

Peter Molin's "Strike Through the Mask!": American Veterans and the Ukrainian Crisis



Bordentown is a pleasant town located on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River about twenty miles north of Philadelphia. For a small town, Bordentown has seen a fair amount of history and notable residents. Clara Barton lived there for a while, as did Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Joseph. Most famously, Thomas Paine, the British author and friend to the American and French Revolutions, bought a home in Bordentown in 1782 and lived there on-and-off until his death in 1809. Paine is sometimes called "the father of the American Revolution" for his writing and active support of the American cause. His 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* stated the American case against England's King George III clearly and persuasively and so helped galvanize the American will to fight for independence. Later in 1776, another Paine essay, titled "American Crisis" contained the famous words:

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.

I don't live far from Bordentown, and occasionally visit it in the course of daily life. So it was on a Sunday afternoon this past February that I arrived in town to find the downtown square packed with people assembled to honor the memory of Peter Reed, a Bordentown native and former Marine who had recently been killed in Ukraine aiding the resistance against the Russian invasion. I had read of Reed's death earlier in the week, but had not noted the Bordentown connection. Given

my own sympathy for Ukraine and interest in the lives of veterans, it seemed a fortuitous coincidence, or even a matter of fate, that I happened upon the ceremony held in Reed's honor.

From the spoken remarks, it was clear that Reed was well-liked and admired, and also a guy cut from a different cloth. Speakers remembered Reed fondly as a good guy, but also something of a joker. One story was that he had streaked through the new local high school in the days before it opened, christening it in his way to the delight of friends who cheered him on. Another speaker told of how Reed had filled her car interior with wadded-up newspapers in a friendly show of prankster one-upmanship. Every speaker noted Reed's desire for adventure, to help, and to serve—impulses revealed in service in the Marines as a medic and culminating in stints as an NGO providing medical aid in Mosul and then in Ukraine. This impression is corroborated by a reminiscence published in the Guardian by an author who had worked with Reed in Mosul helping fight ISIS: "Pete was one of the most selfless people I've ever met. You should know a bit about the good he did in this world."

While I listened to the speakers at Peter Reed's memorial, I did not hear mention of Thomas Paine. Maybe I missed it. Maybe the speakers thought it a stretch to invoke his name in connection with Reed's sacrifice on behalf of Ukraine, or they didn't know how. For myself, I greatly admire Paine in his time as a man who combined striking writing ability, political acumen and righteousness, and courageous service in the field. As I listened to the speakers in Bordentown, I came to admire Reed in his time as a man who, like Paine, was possessed by an unwavering sympathy for people fighting against tyrannical government.

Reed, as far as I know, was not a man of the pen, as was Paine, but he was just one of a number of American military veterans who have volunteered to fight on the side of Ukraine.

Early on, the most prominent of these has been James Vazquez, a former Marine whose Twitter dispatches from the frontlines described in vivid detail the action and emotional caliber of the war. No doubt Vazquez's model inspired other vets to volunteer, either through admiration or envy.

But more recently, Vazquez's claims to prior combat experience have been discredited, and doubt has been cast on the verity of his reportage from Ukraine. Unfortunately, other articles have also portrayed some American vets in Ukraine as thrill-seekers, or as not having much to offer, as seeking profit, or as having little stomach for the long fight. Several veterans and the organizations with which they are affiliated have become ensnared in legal and financial turbulence that besmirch the good names of the participants and which suggest their utility, even at best, has been marginal.

Such articles are necessary, for the complete picture is important to understand. But in our overheated political times, they also seem motivated by an instinct to discredit the Ukrainian cause and undermine support for it in America. From my vantage point as chronicler of Iraq and Afghanistan literature, art, and movies, I've been most intrigued by the accounts of Ukraine written by veterans of the GWOT art-and-literary scene. My sense that these men (all men that I know of, so far) have much to offer in terms of insight and expertise and possess the capacity to write shrewdly and in-detail about their experiences. In short, I trust them—not that their ideas are conclusive, but that their words are sturdy start-points from which my own thoughts develop.

Three writers in particular have published long trenchant articles that weigh their observations about American vets in Ukraine in light of their own war-and-military experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan: Elliot Ackerman, Luke Mogelson, and Matt Gallagher. Another, Adrian Bonenberger, the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*, has spoken at length about support for Ukraine on a recent podcast.

Ackerman, a former Marine and now a novelist and journalist, has written frequently about Ukraine for high-profile media outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Time*. Ackerman's articles often address policy and strategy, but my favorites have been those that describe scenes and people. Ackerman's portrait of soldiers already in the fight or moving to the fight, refracted through his own thoughts about the allure of war, are brooding and evocative, never more so than in an article published in the literary journal *Sewanee Review* titled "Four Letters from Ukraine." The passage below renders Ackerman's talent for scene-setting:

The driver nodded glumly. We piled our bags in his trunk, and he sped us through town to the hotel I'd booked on Expedia a week before. It never ceases to amaze me that you can e-book your rooms in a war zone. Wars can often feel to me like distant, far-off things, even though I have experience writing about them and fighting in them. With a war I've never seen, I usually feel this distance. The stream of headlines, the assault of images—it commodifies war, condenses it into a packageable story. When I feel that distance—whether I'm planning to head to that war or not—I'll often pull out my phone and see what it would take to get to the front line. In nearly every instance, I discover I could arrive at the war with a place to stay within twenty-four hours. And suddenly, the war feels closer.

Later, Ackerman ruminates directly about the international volunteers he meets in Ukraine:

The effort to rally foreign fighters to Ukraine seems to suffer from an adverse selection problem. Although many are sympathetic to Ukraine's cause, a person must place their life on hold to fight. Typically, this means a person can't have much of a life to begin with. If you have a job, or a family, or myriad other adult commitments, it is likely you can't drop everything and go to Ukraine for an indeterminate amount of time. If you don't have any of these commitments, it might be

for a reason, and perhaps these folks ... aren't the best raw material from which to forge an international legion.

Luke Mogelson is not a vet, but a journalist and fiction-author who often writes about war-related and veteran subjects. His short-story collection *These Heroic, Happy Dead* is one of my favorite collections of GWOT-themed fiction. Even better, his *New Yorker* account of Kurdish fighters in Mosul served as the basis for my favorite post-9/11 war film so far, *Mosul*. Last year, Mogelson traveled to Ukraine to take stock of the international fighters fighting on Ukraine's behalf. A passage from his *New Yorker* article "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine" describes the best and the worst of the new arrivals:

Of the hundreds of foreigners who had been at the facility when it was hit, many had returned to Poland. According to my Canadian friend, this was for the best. Although some of the men had been "legit, values-driven, warrior-mentality" veterans, others were "shit": "gun nuts," "right-wing bikers," "ex-cops who are three hundred pounds." Two people had accidentally discharged their weapons inside his tent in less than a week. A "chaotic" lack of discipline had been exacerbated by "a fair amount of cocaine."

The [recent] attack functioned as a filter....

As the article proceeds, Mogelson describes members of the Ukrainian military International Legion in action on the front-line, to include the precarious experience of trench warfare. At the article's close, he balances the sense of purpose that animates vets to volunteer in Ukraine against the lack of purpose many veterans felt in Iraq and Afghanistan. One vet in particular impresses him:

More than any other foreign volunteer I met, Doc seemed to be genuinely motivated by a conviction that the conflict was "a clear case of right and wrong." I sometimes wondered to what

extent his desire to participate in such an unambiguously just war was connected to his previous military career...

Expanding on that last sentence, Mogelson juxtaposes service in Ukraine with the tenuous displays of gratitude veterans received from Americans for fighting in the Global War on Terror:

I also suspected another appeal in Ukraine for International Legion members. During my lunch with Doc on Andriyivsky Descent, in October, I'd been unexpectedly moved when the old man in the fedora thanked him for his service. I shared Doc's discomfort with similar gestures Stateside, but something here was different. Although the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were transformative for those who fought in them, they had no real impact on most Americans and Europeans. Everyone in Ukraine, by contrast, has been affected by the Russian invasion; everyone has sacrificed and suffered. For some foreign veterans, such a country, so thoroughly reshaped and haunted by war, must feel less alien than home.

Iraq veteran Matt Gallagher and author of the novels *Youngblood* and *Empire City* has published two long articles in *Esquire* about his trips to Ukraine. The first describes a quixotic venture in the company of fellow vet-writers Adrian Bonenberger and Benjamin Busch to train rear-guard Ukrainians in basic infantry skills and tactics. Gallagher possesses the sardonic, anti-authoritarian streak of a humorist, but in this piece the instinct for comic appraisal bumps up against his desire to help and belief in a cause that was no joke whatsoever for the Ukrainians he was training:

Then that lawyer does it again, and again, and again, and then, all at once, he's capable. Because he must be. Every woman and man there said they'll defend their homes if the war comes to western Ukraine. I pray it doesn't, but they'll be ready if those pleas go unheard. During our two weeks together, they gave our group their trust, their commitment.

It's a heavy thing, to pick up a gun in war. The choice, if it does come, belongs to them alone.

Gallagher's sentiments made me think of Thomas Paine's words from "American Crisis":

He who is the author of a war lets loose the whole contagion of hell and opens a vein that bleeds a nation to death.

Gallagher's second piece more directly explores the motives and behavior of American and other international veterans fighting in Ukraine. The article is buried behind a paywall, so you'll have to accept my summary of it, but the title hints at the ambiguities Gallagher discovered: "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine: A Journey Through the Strange, Semiprofessional World of Volunteers and Foreign Fighters Who, One Year Into Russia's Invasion, Are Risking Everything to Defeat the Invaders." Not everything Gallagher describes is reassuring; several volunteers are obviously opportunistic and less than well-behaved. Gallagher is a fervent believer in the Ukraine cause, so he doesn't throw the let's-just-say "colorful" volunteers under the bus. But he's a shrewd observer of the veteran-scene in America, and he doesn't miss that that some of the same dynamics that have driven some American GWOT vets to folly have reemerged in the overseas fighting community:

Everyone's story is different. Everyone's story is a little the same. Certain traits and patterns recur as we meet more volunteers. Most are men, but not all. Many of the younger ones served [in the US military] at the tail end of the war on terror and didn't get the combat experience they'd anticipated or perhaps wanted. Some of the older ones sold their businesses and homes to sustain their work. More than a few are living off military retirement and disability checks. I stop tallying the number of divorces and separations.

Taking stock of this ambivalent portrait, Gallagher lands of the side of the glass being half-full:

One can view this as a bit sad, even pathetic. Or one can regard their coming to Ukraine as an act of courage. Here they are, in another war zone, trying to pay it forward to others, because they believe they still have something to give.

The aforementioned Adrian Bonenberger is a US Army veteran of two tours in Afghanistan and the author of a memoir and short-story collection, as well as the founder of *The Wrath-Bearing Tree*. Bonenberger's wife is Ukrainian, and he has been in-and-out of Ukraine many times over the past decade. As I write, he is back in Ukraine and serving in the Ukrainian military as an advisor. Though he has not yet written at length about his endeavors, we await the time when he does, for it surely will be interesting. In the meantime, a podcast with Paul Rieckhoff offers insight into his motivations and actions. Speaking of his work helping Ukraine prepare for a spring offensive, he states, "Helping them get ready for the offensive was probably going to be the single most useful thing I could do as a democratic citizen, a citizen of the US, a citizen of the democratic world, of the civilized world."

