't yet 'out of the woods' to even see that I had been in a wood, much less a dark one. It took another year of wandering and contemplating the truth that although I had religion, as the expression goes, the more theology I got, the less I wanted to be a priest. A year of suicidal depression followed, and I realized I wouldn't go back to be ordained anytime soon.

In his esoteric lessons held in Berlin in February, 1913, the Austrian philosopher and mystic Rudolf Steiner said that God is real and active where we see the destructive powers of nature; in autumn storms, in all shattering and disintegrating of things. I sat and watched the seasons pass outside my window and existed, being crushed by the manifestation of the divine. Slowly, once I let go of the idea of needing to do something meaningful in a foreordained, meditative, and godly way, moments of happiness returned.

When describing the difference between the "normal" everyday life versus the "esoteric" and supersensible one that can be accessed through meditation, Steiner issues a warning: "Exoteric life takes place in the world of cognition. We know something because we confront an object, look at it and make mental images of it. This changes the moment we meditate." In advising the seeker of spiritual wisdom through meditation, Steiner cautions that "We shouldn't immediately make ideas about what approaches us in this world [of supersensible

reality]. We should just open ourselves, listen and feel what wants to stream into our soul." In my case, however, I am not a very regular practitioner of meditation except for three years of attempting to know 'higher worlds' in seminary training. I already sense my mind's existence astride the boundary of the exoteric and esoteric, between mental cognition and psychic reality. One in which often-unwilled thoughts of my own death are what stream into my soul, taking up an inordinate amount of "space." When I opened the door further to this supersensible world, disorientation, depression, and death awaited. One evening last year, my ear began to hurt, and I thought immediately, "Oh, it must be some terrible disease and I will soon die." I see signs in hypochondria. I read into my symptoms the hope that the journey is almost over. The plane is about to crash.

Steiner continues: "We must preserve absolute equanimity with respect to spiritual experiences, just as we should remain calm in everyday life with respect to all events, ideas, etc. so that we don't get excited or upset." Great tip, Rudolf. When not describing the intangible world, Steiner does offer some practical advice for how to practice such equanimity, and it involves disciplining our soul's capacities for thinking, feeling, and willing. This much I have learned is true—there are ways to mitigate the inner emotional turbulence; but I have also learned to sense when I am in danger of being dragged down by an external situation, one that inevitably involves other humans. Why did the frog cross the road? ...

Because it was stapled to the chicken.

Sitting in my room in the village overlooking the Mainarde Mountains of Molise, I look down at my swollen fingers, the instrument of my intended work and they look foreign to me. No, not quite, they resemble my mother's leathery hands which are slightly swollen from arthritis and seventy-five years of

work, but mine are now also covered in an angry rash of hives. The left hand has red bumps full of liquid bubbling up from my swollen flesh like poison ivy burns. Slowly bursting from the pressure after a few days, my body's juices ooze out of my finger like maples being tapped for their syrup. The itching on my hands and legs is maddening, coming in waves, triggered by even a slight mountain breeze upon my skin. Even many weeks later, the itching returns like the echoes of a bad dream. The first day I arrived at the residency, I must have encountered the cause of this reaction, but I have no recollection of what it might have been.

I have been in this situation before. In 2013, once I abandoned my career in the US defense industry and decided to attend seminary in southern Germany. First, I stopped by the eastern Mediterranean following an invitation to visit some pastors from my church who were holding an inter-religious peace camp in the hills of Galilee. After one night sleeping underneath the pine trees with the youngsters, I awoke with what I thought were mosquito bites all over my hands, feet, and face. When they quickly turned into these oozing, itching sores, I saw the Kibbutz doctor who told me about the pine processionary moth. I was the only afflicted party in our group. This miraculous creature of the genus "Thaumetopoea," species "pityocampa" has microscopic urticating hairs in its caterpillar stage, which cause harmful reactions in humans and other mammals. The internet tells me that "The species is notable for the behavior of its caterpillars, which overwinter in tent-like nests high in pine trees, and which proceed through the woods in nose-to-tail columns, protected by their severely irritating hairs."

Although the name pityocampa comes from "pine and larva," the word pity seems most appropriate to me now. Pity-evoking is the only word for a skin rash. It's hard to hide and catches the eye. You can't help but be moved by either disgust or pity, in the best case. I am so full of self-pity it is

literally oozing out of me. Did the pity come from feeling unattractive due to these angry hives swelling my limbs, or was it always there and just now coming to expression?

There are certainly many things that I am angry about but do not say. There are truths I want to shout out to the world that are unsightly and unpleasant about what I have done and experienced in my life. I am trying to write them in the form of a memoir, but I'm blocked. In the meantime, my skin will reveal it as literal and metaphoric markers and warnings. These are expressions of my attitude towards the world I've encountered.