Later in the podcast Bonenberger explains, "The United States invested seven years of time in me. I went to Ranger School, to Long Range Reconnaissance School. I was a platoon leader and executive officer in the 173rd Airborne Brigade. I was an [operations] officer and company commander in 10th Mountain Division. I knew what I had to offer to the Ukrainians...."

How to read Thomas Paine's belief and support for America in light of American veterans fighting today in Ukraine? Is the connection specious? Is it meaningful? Perhaps it's best not to make too much of it. None of the veteran-authors I've described above made 1/100th the impact of Paine in his time, even measured collectively, and the same might be said for the international fighters they describe. Paine's life was not without complication and controversy, both during the American Revolution and afterwards. Today, he is as likely to be as

invoked by the right as by the left as an ideological forebear to contemporary political currents. Roughly stated, conservatives view Paine as a fierce critic of overbearing state authority, contra the more popular understanding of him as an apostle of democracy.

Be all that as it may, given the force with which Paine met the demands of the 1776 moment, less savory particulars and after-events seem secondary. My own thought is that anyone who volunteers to get anywhere close to a war-zone has less regard for convention, propriety, and personal safety than most. For Ukraine to defeat Russia now requires men and women of action first, with talent important, and idealism and commitment factored into the equation in uneven doses.

Also important is the war-of-words that place events in context while guiding readers' thoughts to the fullest appreciation of circumstances. At Peter Reed's memorial ceremony in Bordentown, after friends and family members spoke, a representative from a local Ukrainian Church took the podium. Though not an official emissary, the man spoke with authority and gravitas. "I know the war in Ukraine is a distant one for many Americans, but for us it is life or death. Peter Reed's death fighting for Ukrainian freedom may be difficult for you to understand, but to every Ukrainian he is a hero. Thank you for sending him to us. We know you will never forget him, and neither will we."

Later, re-reading Paine, the Ukrainian's words seemed reflected in this "American Crisis" passage:

It is not a field of a few acres of ground, but a cause, that we are defending, and whether we defeat the enemy in one battle, or by degrees, the consequences will be the same.



Works quoted in this article:

Elliot Ackerman, "Four Letters from Ukraine." *Sewanee Review*, Fall 2022.

Adrian Bonenberger, *Independent Americans with Paul Rieckhoff* podcast. Episode 220, May 2023.

Matt Gallagher, "Notes from Lviv." *Esquire*, March 2022.

Matt Gallagher, "The Secret Weapons of Ukraine." *Esquire*, February 2023.

Luke Mogelson, "Trapped in the Trenches in Ukraine." *The New Yorker*, December 2022.

Cengiz Yar, "My Friend Pete Reed was Killed as He Saved Lives in Ukraine. You Should Know the Good He Did." *The Guardian*, February 2023.

Thomas Paine's writings are easy to find on-line. I also found the following two biographies helpful in understanding his life, work, and times:

Edward G. Gray, *Tom Paine's Iron Bridge: Building a United States*. Norton, 2016.

Harlow G. Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*. DeCapo, 2019.

New Nonfiction by I.S. Berry:

“Math and Other Things I Learned from War”



Numbers don't lie, they say. $2 + 2 = 4$. No matter how you rearrange it; no matter how you solve it. Turn it into subtraction ($4 - 2 = 2$), and it still works. Math's rules are inviolable, unyielding. Particular inputs yield fixed outputs. Even, say, in cases of absolute value, where more than one answer is possible, the results are still finite and consistent.

Then again, numbers can be irrational. Complex. The existence of a mean requires that data fall above or below it. There are exceptions to rules (the commutative property doesn't apply to division); theorems, you realize, rest on assumptions. You start to see that numbers, perhaps, aren't as honest as they appear. Sometimes they trick you. Sometimes they betray you.

Twelve feet was how far the mortar had plunged into the ground of the CIA compound. People said the thud shook every trailer. I was on the other side of the Green Zone and heard about it on my radio. Lucky thing I'd been gone: the mortar had landed behind the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation building, only twenty feet from my trailer, along the path I walked to work every morning. A dud, thankfully: no detonation; no injuries. By the time I returned, workers had buried the unexploded ordnance, blended new soil with the old so thoroughly I could barely see the point of impact. Invisible, as though the thing had never existed—a null set, an imaginary number.

The mortar landing in the neighboring compound a few weeks earlier should've been a warning. But somehow an incursion into our own house seemed different. There were rules, hard-

and-fast-of physics, probability—that all but guaranteed something like this wouldn't happen. That assured us the chances were almost nil.

In November 2004, Iraq was many things: the location of my first tour as a CIA counterterrorist case officer; home to the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates; safe haven for terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi; a sweltering, palm-freckled desert; the most dangerous place on earth. By November 2004, more than 800 American soldiers had been killed in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

At the CIA station in Baghdad, we were trying to track down Zarqawi, but the war kept getting in our way. We couldn't conduct source meetings in the Red Zone. Couldn't do the usual things: eavesdrop in cafés, schmooze on cocktail circuits, dine at strategic restaurants. Couldn't even leave the Green Zone to walk the streets. We were trapped in a fragile green bottle. Five attacks a day. Ten. Twenty. Some in daylight; some in darkness. Some aimed at the center of the Green Zone; some, the fringes. Some victimless; some fatal. An almost infinite number of variables.

Iraq was the place I learned to do math.

Like an alarm, mortar rush hour began most mornings at 0700. I'd open my eyes a fraction, watch the neon green numbers on my small digital clock, guess the seconds before another mortar would launch. Outside, "Big Brother"—the centralized public address system—would broadcast unintelligible instructions from the neighboring U.S. embassy compound. Sometimes—depending on my ratio of fear to exhaustion—I'd drag myself out of bed and run to the bunker outside my trailer. I knew by heart the graffiti inside its concrete slab walls: slogans and drawings that laughed at war, taunted war, ran

from war, tried to make sense of war.

We'd heard stories—of the State Department officer reading in his trailer when an inert rocket pierced the wall; of the Gurkhas, huddled inside a building, killed by a mortar. One station officer confessed that he slept on the bottom bunk, wore body armor to bed, and drank himself to sleep. Others talked of spending the night at the CIA station, which had a sturdy roof and walls. I was arriving at work earlier and staying later.

But amid the hailstorm, nothing had ever struck our compound—which surely meant that nothing could. After all, what good is data if it can't predict outcomes, offer certainty?

There were rules, I'd learned. Mortar attacks were preceded by audible launches (deceptively gentle, like hiccups). Rockets offered little warning—except a high-pitched whistle on close ones—but produced deafening explosions. Car bombs were deeper, more sonorous, lasted longer. If you could hear but not feel a detonation, it was remote. When the ground shook and pebbles sprinkled down, you ran for cover.

Insurgents launched more attacks in warm weather, some at the station postulated. But others countered that wintry air prompted action. Daylight offered insurgents good target visibility and freedom from curfew, but night provided cover. During the occasional rain shower, U.S. military helos couldn't fly and deter attacks. But insurgents' trucks and grip stocks would get stuck in the mud. Everything boiled down to probabilities.

I was doing my own calculations. I didn't condition my hair in the morning: five fewer minutes in the shower meant five fewer minutes under my flimsy trailer roof. Didn't hit the snooze button. It was, we all knew, just a question of out-

calculating the enemy: Master the math and you'd be fine.

Sometimes I chatted about the mortars and rockets with the Military Police on our compound. A few shrapnel-resistant guard booths offered shelter, but the MPs spent most of their time outside, unprotected.

"Shoots," my favorite MP dismissed the threat. "We been noticin' them mortars always go over our compound. Comin' from the other side of Haifa Street. We ain't in their trajectory. Ain't got nuthin' to worry about."

Everyone had a rule. A failsafe equation. Until the dud mortar landed in our compound.

Some four months into my tour, and the sky was gem-blue, translucent. Usually, the air was choked with dust, char, and smoke from explosions and burn pits; at night, stars pulsed through the thick haze like small dying hearts. You never got a sky so rich, so blue.

I'd gone for a long jog. Stripped off my running clothes and turned on the shower. Iraq's first democratic elections had triggered a fleeting and tenuous peace, and the mortars and rockets had temporarily receded, a bully nursing his wounds. The sky was quiet. I didn't know how long it would last, but for now I could condition my hair.

I dropped the bar of soap. My left hand returned to my right breast. A lump. Hard, palpable, so close to the skin it was almost visible.

Naked, dripping wet, I walked to my bed, probed the small mass. The statistics, the calculations, began. I was too young. No one in my family had ever had breast cancer. I didn't smoke. Most lumps were nothing. Worst case scenario, breast cancer had a high cure rate. The odds were all in my

favor. Math, trusty friend: don't fail me this time. Like you did with the mortar.

I palpated my breast and stared at my trailer's thin ceiling. Pairs of Blackhawks descended toward Landing Zone Washington. I wondered if I'd miss their sound when I left. They'd keep coming and going long after a new tenant occupied my small trailer, after I was gone.

On my next home leave, I had a biopsy. The lump was benign. The math hadn't failed me. But I knew the law of averages: eventually, you're bound to land above or below the mean.

1,900? 1,950? How many soldiers had been killed? My yearlong tour was drawing to a close, and the number plagued me. More than double the count when I'd arrived. It couldn't break 2,000 before I left Iraq, I decided: this was my hard-and-fast rule. Every day, like a fanatical horoscope reader, I checked the death count.

One month left in Baghdad and days slowed down, passed in paralyzed motion, as though they were slogging through mud. The math wasn't adding up; 24 hours was longer than 24 hours. Thirty days became sixty, became a hundred, became infinity.

October 25, 2005. Number of American soldiers killed in Iraq: 2,000.

I left a few weeks later.

A week? A month gone by? Writer Graham Greene said, "When you escape to a desert, the silence shouts in your ear." So it was for me. When I escaped Baghdad, the silence was deafening. Leaving war didn't necessarily mean that war had left me, I found.

These days, it's almost clichéd to recite the litany of stumbling blocks upon a return to civilian life—traffic jams, loud noises, big crowds. Some days, just getting out of bed. (Does anyone, in fact, come back from war without these stories?) Often, I stared out the window for hours at a time. Days fell through holes, disappeared like the mortar under the ground, as though they'd never existed.

I moved from my cramped condo in Washington, D.C. to a more spacious, quieter house in the suburbs. It was near Reagan National Airport. At night, sleeping on a mattress on the floor, I could hear airplanes descending. I thanked God they weren't Blackhawks and at the same time wished they were.

It was a degree of luck, I knew, that I'd survived. For others, the math hadn't worked out so well.

I volunteered at Walter Reed Hospital. I delivered care packages to injured and ailing soldiers. My fellow volunteers and I roamed the sterile halls around every major holiday like tooth fairies. The psych ward—the largest in the hospital—was off-limits. Nurses warned us not to put sharp objects in care packages. Even mentally healthy soldiers weren't allowed to have access to instruments of suicide. War had reached every bedpost.

One evening, our charity organized a casino night for the recuperating soldiers: card games and raffles bearing prizes like stereos and computers. My job was to talk to the veterans while they played cards, divine what they wanted in care packages. Every soldier had ideas. They were unflappable, oblivious to their missing arms and legs, the bandages around their heads, the wheelchairs to which they were confined for life. *Shot glasses, robes, candy*, they suggested. Small things made them happy.