One morning on the mountain, I read the introduction to *The Original of Laura*. In it, Dimitri describes how his father's downward spiral to death started with falling in the Swiss mountains while pursuing his hobby of lepidoptery, the study of butterflies. In the cooling late afternoon of that same day, I found myself walking up the hill to the last house in the village on the left, where I had intended to visit Clara, an elderly woman recently widowed earlier in the year. She said to stop by anytime and meant it, but once I finally got myself up the single road, past the village's old houses, to ring at her door, she wasn't home. Later she told me she was picking out her husband's gravestone. I followed the road upwards on its rough-hewn sun-bleached cobblestones, which ran parallel to one of the many stone walls that crisscrossed the mountainside.

During World War II, the Americans came through here on their way north from Sicily, having beaten back the fascists in bloody battles throughout southern Italy. They fought the Germans here in the Gustave Line, which practically runs right through the village, in the winter of 1943/44. They even built a road still named after "the Americans" to access the remote mountains of Molise in the slimmest part of Italy's boot. The

curators tell me about a Scotsman who fought against the Germans in southern Italy but upon returning home met an Italian from this village, and so returned to Italy for good. He stayed on the hill for the rest of his ninety-two years. That's one way to deal with the aftermath of war.

Along the white stony path, I found myself chasing butterflies to capture them with my iPhone camera, far from civilization, and contemplating the purchase of a house in this village that I had just left. There are many empty houses in the towns of the region. Many of the children of families who'd lived here for generations having long since moved to the big cities of Europe, though some continue to return to build more energy efficient houses or move to lower altitudes, where the winters are milder. The house I looked at came with a plot of land, upon which fig trees already grew. The idea of having an orchard and chickens providing fresh eggs daily and growing my own food in the garden captured my imagination.

If I wandered off the path here, I had been warned there might be shells, unexploded ordinance, and other nasty surprises like scorpions and wild boars awaiting me. I had seen the boars already, hurtling through the underbrush uprooting everything in their path—hard to miss—but also the seemingly invisible moths and caterpillars which caused me grief. As I wrote and searched through my journals—trying to put them in some meaningful order in my memoir—plumbing the depths of my memory, I found undiscovered ordinances of thoughts and feelings, a seemingly endless supply of trauma and suicidal ideations that I had confided to my journals but otherwise hidden from those around me, and even myself for so many years. I had been mentally living a life on the edge for decades, where thoughts of suicide would lie waiting behind every bush, stone, boulder, or obstacle in my path. Whenever I was challenged and felt like I had no more choices out of a bad situation, I had thoughts of ending it all. And now I was stumbling upon them in my journals and wondering how I'd even

made it this far without hurling myself off some cliff.

The rugged beauty of this landscape appeals to me because it is not just pretty, or quaint, or touristy, but real. Molise is beautiful in its wildness. It wasn't always quite so wild. It has been worked, yet it is a work in progress as the re-wilding of this region takes over. My hosts explained how over the past fifty years, nature has been slowly reclaiming these hills and hiding the many stone walls and paths that had been cleared over generations for small plots of land to be cultivated. In the photos of the area at the WinterLine War Museum in the nearby town of Venafro, the landscape looks vastly different. There is history here, but there is still potential amongst the rocky terrain and partly deserted villages. People like me are coming here in search of something quieter and safer, like the curators of the Museum who created such a residency for artistic reflection. Some things look better with the passage of time; others just appear different.

I imagine a life where I live in the house that I saw for sale in the village. I have chickens in the yard and a garden, and I harvest figs. If I had chickens—whose lives I would worry about preserving—and a plot of land to care for would the incessant thoughts of my own mortality fade? Keeping busy certainly is one way of keeping the hounds of existential angst fed and quieted for a while.

I wrote a children's story about chickens once. I wrote it mostly in my head and like Nabokov, whose characters in *Laura* never get fully fleshed out, my chickens never saw the light of day on a page. They were inspired by real ones my sister kept in Pittsburgh for a few years. Her young children loved to chase them around the small backyard. Every night the hens went into their plastic coop, but one night, as my sister later relayed, several of them managed to flee into the

uppermost branches of a tree in their yard. She had to chase them around in the dark for what seemed like an eternity, so intent they were upon staying in danger.

In my story, these imaginary hens escape their coop and have an adventure in the big city. The story began thus: Miffy, Laurel, and Hilary lived in the small backyard of a big house in a big city. Their coop was opened every day, and they had free range in the yard to search for tasty bugs and juicy caterpillars. They often flew up and roosted on the boughs of the big pine tree next to the house—especially when they got tired of being chased and hugged by their small human friends. From the tree branch, they could see into the big house. From high up, they could see over the fence into the neighbor's yard. They could also hear the shouts, whoops, cries, laughs, and bits of conversations about life out in there in the big city. One day, Miffy—she was always the one starting such debates—said to Laurel and Hilary: “What do you suppose it's like out in the big city?” And so off they went, out into the wilds of urban America, encountering curious raccoons, venomous vipers, pensive pigeons, and friendly foxes who share with them how to stay alive in the big, scary, cityscape. Eventually, they return home, safe and sound.