As casino night drew to a close, the volunteers assembled on

the stage to announce the grand prize. The soldiers gathered below, excitedly comparing numbers of tickets won and lost. Two men—not more than forty years combined—boasted only one ticket between them, intending to split any prize they won. One had lost his legs and was lying on his stomach, leaning over the stage to grasp half of the precious ticket, while his buddy, in a wheelchair on the floor below, held the other half. They clutched the scrap gleefully like it was a ticket to another world. The odds, I knew, were overwhelmingly against them.

The announcer called the winning number. They'd lost.

I have a complicated relationship with math. Sometimes it's my friend, sometimes my enemy; sometimes reassuring, sometimes brutal and uncaring. Either way, it's here to stay, like a childhood memory or a scar. I still find myself crunching the numbers, often on a daily basis. Anytime I feel death might win.

During the pandemic, I computed the chances of getting COVID from passing someone on my morning jog. How likely was I to die if I got sick? (I was middle-aged, healthy, didn't smoke...my numbers were good.) After getting vaccinated, I calculated the necessity of a mask, the risk of transmission at a restaurant, a concert. How long would it take for my inoculation to wear off? For a booster to kick in?

As I grow older, I get increasingly nervous at doctor appointments. I wonder if the smog of burning trash, ordnance smoke, and other toxins we breathed daily in Baghdad will eventually defeat my body's defenses, warp my cells. If the math will tell me it's my turn. Statistically, I know, I'm at higher risk.

Now I'm a parent, and every time there's a school shooting, the numbers start forming columns on the page. Chances are

small, I tell myself, that it will ever happen to my son. That a school in our district will be the next target. Miniscule probability that it will be my son's school. Half a percent? Quarter percent? His classroom. Surely less than an eighth of a percent. (Right? Don't fail me, math. Please don't fail me on this one.)

Math is my memento from Baghdad. Adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing chances of death, looking for answers and rules and reassurances, something to hold onto in a world that feels every day, in a million ways, like a war. All I can do is hope the numbers are on my side.

New Poetry by Carol Everett Adams: "Rabbit Trails"



THE TEXAS DUST / *image by Amalie Flynn*

RABBIT TRAILS

in the Texas dust. We're flat in the dirt

so we can poke around down there with a long stick,
while above us bullets fly and children

hold up their honor roll certificate shields.

You say blankets are the answer,
and backpacks and better officers and armed teachers

and doors that shut like Vegas vaults to keep your money safe,
keep your money safer than my child.

I forgot what we were talking about.

New Nonfiction by M.C. Armstrong: "Murder Most Foul: The Role of Lyndon Johnson in the Murder of John F. Kennedy"



*What is the truth, and where did it go?
Ask Oswald and Ruby, they oughta know.*

*"Shut your mouth, " said the wise old owl.
Business is business, and it's a murder most foul.*

-Bob Dylan, Murder Most Foul



Doyle Whitehead flew Air Force One on November 22, 1963, the day JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas. Whitehead waited a long time before speaking up about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He enlisted in the Air Force after graduating from Oxford High School in 1954. In 1959, after one of Dwight Eisenhower's Air Force One stewards suffered a heart attack,

Whitehead subbed in and became part of the executive detail. It was while serving on Air Force One that Whitehead came to know Kennedy. Caroline, JFK's daughter, called the steward "Whitey."

"Did you know I have a steward on my plane who went to Oxford?" Whitehead remembers the president teasing on occasion.

"People celebrated on the plane ride back to Washington," Whitehead said in 2016. "They were laughing and talking about 'what we gon do now.' They were so loud we had to shut the door so Jackie wouldn't hear them."[\[i\]](#)

Only hours earlier, Johnson was being investigated for corruption by the Senate Rules Committee.[\[ii\]](#) As recently released evidence reveals, Kennedy was about to drop Johnson from the 1964 ticket.[\[iii\]](#) Thus, flying back to DC, drinking nearly a fifth of Cutty Sark whiskey on the way, LBJ had reason to celebrate. His job was secure. And as President of the United States, he now possessed control of the investigation into the murder of JFK.

The Radioactive Belief

In 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic, the Nobel Prize-winning songwriter Bob Dylan released "Murder Most Foul," a seventeen-minute ballad about the death of President Kennedy. Many writers reported on the song's length and surprise surge to the top of the Billboard charts. But Richard Eskow wrote, "most commentators tiptoed around the true news value: a major cultural icon has boldly given voice to a widely held but professionally radioactive belief: that John F. Kennedy was killed, not by the lone nut, Lee Harvey Oswald, but as part of a plot that was tantamount to a coup d'etat."[\[iv\]](#) Is America finally ready to have an adult conversation about this "radioactive belief"?

It is time to reclaim the narrative of the Kennedy

assassination from the propaganda machine Lyndon Johnson catalyzed when he commissioned the Warren Report, the official government version of the JFK assassination. Johnson played a hand in the murder of President Kennedy and America needs to reckon with what this means for our democracy. To be sure, we must be careful when handling the reputation of a public figure, especially one like Johnson whose presidential achievements in civil rights tie his story to so many others. But America is a deeply divided country whose democracy is in danger. The post-truth moment we find ourselves in will not go away by continuing to dance around the history of the coup in Dallas.

Dylan writes, in "Murder Most Foul," that "We'll mock you and shock you and put it in your face/We've already got someone here to take your place."[\[v\]](#) But who was the "we" and what was Johnson's role in the conspiracy? In November of 2022, longtime JFK assassination researcher Jefferson Morley asked on Twitter, "What's the evidence tying LBJ to the crime or to Oswald? I don't know of any."[\[vi\]](#) Morley is not alone in viewing the LBJ theory as a hidden history. But there is a mountain of evidence hiding in plain sight to indict Johnson and demonstrate that he was the mastermind of the coup.



Nobody but Johnson had the means, motive and opportunity to kill Kennedy, and those who knew LBJ left behind a trail of transactions, confessions, and forensic evidence. As members of Kennedy's Secret Service acknowledged after the murder, there were multiple conspiracies to kill JFK in the fall of 1963, such as one in Chicago just a month before Dallas.[\[vii\]](#) To pull off a coordinated attack against a formidable security apparatus required a command of the police on federal, state, and local levels. The fact that the successful plot finally played out in Johnson's home state of Texas is no coincidence. We cannot comprehend Johnson's role in the plot without

understanding the network of supporters he cultivated from his earliest years as a Congressman from Texas, among these being Herman Brown, Johnson's number one source of money. Johnson's "power base," in historian Robert Caro's words, "wasn't his congressional district, it was Herman Brown's bank account . . . His power was simply the power of money." [\[viii\]](#) To understand Johnson's part in the killing of Kennedy, we must map the finances and motives of the men who depended on Johnson's access to Washington. Among these were three key figures: Herman Brown, the oilman D.H. Byrd and Ed Clark, Johnson's attorney and a former lawyer for Brown and Root. The story of the Kennedy assassination is the map of Texas power. The "we" Dylan describes in his song is the bipartisan war industry that depended on Johnson for their work, both at home and abroad.

Forensic Evidence & CIA Confessions

Dylan's "we" suggests that the Warren Commission's official story of a lone nut assassin was a myth and that there was a second shooter stationed atop a slope of grass in Dealey Plaza. The songwriter sings, "Put your head out the window, let the good times roll/There's a party going on behind the grassy knoll." [\[ix\]](#) Twenty-first century scholarship supports Dylan, revealing that the decisive headshot from frame 313 of the Zapruder film was, in fact, from an angle consistent with the location of the grassy knoll. In a 2001 issue of *Science and Justice*, a quarterly from Britain's Forensic Science Society, a government researcher named D.B. Thomas claimed that there was more than a ninety-six percent certainty that the infamous headshot came from the front right of JFK's limousine and, more specifically, from the grassy knoll, not the Texas School Book Depository. [\[x\]](#) Thomas' article, supported by Josiah Thompson's 2021 study, *Last Second in Dallas*, refutes the Warren Commission's 1964 "lone nut" theory and affirms the findings of the 1978 House Select Committee on Assassinations who argued the president's murder was most

likely the “result of a conspiracy.”[\[xi\]](#)

✘ The power of *Last Second in Dallas* is a function of Thompson’s methodology “that ignores the sexy and elusive” question of “whodunnit?”[\[xii\]](#) Like the scholarship of D.B. Thomas, Thompson takes us back to the fundamental questions of forensic data such as “Were there multiple shooters?” and “Where did the shots come from?” By focusing rigorously on the forensic analysis, Thompson creates a firm foundation for investigators to now concern themselves with the question of culpability. The answer, in line with the work of researchers like James W. Douglass, Gaeton Fonzi, Oliver Stone, and David Talbot is that the CIA, using Cuban and mafia assets, murdered JFK, with Allen Dulles playing a key hand.

✘

But we must now go one step further and share the big open secret in Texas: Lyndon Johnson sat at the top of the plot’s chain of command. Johnson, Kennedy’s Vice-President, ordered the hit and, through his attorney, Ed Clark, played a decisive role in the orchestration of both the assassination and the cover-up.

✘

To prove this point, we must step behind the curtain of attorney-client privilege. Barr McClellan, who was the father of Scott McClellan, the press secretary for George W. Bush, was employed by the Johnson administration (National Labor Relations Board and Federal Power Commission) and served as a Johnson attorney from 1966 through 1971, working under Ed Clark and Don Thomas at Clark, Thomas and Winters. For decades, McClellan maintained a silence consistent with the code of confidentiality that attends lawyer-client relations. However, like Whitehead, McClellan felt an obligation to tell the truth before it was too late. In 2003, forty years after the murder of the President, McClellan wrote *Blood, Money, &*

Power: How LBJ Killed JFK. What McClellan's book reveals is a man who was an eyewitness to history and intimately understood why Johnson had Kennedy murdered: to end a government investigation into Johnson's corruption. In 1973, the same year LBJ died, Don Thomas confessed to McClellan the firm's role in the assassination and that Ed Clark was the figure who planned the hit. McClellan writes, "Edward A. Clark, attorney at law, Johnson's right-hand man and the only man he trusted, was the key man in the scheme that culminated in Dallas on November 22, 1963."[\[xiii\]](#) McClellan's book investigates Johnson's hand in the assassination, Johnson's theft of the 1948 Senatorial race (Don Thomas stuffed the ballot box in Precinct 13), and also explores LBJ's relationship with Malcolm "Mac" Wallace, whom McClellan claims was responsible, at Johnson's behest, for the 1961 murder of government investigator Henry Marshall. McClellan writes that Johnson was a "psychopath" and capable of murder and that the Wallace case offers precedent for the murder of JFK.[\[xiv\]](#) Recent scholarship from Jeremy Kuzmarov supports the claim that Johnson had plotted other murders before Kennedy's. McClellan, in his book and Kuzmarov in his article, "Was LBJ A Serial Killer Who Advanced His Career by Murdering 6 Other Men Who Stood in His Way?", both reveal a nexus of Texas corruption ("Bubba justice") that resonates with this student of the Iraq war under Bush and Cheney.[\[xv\]](#) But before the Kellogg, Brown, and Root that regulated the burn pits of the Global War on Terror, there was the Brown and Root that served Lyndon Johnson and his corporate partners in Vietnam.



McClellan points readers toward a "money trail" that shows contracts at risk before November 22, 1963, and contracts secured after the assassination. On January 17, 1963, John F. Kennedy proposed the repeal of the famous "oil depletion allowance," a revision to the tax code that would have cost Texas oilmen up to \$300 million a year.[\[xvi\]](#) In addition to

documenting these provocatively progressive policies from Kennedy, McClellan goes beyond circumstantial evidence and delivers forensic data that places the fingerprint of Wallace, Johnson's henchman, on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository on the day of Kennedy's murder. Furthermore, the Wallace print has now traveled through a blind submission peer-review process and has been confirmed by two independent researchers, including Interpol print examiners in Paris, France. [\[xvii\]](#)

The Wallace print is significant and so is the precedent of the Marshall case. In 1961, Henry Marshall was himself investigating Johnson and another LBJ aide, Billy Sol Estes. Wallace, implicated in Marshall's murder, was spotted at the Texas School Depository on November 22, 1963, by a Chickasaw Indian named Loy Factor who claimed that he himself—Factor—was part of the kill team. Factor's statement and Wallace's fingerprint in "the sniper's nest," places Johnson's key fixer at the scene of the crime. But Whitehead and McClellan's disclosures, Factor's eyewitness account, and Wallace's fingerprint (available for viewing in the National Archive) do not close the case of the Kennedy assassination. No single data point does. As Jim Marrs, the author of *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, writes, "when it comes to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, don't trust any one source." [\[xviii\]](#) Let it be clear: McClellan is not the only witness indicting Johnson. So let the story now turn to corroboration from participants in the coup: E. Howard Hunt and David Morales.

Famous for his role in the Watergate break-in, Hunt was also a novelist and screenwriter, as well as a friend of former CIA Director, Allen Dulles. Hunt, who died on January 23, 2007, admitted to being a "benchwarmer" on the CIA team that murdered JFK. [\[xix\]](#) Hunt's testimony, published on the pages of *Rolling Stone* and *Wired* in 2007, can also be located in his son Saint John's 2008 memoir, *Bond of Secrecy*. [\[xx\]](#) In the map

of the hit that he provided to Saint John, Hunt places the name "LBJ" at the top of "the chain of command." Beneath LBJ is a CIA agent named "Cord Meyer," a man whose estranged wife, Mary, was a mistress of JFK and was herself murdered less than a year after the president. In addition to this "chain of command" map, Hunt provides a timeline for a plot that begins in 1962 and includes the names of CIA agents Marita Lorenz, David Atlee Phillips, and David Morales. Lorenz, Phillips, and Morales, separately, claimed Kennedy's death was a CIA hit, but Morales went further, arguing, like Hunt, that Johnson approved the plot. [\[xxi\]](#)[\[xxii\]](#) Even more than this, "According to his lawyer, Robert Walton, Morales revealed that he [Morales] was involved in *both* Kennedy assassinations." [\[xxiii\]](#) Yes, Morales' and Hunt's story point straight at the man McClellan accused and the same man Whitehead heard laughing and celebrating on November 22, 1963: Lyndon Johnson.

"Business is business": The Money Trail

Clare Boothe Luce, former Congresswoman and the wife of Henry Luce, the media magnate who founded *Time*, *Life*, *Fortune* and countless other mainstream media publications, knew a thing or two about power and propaganda. On the way to JFK's inaugural ball in 1961, Luce asked the new Vice-President, Lyndon Johnson, if he minded being relegated to the number two spot. She asked Johnson to "come clean."

"Clare," Johnson replied, "I looked it up. One out of every four presidents has died in office. I'm a gamblin' man, darlin', and this is the only chance I've got." [\[xxiv\]](#)

If Johnson rolled the dice and was indeed the figure at the top of the chain of command for the assassination of JFK, why should we care, now that both men are dead? Sixty years later, what does this story tell us about contemporary America where this is still so much talk of coups, corruption, and treason? In order to comprehend government corruption we have to understand how corporate power captures government agencies

and assets. We cannot fully fathom the means and motives of Johnson without understanding America's permanent war party, the ongoing bipartisan social network of politicians and their clients in the military-industrial community. In order to contextualize the killing of Kennedy, we have to study the city and state of "The Big Event," as the CIA called the assassination.[\[xxv\]](#) If Johnson ordered "The Big Event," and Clark and the CIA orchestrated the logistics and Brown was one of Johnson's primary financial backers, who in Dallas facilitated the placement of Lee Harvey Oswald in the Texas School Book Depository?

In 2021, the year after Dylan released "Murder Most Foul" and the same year Thompson published *Last Second in Dallas*, the historian H.P. Albarelli published a posthumous book called *Coup in Dallas*. Based on the 1963 datebook of CIA operative, Jean Pierre Lafitte, *Coup in Dallas* offers readers a primary document that maps the cast behind "The Big Event." On November 23, 1963, Lafitte writes, "Rene says, 'Coup de grace.'[\[xxvi\]](#) "Rene" was the name of Lafitte's wife, the woman who gave Albarelli the datebook. Rene Lafitte once remarked, "Dallas, ah goodness, I'm not sure what to say . . . I wasn't there anywhere near as often as Pierre . . . not at all. But Pierre would say it was . . . Dallas was like the arms and legs of the American secret service, your CIA."[\[xxvii\]](#) Albarelli's book shines a light on the major players in the coup and pays particular close attention to Johnson's friend, D.H. Byrd.



Other than C.I.A allegations, eyewitness accounts, and the fingerprint of Mac Wallace, how else do we answer Jefferson Morley's question and connect Oswald to Johnson? The answer is David Harold "Dry Hole" Byrd, the military subcontractor, Texas oilman, and founder of the Civil Air Patrol, to which Oswald belonged as a teenager. Incidentally, Byrd also owned

the building that contained the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald was employed on the day of the assassination. Byrd was a crony of Johnson and once said, "Sam Rayburn, Morrie Shepard, John Connally, and Lyndon Johnson on the national scene were to become men I could go to anytime that I wanted action, and so were a succession of Texas governors."[\[xxviii\]](#) Like Brown, Byrd knew Johnson personally, stood to profit greatly from a Johnson presidency, and, likewise, stood to absorb substantial losses if the oil depletion allowance was allowed to expire or if Johnson went to prison. We may never know for sure whether Oswald was a whistleblower, CIA double-agent, or "patsy" (as he claimed on TV), but what is now irrefutable is the fact that there were multiple shooters and that on November 22, 1963, Oswald was working in the building Byrd had purchased just the year before and where a fingerprint of Johnson's fixer, Mac Wallace, was discovered by police.[\[xxix\]](#)

McClellan, Byrd, Clark, Hunt, Factor, Wallace, and Morales all tie Johnson to Kennedy's killing. McClellan claimed that Johnson's attorney, Ed Clark, was horrified when Oswald wasn't murdered after the assassination but was instead arrested and allowed to speak on TV and declare he—Oswald—was a "patsy."[\[xxx\]](#) McClellan provided his colleague's confession and Wallace's fingerprint as evidence to connect Johnson to the crime of the century, but also insisted that researchers follow the money trail of Johnson's social network in order to witness foreknowledge of the plot. Nowhere is the advance intelligence more apparent than in the pre-assassination stock trades of Byrd and his associate at Ling-TEMCO-Vought (LTV), James Ling, former employer of Mac Wallace. LTV, perhaps the inspiration for "Vought International" from the Dynamite Comic series, was one of the largest engineering and manufacturing conglomerates in the United States in 1963. Like with Brown and Root, the profits of Vought went through the roof in the years after JFK's murder. Right before the assassination, Ling and Byrd, through an investment vehicle called the Alpha-Omega

Corporation, “purchased 132,600 shares of LTV stocks for around \$2 million.”[\[xxxii\]](#) LTV was responsible for developing a number of planes and weapons that were used during the Vietnam War. According to Albarelli, the “\$2 million investment by Byrd/Ling was worth \$26 million by 1967.”[\[xxxiii\]](#) As Johnson reversed the Kennedy policy of withdrawal from Vietnam and the war progressed, LTV “would consistently be among the top-ten aerospace companies in dollar volume of prime contracts.”[\[xxxiiii\]](#) Which is to say, Byrd got rich off the coup in Dallas, and so did Clark and Brown of Brown and Root, later renamed KBR. Lyndon Johnson was the savior of the military-industrial complex. So much depended on that day in Dallas.

“Lyndon Johnson Did It”

Critics might reasonably ask, “Where are the stories of the marginalized?” in the history of the Kennedy assassination? How do we summon the voices of the millions dead in Vietnam? We can’t possibly tell the tales of all the people around the world who were impacted by Kennedy’s murder. But perhaps some small measure of justice can be achieved by listening to four American citizens whose stories have been muted by the media. So, let us turn here in the end to Abraham Bolden, Evelyn Lincoln, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Dorothy Kilgallen.

On April 26, 2022, President Biden pardoned Bolden, a man JFK called “the Jackie Robinson of the Secret Service,” which is to say the first Black Secret Service agent to serve on White House detail. Bolden was hired by Kennedy and then later challenged Johnson and the Warren Commission with Secret Service evidence of conspiracies to kill Kennedy prior to the release of the Warren Report.[\[xxxiv\]](#) Was Bolden rewarded for his bravery? No. Like so many who came after him, Bolden was attacked for telling the truth and on May 18, 1964, Bolden was thrown in prison for bribery, conspiracy, and obstruction of justice.



Bolden committed a narrative violation. Decades before Snowden, Assange, Hale and Manning, Bolden blew the whistle on the military-industrial complex. He told the truth. For sixty years, Bolden claimed he had been framed by the very government he took an oath to serve. He has stated to this writer and others that he heard Johnson threaten both Kennedy brothers while serving in the White House.[\[xxxv\]](#) In the twenty-first century, Bolden has been forceful about his analysis of the killing: “[T]he assassination of the president went to the highest position of government,” he said in a 2018 interview. “There was a coup to take him [Kennedy] out of power.”[\[xxxvi\]](#) Like “many in the DFS” (Mexican CIA), Bolden’s investigation of the murder points to “the highest position in government.”[\[xxxvii\]](#) But for a long time, Bolden, author of *The Echo from Dealey Plaza*, has been ignored by America’s mainstream media. Fortunately, with the help of journalists, President Biden heard Bolden’s story before it was too late. In January of 2022, Mary Mitchell, writing in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, published an editorial in which she wrote, “While Bolden’s life story might seem like a conspiracy theory to some, Black Americans will identify with the brand of injustice that buries its victims under false accusations and legal documents.”[\[xxxviii\]](#) Mitchell’s voice, amplifying Bolden’s, was legitimated by Biden, the man who now keeps a bust of Robert F. Kennedy in the Oval Office and is currently being challenged by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. for the 2024 Democratic nomination.



Perhaps part of RFK Jr.’s challenge to Biden has something to do with Biden’s refusal to go all the way in the story of Kennedy’s uncle. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., whose career and campaign platform focuses on government corruption and agency capture, may be the only American capable of compelling Biden

to open the assassination archives. Certainly, others are trying. In October of 2022, The Mary Ferrell Foundation sued the Biden administration for once again postponing the release of the JFK files.[\[xxxix\]](#) In December of 2022, the Biden administration ordered the release of more than 13,000 records, but caved to the CIA's appeal to maintain the redaction of more than 4,000 others.[\[xl\]](#) Why does the censorship persist? Is this just institutional protection or is something else at play? And beyond the redaction and withholding of documents, why does the American media refuse to listen to the people closest to this case? What did Evelyn Lincoln, Kennedy's secretary and a passenger in the motorcade, say at the time of the assassination and how did Jackie Kennedy, covered in the blood of her dead husband, view the crime she witnessed?