Is it too obvious to say this story is an allegory? That I long to return to the heavenly coop is a simplification. I am not a mere chicken. I yearn for a sense of meaning in my life. Having pursued it in various external titles, roles, and institutions for years, I am on my own now.

There are many ways to deal with suicidal thoughts; the stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues is thankfully disappearing. I also know from other friends and acquaintances, not just myself or suicidal exes, that while so many of us remain depressed, we are not alone in our suffering. We often need other humans to assist us with

getting through the worst of the wave of crisis. Other times, we are being called to connect with our purpose. The Quaker theologian Parker Palmer writes about his depression in *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*—the title itself giving away the key to healing—and connects our ability to hear and thus speak the truth of our selves with maintaining our mental health.

My dad used to tell jokes around the dinner table. Here's one I remember: A man goes to a psychiatrist and explains that he thinks he is chicken feed. They work together for months until finally, the man comes to understand that he is not chicken feed. Just as he's saying goodbye, he says, "Wait, Doc, I have one last question. I know that I'm not chicken feed. You know that I'm not chicken feed, but what about the chickens?"

When do we label ourselves something like "suicidal"? Once you tell someone that you've had thoughts of suicide, they never look at you the same way again. After my formative experience in the military where I was constantly overworked, muscle fatigued, sleep-deprived, harassed, and pushed over the threshold into suicidal ideation (all without deploying!), I learned to be wary of having everything taken from me or "giving my all." It still happens that things become too much, but I remain protective of my internal and external resources, most importantly my soul resources. I try to avoid situations where I might be stuck in a situation that I do not desire; I always have an escape route. My life depends upon it.

Rudolf Steiner also said, in the same lecture given in Berlin almost 100 years ago, quite helpfully that the Gods protect those unprepared for what lies on the other side of the threshold of the visible world by giving us pleasure and enjoyment in creative activity in the physical world. So here I stay, on the haptic side of the line of consciousness and immateriality: writing, eating, and when possible, making merry. Besides writing out the truths of my life and turning hives into literary hay, I've learned to let the imaginary

chickens save my life. Creatively sending the hens out on adventures or calling them home to roost again. Just getting to the other side can be enough. This is an attitude that Victor Frankl would endorse.

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.”

*

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 hentai 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."

*

"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.

*

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.

*

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.

*

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.

*

"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.

New Fiction by L.W. Smolen: “Dirty-Rotten”



Where mom and dad and me used to live in the Haight, from the brush in the empty lot across his street, with a BB gun, I shot a big, scary German Shepherd guard dog – right in his gonats. Wasn't my gun. Was a big-kids' dare. The oldest one told me, "You're just a dweeb fourth-grader. His tail's always in the way. Only time you can get him's when he lifts his leg to pee. You'll get two, three seconds and that's it." So I held my fire. I waited for the Shepherd to pee, and I got him! One shot. They went, "Jeeze! The kid did it!"

I don't know what I thought would happen when I shot the Shepherd. It yiped and yiped and skidded all around on its rear. I dropped the gun and I ran. Could hear the dog blocks away. It was awful. The big kids knew where I lived and they told my mom. Said I stole their gun.

They took 'em both – the Shepherd's owners did – both his gonats. The Shepherd never charged his fence or growled or barked after that – just wagged and smiled and let me pet him sweet – like he never knew it was me shot him. Like he never knew at all – just smiled and wagged, but always wanted me in particular to pet him and let him lick my hand. Nobody else. Just me. He never acted like he knew what hit him, but it was like forgiveness anyhow – forgiveness I never deserved on the dark side of the moon.

Later, coupla times, I brought the Shepherd special gizzard treats and he used to go nuts and spring his front paws up on top of his fence double-happy and smile to see me just like he knew the way how dogs know and do things, like he knew how my heart was hurting – like he knew all along I shot him.

After a while, I couldn't stand it. Couldn't look him in the eye. Couldn't stand – didn't deserve his happy dog-love – my false, trigger-happy truth stuck festering inside me.

Finally, I quit going even down that street. The big kids said I was a jerk for taking the dare and called me a dirty rotten, little gonat-snatcher twirp and worse – and it's all true.

New Poetry from D.A. Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”

New Poetry from DA Gray: “Cactus Tuna”; “We Return from the Holy Land. God Stays”; and “Reverse Run”