Lincoln, who was fifty-four on the day of the murder, visited JFK's grave every year on November 22nd. On the plane ride back from Dallas, the same flight where Whitehead overheard Johnson celebrating, Lincoln wrote down a list of suspects. At the top of her list was the same name at the top of Hunt's deathbed chain of command: "Lyndon."[\[xli\]](#) Was Lincoln the only one on Air Force One who felt she was travelling with the architect of a coup?

No.

Jackie Kennedy knew what many in DC knew about her husband's relationship with both LBJ and Allen Dulles. She knew that her husband loathed the Vice-President and that the ex-head of the CIA resented her husband after JFK fired Dulles subsequent to the disastrous failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Did Jackie see the pictures in the *Chicago Tribune* on August 15th, 1963, three months before her husband's murder, revealing Dulles meeting with LBJ at the Vice-President's ranch? Did she ever come to find out that Dulles, who kept a meticulous datebook, left that particular encounter with LBJ off the

record?[\[xlii\]](#) We may never know the answer to these questions, but we do know that on November 22, 1963, Jackie Kennedy was an eyewitness to a crime that traumatized her, her family, her nation, and countless others beyond America's borders. We also know that Jackie, like her brother-in-law, Robert F. Kennedy, suspected a conspiracy from the very beginning.

RFK once famously said, "If the American people knew the truth about Dallas, there would be blood in the streets."[\[xliii\]](#) Jackie Kennedy knew there was a conspiracy. She was caught in the crossfire. Hours after the assassination, while aboard Air Force One with Whitehead and Johnson, she considered her grisly appearance. "My whole face was splattered with blood and hair. I wiped it off with a Kleenex," she said. But then, "one second later I thought why did I wash the blood off? I should have left it there, let them see what they've done."[\[xliv\]](#) Jackie knew from the start that her husband's murder was the work of more than one lone communist nut bar. Her pronoun was "they."

But Jackie went further.

According to Whitehead, after the assassination Johnson and his cronies were laughing and celebrating within earshot of the widow and were so out of hand that Whitehead had to hide Jackie away. Perhaps keeping this woman in the dark seemed an act of mercy in the moment, a gesture of compassion on behalf of "Whitey." But the truth has a way of getting through those doors men close to protect women. No one was closer to the crime of the century than Jackie Kennedy. No one had a better seat for what Dylan called "the greatest magic trick ever under the sun."[\[xlv\]](#) In the singer Eddie Fisher's memoir, *Been There, Done That*, Fisher describes his relationship with Pamela Turnure, the press secretary for Jackie Kennedy at the time of the assassination. "On the flight back," Fisher writes, "Pam told me, Jackie told her, 'Lyndon Johnson did it.' Words I'll never forget."[\[xlvi\]](#) Those words, like Bolden's, Factor's, Hunt's, Lincoln's, McClellan's, Morales',

Whitehead's and so many others, cannot stand alone. In this essay, however, they find accord. In closing, they stand here with the voices of Dorothy Kilgallen and Jack Ruby.

In "Murder Most Foul," Dylan sings, "What is the truth and where did it go? Ask Oswald and Ruby, they oughta know." [xlvi] Dorothy Kilgallen did ask Jack Ruby, the man who murdered Oswald on national television. Who was this fearless journalist who dared to question her government's official narrative? According to Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Kilgallen was "the greatest female writer in the world." [xlvi] Kilgallen, in the final years of her short life, worked as a crime reporter and was about to publish a book about the Kennedy killing. But Kilgallen died on November 8, 1965, just before she could deliver the pages of *Murder One* to her publisher at Random House, Bennet Cerf. [xlix] However, history has documented that Kilgallen's quest for the truth was focused on Ruby. Kilgallen attended the Ruby trial and was the only journalist granted a private interview.



Dorothy Kilgallen, journalist

In February of 1964, Kilgallen wrote, "It appears Washington knows or suspects something about Lee Harvey Oswald that it does not want Dallas and the rest of the world to know or suspect." Kilgallen told her closest friends that her Ruby disclosures would "blow the JFK case sky high." [l] But then, at the age of fifty-two, Kilgallen died of an "accidental overdose" of alcohol and barbiturates. Was she murdered because she knew too much? We may never know. But what the historical record can provide, even though her book and notes have disappeared, is the voice of Jack Ruby, the key to the Kennedy assassination, according to Kilgallen.

In a letter he sent to a friend while in jail, Ruby wrote: "I am counting on you to save this country a lot of bloodshed. As soon as you get out you must read Texan looks at Lyndon

(reference to a book called *A Texan Looks at Lyndon* by J. Everett Haley), and it may open your eyes to a lot of things. This man is a Nazi in the worst order.”[\[li\]](#) Yes, Jack Ruby knew that Johnson was corrupt and part of the plot. Ruby shot Oswald to protect the cover story. Jack Ruby didn’t kill Lee Harvey Oswald out of love for JFK and he certainly didn’t do it out of love for the man he calls “a Nazi.” This pattern of focusing on LBJ can be further located in Ruby’s testimony to the Warren Commission and the videos of his brief exchanges with reporters.

“I wish that our beloved President Lyndon Johnson would have delved deeper into the situation,” Ruby said to the Warren Commission, but the Commission never granted Ruby his request to leave Texas and travel to DC where he felt he could tell the truth.[\[lii\]](#) So Ruby continued to hammer on the president in later interviews.

“The people that have had so much to gain and had such an ulterior motive for putting me in the position I’m in will never let the true facts come above board to the world,”[\[liii\]](#) Ruby said. When asked by a reporter to elaborate, Ruby who was himself about to die in 1967 (right after winning an appeal for a new trial), said, “I want to correct what I said before about the Vice-President.” He then continued. “When I mentioned about Adlai Stevenson, if he were Vice-President, there would have never been an assassination of our beloved President Kennedy.” The reporter asked Ruby to “explain again.”

“Well,” Ruby said. “The answer is the man in office right now.”[\[liv\]](#)

“[T]he man in office right now,” in 1965 when the interview with Jack Ruby took place, was Lyndon Johnson, the architect of the Vietnam War and the man Ruby characterized as a Nazi. Ruby’s response here gives the reader a sense of why Kilgallen was so excited about publishing her book, *Murder One*.

Kilgallen's voice, however, was never heard. Like Ruby and so many witnesses in this case, Kilgallen died a premature death. But here, alongside Jackie Kennedy and Evelyn Lincoln, we can see that the women closest to this case all came to the same conclusion. Cumulatively, as a people's history, the story these women tell aligns with the arguments of JFK's Secret Service, LBJ's attorneys, and the CIA agents who were part of the hit team. Their voices, revealed as Bob Dylan's chorus in this space, support contemporary peer-reviewed scholarship and its thesis of conspiracy. John F. Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, was murdered by his successor, Lyndon Johnson, in a coup d'etat, an act where the means and motive were one and the same: power.



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For More Information

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Patrick Bet-David, Interviewing David Bolden: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHEX8DZQ160>

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[ii] Cabell Phillips, "Major Political Scandal Looming in the Bobby Baker Case," *The New York Times*, January 25, 1964, 146.

[iii] Lew Powell, "VP Sanford? How Serious Was JFK?" *NC Miscellany: Exploring the History, Literature, and Culture of the Tar Heel State*, September 17, 2020.

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New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: "American Fapper 2: Still Fappin'"



I know what you're thinking. What could this story possibly be about. Let me catch you up.

First of all, you're wondering whether I shot Angela's kid or

Angela. The answer is: I shot neither. I shot a jihadist who spotted me. The next half hour was a blur of sniping, shooting, and explosions. Here's how it ended: me bursting into Angela's room and disarming her. I don't remember many details about what happened to get me there, but I remember quite clearly what happened when I entered her bedroom. She tried to shoot me with her AK, it missed, and I wrenched it out of her hands. She tried to attack me with her fists, and I held her by her arms.

"Angela, it's me," I said, pausing her furious assault, but sparking no recognition in her blue eyes. I removed my helmet like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. "It's your neighbor, from high school. I'm here to rescue you."

In fact I had been sent there to kill her, but the plan changed. You'll be happy to know that I made her my wife, and adopted her kids (we weren't able to find her jihadist husband, I heard he joined up with ISIS later, after Angela became my girl). Now they're at Choate, and me and Angela have a couple kids of our own.

Big changes, huh!

This story isn't about Iraq, though—not the parts from the first story, or the parts from when I went back to do more sniping in Mosul in 2017. It's not about my happy marriage to Angela either, though that's somewhat relevant. No, this story is about what happened when, after a long and illustrious career, having just retired, through a strange series of coincidences and serendipitous happenings I found myself in Ukraine, fighting against Russia's wicked and immoral invasion.

In Ukraine, where I encountered the greatest test of my life—one that nearly ended me, and from which I emerged triumphant only by the barest of margins.

How to set the stage for Ukraine better than to explain that my heroic rescue of Angela from the clutches of evil jihadists wrought in me a profound and lasting change? A change that, given what you already know of my sniping aptitude, probably won't be all that surprising... that's right: after marrying Angela, it was no longer necessary for me to jack it before killing some bad guy or another.

Throughout the various places I was deployed with the Navy SEALs and then later Delta, Special Activities Detachment (SAD) and a Task Force that occasionally pulled me up for off the books black ops missions, I did not fap once during a mission. People in those units already knew me as the "American Fapper" owing both to the fame of my story (with which you're likely familiar) and my unimpeachable combat record. But as is so often the case with fame and the things that bring people notoriety I had already moved on... I was no longer "fapping," nor did Angela's prodigious sexual appetite leave me much energy for anything beyond recuperation. I would look forward to two- or three-month deployments as only these were able to give me the time and space to adequately restock the vital energy I needed to do the level of sex Angela required to a standard that I felt was acceptable.

It got to the point where I could barely even remember the person who'd needed to rub one out before achieving the quiet clarity required to make a 900m headshot kill without flinching. Who was he? What odd neuroses consumed him? It was like thinking about a fictional character or trying to recollect the optimism and enthusiasm of a Christmas morning during childhood.

Countless missions later, I'd been promoted and aged out of combat operations. Angela didn't mind and neither did I. Closing in on retirement with two bad knees and a broken down back, the desk job I had once regarded with revulsion and fear came to represent a goal. Nothing pleased me more than to think about quietly retiring to my hometown to teach history

or maybe join the police force. As I remembered, and observed during trips back, the sleepy town was ideal for older people to wind down their final days.

The pent up and volcanic energies of my youth, satiated and slacked by the accomplishments of my adulthood, no longer compelled in me a reckless gallop for the unknown. I was admired within my company of peers, and that group was (who could disagree?) objectively a company of heroes.

This is all to say, nothing artificial pushed me to Ukraine; it was not an escape or a restlessness. The circumstances of my life were pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying. I was perfectly content.

Then Putin invaded.

In 2014 I'd done a training hitch in what Ukrainians call "polygon," the name for a training area, somewhere in its north. It was an off the books rotation, I'd taught a strange crew of old and young men how to do sniper activities. I'd done training missions before all over the Middle East but could honestly say I'd never had a group ingest my lessons so quickly or completely. In fact, one of the older soldiers, a 55-year-old man named Yura who'd been in Afghanistan with the Red Army, taught *me* a couple tricks about concealment that stood me in good stead. That hadn't happened in a long time; I considered him a master sniper and a peer, though his rank was that of a regular sergeant. Their promotion system was a little wacky.

My time in Ukraine gave me a sense that this was a serious people, and I never completely forgot about them, especially as they fought against the Russians over the next years. Occasionally I'd get a note from one of them, inquiring about my health or sending an update after a particularly fierce battle. My training of them seemed to have a profound impact

on their development and confidence and I tried to offer them support and conversation as I could.

One of the updates, in 2019, came from Yura's wife; Yura, it seemed, had been seriously wounded in an artillery strike in a town called Avdiivka. She related the details of his injury – the loss of his left (non-shooting) arm – asking for small monetary assistance and I thought, not for the first time and not for the last time, how different a war like his was. Getting injured or killed by a battery of Russian 300m rocket artillery pieces was never a conceivable end for me. Shot by the Taliban or AQ or ISIS, maybe, but a bomb or rockets? Forget it.

The Ukrainians were in the kind of war I'd only ever imagined or watched on TV. Even the battles for Mosul paled in comparison. I thought about this, and wondered at their ability to keep fighting against the Russians. We wired him \$1000 which his family said was a godsend. Several months after his injury and with the help of a prosthetic, Yura was back in uniform and carrying his trusty Dragonuv rifle.

I thought about that, too.

There had been a foul energy building in the world. A bad moon. Even so, when Russia invaded, I was surprised. I didn't think things like that could happen anymore.

Angela's parents, who admired me (especially her father), were nonetheless owing to their German roots somewhat skeptical of Ukraine, and I would even go so far as to say passively pro-Russian. At least in the sense that they'd totally written off Ukraine once Russian tanks crossed the border.

This prejudice against Ukraine and for Russia was deep-seated with them. Angela's grandfathers had both fought in WWII and I think after Germany's defeat were inclined to view the

Russians and Soviets both as horrible and paradoxically also at the same time superior to Germans – the Russians had proved this on the battlefield. To resist or defeat the Russians was seen somehow as impossible, or not worth the cost.

They swore (Angela's father, and her mother supported him in this) that Russia would have the whole of Ukraine in two weeks. I told them as respectfully as I could that the Ukrainians would fight, knowing the people I trained, and fight they did; bravely, honorably, and against all odds, successfully. The invasion was parried in the north and south, then pushed back. In the east, however, it turned into a brutal shoving match. Mariupol and Melitopol were lost. The war itself darkened.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first weeks of the war the Ruhrs went from seeing things their way, to seeing them my way. I shared photos that Ukrainian friends sent. Then I shared photos that friends of mine, folks who'd retired or gotten out years ago, started taking. They'd gone over to join the International Legion or volunteer. very quickly, some of them stopped coming back, either committed to the fight or dead somewhere.

Those photos and the stories you probably all saw in the media had a dramatic impact on me. Simple and humble men, good people, standing up to what everyone knew was certain death and winning, making death itself uncertain. Defeating the bullet, the red horde, standing up to it chest to chest and stopping it cold.

It got so I couldn't stop thinking about it, and then thinking about going over to do something, to help. I cleared it with Angela, who wasn't thrilled, but who basically understood, and I reached out to Yura, who was serving in the Azov Battalion. He got back the same day. "Come on over," he said on Facebook.

I probably should say a few words about Azov. You read about them in the news and in Russian propaganda where everyone in Azov is supposed to be a Nazi. I can't say how things were in the past; the symbol they use looks like SS lightning bolts, and everyone there (Yura included) just about admitted that the unit was founded as a neo-Nazi paramilitary (funded, somewhat confusingly, by Kolomoisky, a Jewish oligarch) in 2014. But times change. By the time I got to Azov, in March of 2022, it was a top-tier volunteer unit in the national guard, composed of experienced veterans and motivated volunteers. Maybe something analogous to the US Army Rangers. They took their tasks seriously and had obviously trained and prepared for the fight that was unfolding around them in Mariupol. Nobody was "far right" in the sense that Russia or pro-Russians in the west attributed to them. That was all old-guard Azov; people whose influence in the unit was to tell stories about 2014 (and those stories were quickly eclipsed by the actions of 2022 and 2023).

Why didn't I go into the international legion? This is an excellent question. Mostly, I had no sense of what it was as an organization. If the Ukrainians had found a man to lead it, that might have been one thing. Certainly there were individuals – Westerners – who were suitable for the job, and had reputations that might have imprinted discipline and unity on the organization. But these individuals were never recruited – nor, as I understand it, even asked – who's to say whether a Petraeus or McChrystal would have even said "yes" to such an uncertain proposition? In any case, the organization was shrouded in opacity and mystery. As a SEAL, I instinctively mistrusted such an organization...

How did I get to Azov? By helicopter. Things weren't as difficult as they'd get in April, but it was still pretty tight. I flew to Bucharest in Romania, crossed the border, took a car to Odesa, and from there, hopped a series of cars to a point that was still contested across the Dnipro, where

two MI-8s were loaded with ammo and personnel. Mine had a Soviet-era camouflage paint job, and flew low, below treetop for much of the journey, until at night we reached the city and our drop-off point.

These flights were extremely risky, though I happened to be lucky; neither of the helicopters on my flight were shot down or even received much harassing fire. In the very early days, Russian soldiers hadn't learned to shoot at everything, and owing to their local air superiority, they assumed our helicopters (the same model as their own) were Russian, though that changed later. The pilots were, like so many Ukrainians, veterans of many conflicts and much combat. The pilot on my helicopter was, like Yura, a veteran of Afghanistan, and had also been employed as a contractor in Iraq, in 2007. Small world, I thought.

Disembarking from the helicopter, my knees and back groaning after the ride, I helped unload the ammo and equipment quickly, then loaded five casualties aboard— everything was done with great urgency for reasons that would soon become apparent — and two English-speaking soldiers hustled me into a basement as the helicopters took off. The entire operation from landing to liftoff took less than five minutes.

Five minutes after that, artillery came crashing down around us, plastering the courtyard and the surrounding buildings with 152mm shells. It was a storm the likes of which I had never before endured, and it lasted for almost 15 minutes straight. They must have put an entire battery to the task of destroying the helicopters; sadly for them, the Mi-8s were long gone.

This was it, I thought as the dust settled. Real war; the kind I'd always imagined. Not gun battles, the likes of which I and my special operations comrades had touched during the invasion of Iraq, and encountered sporadically since. No—this was authentically and unarguably war, Mars walking up and down

streets in BTRs and tanks, swinging his red sword and laughing joyously as it struck business, apartment, car, soldier, and child alike. It was chaos.

For a moment, during the artillery barrage, I had even experienced something I never expected to encounter – concern. Had I made a mistake, coming here? Would I ever leave alive?

Using my American optimism and iron Will, I easily shook off that morbid thought. These were Russians, not supermen. They had advantages in personnel and equipment, but who knew better the price and blind spots of pride better than a Navy SEAL... those vulnerable areas were things I could exploit as easily as shaving errant hairs from my face in the mirror.

The soldiers brought me to Yura that night. I was equipped with a sniper rifle taken from a dead Chechen, one of Khadyrov's henchmen (Azov had ambushed him in broad daylight as he walked down the street with a squad of his soldiers), and given the four magazines of ammo they had for it, totaling 120 rounds. "Make each bullet count and look out for Chechen snipers," Yura said, shaking my hand with his good hand.

"I will," I said, though this was unnecessary.

Yura made a jerking off motion, then winked. "American jerker," he said. "The best."

"Number one," I said. The nickname didn't bother me, and I didn't bother to correct him – it was Fapper, not jerker, or masturbator, both of which I had heard. Getting hung up on that particular always felt like a waste of time, for one thing, and for another, appearing to care about anything usually produced the opposite result from which one hoped, in the military.

I chatted with Yura and his boss, and got a basic sense for the AO. We hammered out a plan for where I could operate, and how to get in touch with Azov if I got cut off (as I planned

and hoped to do – one does one's best sniping behind enemy lines). They gave me a manageably light ruck with a couple days of food and water that I would replenish during my forays through the city, warned me again about the threat of Chechen snipers, I grabbed a few hours of sleep, and set out into the early morning before sunup.

Mariupol – what to say about the city. People told me after I returned home that it was a formerly Greek, and this was true up to a point. The city was built on the site of an Ancient Greek colony, but the modern city was a much more recent phenomenon – and attempts to “Hellenize” its identity, similar to attempts to retroactively Hellenize other parts of Ukraine in Crimea and on the Black Sea were inventions by Catherine the Great and other Russian leaders hoping to connect their nation's history more firmly to posterity.

What I saw in Mariupol was a shattered city; nothing of Greece, or anything beyond pro-Ukrainian spirit among the residents, a desire for peace, and a lot of Russian targets dancing through rubble.

Yura had explained to me how the Russians would attack, and I figured out pretty quickly a solid plan for taking as many of them as I could. First, I'd set up a position adjacent to where I knew there would be a firefight, but offset by 150-200m, preferably with a nice bit of stand-off from streets directly adjacent to the fight. When Russian soldiers popped up, I'd track one, and as soon as the shooting started I'd shoot, my fire masked by a machinegun or tank, then retreat from my wall or apartment or window or rooftop. I'd say my hit rate was around 100%; I can't say for sure about the wounded / kill rate, body armor or helmets might have cheated my bullets, but as I understood from media coverage afterwards the Russians provided very little field medicine to their soldiers during that stage of the invasion, and even a

relatively minor wound could result in a kill. In this fashion I was able to hit about 10 soldiers a day without taking any fire.

For about a week I was able to keep this up, old and battered as my poor body was, and in my head I started to think that I was probably informally closing in on Chris Kyle's mark. As we were working, though, we were also falling back – always retreating – the noose slowly closing around our neck. It dawned on me that, American and rather notorious in certain circles as I was, doubly so as a sniper, my odds of surviving captivity were pretty slim – and the means by which they'd dispatch me were almost certain to be unpleasant.

Block by block, house by house we fought, and at some point during that second week, the Russians seemed to figure out that I was there. Maybe a prisoner talked, maybe I had worked enough squads that folks sort of figured out the routine. I suppose it was inevitable. Still, not knowing bothered me; I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong, so I could correct it in the future.

By then I'd shot (again, I want to be careful to caveat that I never stuck around long enough to see the result) nearly 100 Russian soldiers, and going by the killed/wounded ratio my guess is that at least 50 of those had been kills. But I really can't say for sure.

Some of the kills I'd seen – the Chechen fighters Kaderov sent didn't always like to wear helmets for some reason, and I headshotted about a dozen of them – those, I know I killed. There was something familiar and comfortable about those kills; I suppose the targets reminded me of Taliban or ISIS, with their beards, and swaggering overconfidence. I didn't headshot many of the regular Russian soldiers. Most were wearing helmets, and even a lousy steel WWII era helmet can deflect a bullet at the right angle. Russian soldiers I tried to killshot to the gut, I suspect with some effectiveness.

I noticed that *they* had noticed me, or were aware of my presence, when near the end of the second week, squads began scanning windows and rooftops before charging into an area. It could be I suppose that they had encountered snipers in other, different locations – that it had nothing to do with me, personally. But there they were, looking – seeking. And where soldiers look and seek, where they take precautions, one can be sure, there are other snipers lurking – Chechen or Russian.

My numbers fell – I had to change my standard operating procedure. I needed the break, anyway, my body had unlocked new ways of experiencing fatigue and pain. Now I wasn't plinking soldiers or officers – I was in counter-sniper mode. By any reasonable measure my work in this department was exceptional; as soon as I started looking, I found the new or unseasoned or experienced but not battle-tested snipers in their usual spots, and was able to take them out using precisely the same trick that I'd used to shoot soldiers. The snipers I knew that I killed, as everyone was headshotted while they looked for me, or someone like me. One. Two. Six, I tallied them all.

It took me about a week to kill 10 snipers, and by then, I felt a kind of confidence that's difficult to describe. I knew – the way one knows that a table is a table or a tree is a tree – that I was the best sniper in the city; something like a master of the place. Nobody else in the city could do what I was doing. Furthermore, nobody could, now; the opportunity had come and gone, the low hanging fruit was almost all gathered, picked up from the grass with the minimum necessary effort.

The Russians moved in my area only with great caution, perhaps with something bordering on terror. Many people believe that the word terror is synonymous with horror, but this is not the case... horror is a type of extreme fear, whereas terror is

spiritual or religious, the state one enters when confronted by the divine. People would peer and creep where before they had run. Snipers were rarely seen at all; more often, what would happen now was tanks or APCs would spray the windows of upper floors whether fire was coming from them or not. Artillery fire and rocket artillery fire was applied liberally on similar logic. The Russians and Chechens had encountered mortality – death, in the form of my steady hand – and they did what they could to destroy instead of fighting the war incompetently, as they had before. Rather than evolve as an army, they devolved – they were little better than heavily armed gangsters with artillery.

Even under these conditions I was still able to work. I tripled my precautions and began hunting, firing opportunistically and with as little rhyme or reason as I could muster, like a serial killer throwing detectives off his scent. In this way I was also able to replenish my ammunition somewhat, which was down to critical levels. One day I took the uniform from a Russian soldier and infiltrated far into the city, taking a terrible risk (I spoke no Russian or Ukrainian) until I found a headquarters, then crawled in the window of a former bank, walked and lifted myself up a set of stairs, my worn muscles afire with exertion, and (finally) set up in a room across from an emergency exit that fed out onto the roof of an adjacent building. I waited until someone important appeared, canoed him, then made good my escape as the HQ erupted in gunfire and confusion.

This audacious act (one of many) was, though I did not realize it at the time, to create the conditions by which I would encounter my greatest test of all. Jogging along my escape route, all I could think of was the surprised expression on the large, bulldog-faced man – colonel? General? - who had until he met my bullet been under the mistaken impression that he commanded a unit, a group of men, a space in which his authority was absolute.

This very lesson was nearly imparted on me scarcely a day later. Our defensive perimeter was shrinking by the day, collapsing onto the massive Azovstal factory-fortress where Azov regiment and many Ukrainian marines would make a last stand. Almost as soon as Russia invaded again, Azov had begun preparing the factory as a redoubt of last hope, stockpiling food, water, ammunition, and everything necessary to withstand a siege.

Between the factory and the city was a fetid swamp, which as the ground rose to the north, turned into a ghetto or shantytown. Then, more substantial buildings emerged, and one could say that the city itself began, atop the ridge line. We held that, and about a half a kilometer further.

Ill omens had arrived as the sun rose; a murder of crows had flown overhead as I moved toward my sector, the zipper on my jacket got stuck halfway and I realized I'd need to discard it, and "Yankee sniper go home" had been spray painted overnight on the wall of a prominent building. With a start, I realized that it was the 15th; the Ides of March. When I reached the line of contact to set up a position, struggling to move a table into place quietly, one of the two magazines I had remaining slipped out of its pouch and onto the floor. My pouches were customized for my rifle's magazines, and the narrower Soviet-era magazines used by the Russians and Chechens were an imperfect fit, which drove me crazy.

In this case the accident was serendipitous... the magazine slipped out of the pouch, and as I bent to retrieve it the concrete wall where my head had been an instant earlier sprouted a deep divot.

I'd been fired upon; a sniper – a talented sniper – had me zeroed in. I grabbed my rifle from the table and knocked the table over for concealment, pocketed the magazine, and made my

retreat; another two bullets punched through table behind me as I left the room, scrambling on my hands and knees and barely avoiding an ass full of splinters or bullets.

I didn't stop in the hall; I made for the staircase and engaged my evacuation route immediately. Just as I exited the building, it erupted – a tank had begun pummeling any room I could be in. I went through a couple buildings and paused, then moved to the first floor of an abandoned house to take stock and recuperate, gulping in air like a drowning man, ragged with adrenaline and vitality.

When I checked my gear, I saw that there was a bullet hole in the collar of my uniform's jacket. That's how close it had been. Sheer luck, and I'd made it out alive.

My first rational thought, examining the situation calmly, is that the sniper had been waiting for me. That was the only explanation. They'd set up to catch a sniper, and I was the sniper to catch. So they'd tried to kill me, personally.

It felt personal, anyway.

Three choices confronted me. One: chalk it up to coincidence and go back to work – work that still urgently needed to be done. Or two: go into emergency protocol, and hunt this specific sniper. Three involved telling Yura I was done, but I wasn't ready for that. No, now something needed doing, and a head needed taking.

I'd been tracking snipers and taking them out for nearly a week, but this was different. A high-level sniper – elite, certainly. They'd laid a trap for me, and sheer chance had robbed them of the kill. I had to acknowledge that before anything else. By all rights I should have been dead. God had preserved me for some other purpose, though I had no idea what that purpose could be.

I made a quick survey of the area and calculated what would be necessary to spring my own trap. First I'd need this person to think that I was taking the first course of action. Leaving was leaving – staying was staying. I'd have to gamble that the sniper I was fighting – a Chechen? Had to be – would both feel cheated by fate, and suppose that I was the type of proud person who'd go out for revenge and/or ignore the incident as bad luck. Besides, we had to protect our territory. Just that day we'd lost an entire block to the Russian forces to our west.

This gave me a day, three streets or so, worth of houses to make my move. I'd have to get as high as I could without going onto a rooftop (where drones could spot me), but not so high that tanks would bring me under fire before I could find the sniper stalking me. I'd have to predict the rate of advance of the Russians, and also predict how the sniper would predict my own movements. There was a lot of guessing involved. I've never played chess, but this felt a lot like it. I felt like both a King. Or a Queen. Or both. You get the point.

Over the next several hours I scoured our territory looking for the perfect place to spring my plan. Nothing seemed adequate – where my room was good, there was no suitable place for an opposing sniper. Where my enemy had excellent fields of fire (like those he'd encountered in Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria, I assumed, trying to get into his head) there was no good place for me to establish my counter-position.

Just as I was ready to give up, I found the position that made perfect sense. It was 1500, and I had plenty of time to prepare a fake position using a mannequin, watching over a likely sniper location *but not* the location an expert would take – this was the bait.

I clothed my doppelgänger with my uniform and rifle – everything needed to be the same – and concealed them. Yura had brought up another sniper rifle (sadly there were more

rifles, now, than people to use them), an old M14, one with which I was familiar owing to time spent deploying to assist the Army earlier in my career. As the fighting around us raged I zeroed the rifle and made sure that its optics worked. Actually, it felt great in my hands – brought back memories of a younger me, one who had their entire future ahead of them. A me who never could have imagined that one day I'd end up with Angela.

Yura also handed me a set of thermals, which I'd need to spot the sniper's infil, though not to shoot. I'd make sure the rifle was already in position, so when he showed up that night to take up his position, I'd be ready to pay him back the favor he'd done me.

Wrapping myself in a Mylar poncho, I found my place in a room behind a shot-out window overlooking what had been a rich man's balcony. The overwatch was itself concealed by a large and well-manicured pine bush. It was an improbable location, which made it perfect – the sniper wouldn't, in the darkness, even know that it was there, and if somehow he did notice it, the angle was off from his perspective. I chuckled to myself. Once again, I felt in sync with the world and the city. As it breathed, I did. As I exhaled, it did. Then I waited.

It happened at 0200. The city was quiet – sleeping, mostly, with sporadic gunfire erupting between soldiers and APCs, or artillery booming nearby or in the distance. I felt it before I saw it. The sniper entered the room; tentatively at first – moving delicately and with care – and I recoiled within my thermal-dampening suit reflexively as the sniper scanned my room, presumably with some cheap (but sufficient) Chinese knockoff. He hesitated – something compelled him to look more deeply at my position – and I thought, did I leave a chink of warmth uncovered? Had I walked into a trap of my own? Was this the end of “The American Fapper?”

But then, the sniper continued scanning, until they found my dummy position. I'd placed an electric heater under the mannequin and concealed it, so while visible, barely, it was not conspicuous. When the sniper started setting up to shoot my double, I knew I had them.

Once they were settled on a table, I got ready to end things – no point in extending it, I thought, I'd had plenty of luck on my side and didn't feel like testing God twice. Just before I lay the thermals down to site in the M14, though, a movement by the sniper startled me. They were undoing their pants and – was it possible? Were they about to do my move *on me*?

A wave of anger rolled over me, but before I had time to process the uncharacteristic emotion, I was struck by another, even greater shock; the sniper, as I could see from the means by which they were satisfying their vile urge, was a woman.

I'd heard of female snipers and knew the Ukrainian military fielded them (I saw none during my time in Mariupol but believe several were stationed there at that time), but for some reason it had never occurred to me that my own foe would be one – that the second greatest sniper in the city was, in fact, a woman. One who had by rights killed me, but for a trick of fate.

The thermal could tell me that much, but I did not know anything else about the target; whether she was old or young, pretty, or plain. One thing was certain: she was observing a version of me that I had placed to entrap her, and had, and was vigorously pleasing herself.

Here I encountered my third shock of the night. I went to leave the thermals, shrouding myself in darkness, to take the shot with the M14, and... I couldn't. Suddenly, I was back in Iraq, paralyzed by an inability to take and therefore make the necessary shot. My target was writhing in ecstasy before me, helpless, and there was nothing I could do.

Should I retreat, I thought? No – I probably wouldn't get another chance like this, certainly not after she realized the ruse. This was it. Do or die. I was trapped, paralyzed. There was nothing to be done.

Unless...

Then I realized. Of course. It had to be this way. I could explain to Angela later. Or maybe not. Maybe this would never come between us. Maybe, it was this one moment, this last target that the universe was offering me, some kind of redemption for my past, here in a fallen city.

Without touching the rifle, I did my thing, quickly and efficiently. I finished, then slowly felt for the M14's cold wooden buttstock, laying my hands on its worn grains, bringing my cheek to the correct place, lining everything up. A flash in the sniper's window briefly illuminated her in the scope, allowing me to move the crosshairs ever so slightly over her (as I could see it) short-cropped blond hair and yes, attractive face, and placed my last shot as a sniper square between her gray eyes.

The story of how I managed to escape Mariupol before its fall, and Yura and Azov's brave stand alongside Ukrainian marines in the Azovstal fortress are stories known to all, and don't bear repeating. For myself, I'll always look back on those days as the pinnacle of my sniping career. Sometimes you get lucky. I did. Twice!

New Fiction by Cam McMillan:

“The Colors of the Euphrates”



She came from the south, wearing a bright red dress and carrying a light blue backpack, weaving through the well-worn paths on the banks of the Euphrates that had been carved out by foot traffic and various other forces of erosion for millennia. The same ground carried her ancestors and bequeathed them their fertile crescent, upon which they birthed a cradle of civilization and set forth the foundations of human history and society, with all its triumph and suffering. For all that had changed in the sweeping conquest of ecological momentum and Westphalian geopolitics, the beauty of the Euphrates remained. Its flora flourished, hosting palm trees and wildflowers, poplar trees and different species of reed, camel thorn and prosopis, that all combined to a bright, magnificent green to the armed predator drone circling 25,000 feet above. She may have heard the slight hum of its engine as it watched over her with its hellfire missiles and multi-spectral targeting system that held several high-quality cameras to broadcast the feed of her image to SPC Yates' screen, but it's unlikely. Drones circled over her head everyday while she went to school and went on with her life, oblivious to SPC Yates' existence as a set of eyes that was capable of seeing her every move and even ending her entire existence.

His real name was Brian. If it were not for the college loan forgiveness program that brought him into the Louisiana Army National Guard, that's what he would have preferred to have been called. But it did, and the Army named him SPC Yates. He sat at his desk in the base defense operations center (BDOC) of Al Asad Air Base and watched his screen. Around him, other SPCs carried out similar tasks, monitoring drone feeds and security cameras littered throughout their area of operations in Al Anbar province. Together, they looked for things that

could kill them, rockets or drones riding in the bed of a Toyota highlander or being loaded into the back of a trailer. SPC Yates was good at his job. He tasked drone pilots, far away in their air-conditioned trailers on an air force base somewhere in Nevada, to survey certain areas and strike certain targets depending on the needs of the day and the orders he received from the battle captain that sat at the back of the room. He stared at suspicious trucks and dangerous looking people. More often than not, they were nothing. A group of insurgents loading rockets into a pickup would end up being a family moving a mattress. An individual fitting the description of a known terrorist would be an old man herding goats. Through these laborious tasks and the daily monotony of his screen, SPC Yates came to know the village of Al Baghdadi, ten kilometers to their north, its winding roads and paths, and all its nooks and crannies. He immersed himself in the foliage of the river that cut between it, colorful and bright, and yearned to be around the green of his childhood, the marshes and swamps around New Orleans where his father taught him how to fish, instead of the bleak and barren landscape of sand and dust that waited for him outside the door of the BDOC. He came to recognize the people, the shopkeepers and merchants, schoolchildren and insurgents. But he had never seen anyone quite like this, the little girl in a red dress.

She walked with an ease and absolute lack of concern or awareness about the dangerous world around her. In the strikingly vivid and detailed quality of the drone's cameras, SPC Yates could see the pattern of her dress, floral and white, as it blew with the breeze that swayed the green all around her. She skipped up and down, and bobbed her head from left to right, holding the straps of her backpack with both hands as it bounced gingerly with each leap. She had dark brown hair that she let flow past her shoulders, free of a bun or head scarf, which was uncommon. Brian thought he could see the sun reflecting off of it when she tilted her head in just the right direction. Every few steps, she would stop, and pick

a rock up off the ground and skip it across the water to her right. He found her fascinating. She was unlike anything SPC Yates had seen in his eight long months sitting at his screen in Iraq. The simplicity with which she existed astounded him. He wondered what was in her backpack, books about the history of Mesopotamia, or perhaps mathematics, maybe even literature filled with pros of faraway lands. The joy he felt in her orbit was almost unrecognizable after being away from his true joy along the Mississippi for so long.

Along that magnificent and mighty body of water that cut through his small town in Louisiana all the way to Canada, SPC Yates was home. He was Brian. He remembered skipping rocks with his sister as a boy. When he was older, they would play hooky and sneak down to the banks where they watched the barges go by, as they drank cheap beer and cheaper cigarettes, speaking of days when they would leave their Louisiana outpost along the river. He thought of his sister, Laura. She wanted to be a makeup artist and work on movie sets in Los Angeles. After an unplanned pregnancy and an unreliable boyfriend, she ended up staying on those same banks and raising Brian's nephew, Ben. Before he left for the deployment, Brian promised he would send him a picture of a camel, but he never did. He didn't even call for his birthday last month. It's not that he didn't want to. He just didn't have the energy to fake the smile and laugh he knew he would have to muster to reassure them he was okay. But, watching the little girl in the red dress prance along the Euphrates, Brian decided he would finally call Laura back and tell little Ben about the camels he saw in Kuwait to wish him a late happy birthday.

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

"Incoming, incoming, incoming."

SPC Yates' heart stopped and jumped into his throat. Before he could think, he was on the ground where his heart raced again, beating like a drum into his chest that threatened to break

through his sternum and spill onto the floor. He scrambled to reach for his kit, the Kevlar vest and helmet that lay next to his seat, reaching his left arm out to cling for the facade of protection. The explosions were distant at first. But as Brian pulled his vest across the plywood floor, they grew closer. The ground shook. The walls shuddered and the ceiling sagged with each thud that grew louder and louder. He couldn't make his hands work. He flopped and flailed on the floor, trying to get on his vest and helmet, grappling with clasps and fighting with clips in his desperate attempt to live even though he knew it wouldn't save him. Those around him did the same, completely disregarding their assigned duties and tasks as all semblance of order collapsed and everyone embarked on a journey of personal survival, no matter how in vain. The room filled with dust when a rocket impacted a T-wall outside, tearing a hole into their plywood fortress and filling it with smoke, soot, sawdust, and sand. Brian couldn't hear. He inhaled the toxic mixture into his lungs and nostrils. He gave up on the vest and hugged the ground as tightly as he could. He made himself as flat as possible. He wished that he could dig through the earth and come out the other side. The ground around him continued to shake. The grains of sand in front of his face bounced with each additional thud and he felt that he was one of them, a victim of circumstance and location that left him completely at the whim of the explosions that rocked across Al Asad Air Base. He could hear again. People were screaming. *Help! Get the fuck down.*

They were anonymous screams that Brian could not identify. He was too paralyzed to try. His surroundings and all of his bodily senses collapsed onto him into a single mass of noise. The explosions. The screaming of orders. *Get that gun up!* The pleas for help. *Holy Shit. Jesus Christ.* The inaudible cries from friends. The beeps of the monitors and systems. The alarm. All of it, even the unheard, the smells and vibrations, combined into a terrible cacophony of noise that paralyzed Brian completely. Frozen and resigned to his own death, Brian

thought of nothing. He did not think of God, or his sister Laura, or his nephew Ben, or even his friends who could be dying around him. Fear, fear, fear, was all his body could muster. The fear gave him no purpose or drive, nothing to combat or defend against. The fear simply was. It ate alive at his insides and propelled his heart harder and harder against his chest. Nothing in the biological array of his body, no organ, no frontal cortex, nothing, could sustain a thought or sensation other than absolutely paralyzing fear. And then it was over.

The explosions stopped first. And as the mass of noise evaporated, it created a vacuum that was filled with utter silence. The mosh pit of yells, and screams, and barking of orders was replaced by a tense quietude. It was as if anyone spoke or made a sound of any kind, it would all begin again. The dust in the air slowly settled back onto the ground as the earth no longer shook with fury, but instead lay there like the inanimate rock that it was before. The smoke began to clear from the room. And in that silence, they were brought back. The fear and panic dissipated, replaced by a slow, burning anxiety that sat like a tripwire. It could be activated at any time when chance would again return the chaos. The people around Brian became aware of their surroundings. He himself was no longer paralyzed. Instead, he felt hungover. He was stuck in a deep sludge, like a dream where your feet never move fast enough, and you can't outrun the monster chasing you no matter how much you try to make your legs move. People checked themselves for wounds, feeling and looking for blood. They did so for their friends around them. Brian patted slowly around his torso and down his legs, praying that the adrenaline wasn't so strong that he hadn't noticed a chunk of flesh missing. He wasn't hit. Aside from a couple superficial wounds, lacerations to faces and extremities from shards of plywood and other shrapnel, no one was seriously wounded. They were alive. Finally, someone spoke. It was the battle captain.

“We up?” he sputtered out through his cracking voice. “Everybody good?”

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

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

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

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

When Brian finally got a predator over the location, he put

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

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

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

screen right along the water. The camera zoomed in and Brian saw her.

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

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

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

Just before he finally went home, Brian went down to the bomb yard where they kept blown up vehicles and trash. They had brought the truck that shot the rockets at them there the day after the attack. The insurgents hid all thirty of the rockets behind bags of flour to get through a checkpoint, causing them to ignite and cook off the rockets inside halfway through their launching. That's why the truck blew up, the mosque was destroyed, and the little girl in the red dress slowly bled out alone on the banks of the Euphrates. It's also probably why Brian survived. He stood there at the gate of the bomb yard and stared at the smoked out twisted steel that remained of the truck that tried to kill him and his friends. He wondered if it was a piece of shrapnel from the twisted mess that had pierced the little girl's red dress and dug into her liver or another vital organ. He thought of flour and how a simple cooking ingredient had decided who would live and who

would die. He considered how and why no combatants from either side were killed, only innocents. He thought of the fourteen innocent men, women, and children who had been torn to shreds in that mosque. He wondered how many more had been wounded. He thought about how he could find no mention of it in any US news sources. He thought of his friends and fellow soldiers he didn't even know who were wounded. He remembered the little girl in the red dress.

Two weeks later, Brian was home. He moved in with Lauren because, after he gave up his lease for the deployment, he had nowhere else to go. He was remote and cut off. She would try to get him to come out for social occasions or family get-togethers, but she couldn't even get him to come outside of his room for dinner. She left a plate outside his door every night. Eventually, the extra sleeping meds he stashed from Iraq were gone, and he had to come out. No longer able to sleep, he set himself out to fix Lauren's crumbling porch. He used up about half of the money saved from the deployment on lumber, tools, and finishing, and got to work. It was August in Louisiana, and it was hot. Unlike Iraq, it was humid. He demoed and worked to put in a cinder block foundation so that it could ride out the hurricanes and flooding that had brought it to such a state of disrepair in the first place. Lauren would bring him out water and plead with him to get out of the heat and come inside to the air conditioning. Anything to get him to talk. But he just kept working.

Finally, in October, the work was done, and the deck was finished. Brian had done an outstanding job. The foundation was solid. From it, six solid posts of cedar rose up. A finished staircase led up to a deck of pressure treated tropical hardwood. Ben helped him build some Adirondacks out of fresh pine. Together, they sanded and treated the wood, so the chairs looked rustic and modern at the same time. Once the foundation was finished, Lauren planted a garden around it of beautiful hibiscus and phlox. With all the work done, Lauren

was worried what Brian would do next. He hadn't returned to school like he planned. He was going to study to be a marine biologist and move to Miami. After getting back, when he would answer her questions, he'd just say "eh, I'll figure something out." But she wasn't so sure. She often thought she questioned him too much and should leave him alone, but she was genuinely worried and felt a responsibility as his big sister. She decided to take a family trip to Brian's favorite spot on the river to celebrate the completion of the porch and Ben's good grades from the fall term. She was surprised when Brian agreed.

When they got there, it was exactly as Brian remembered it, a small hideout in the River State Wildlife Refuge where the noisy barges couldn't be heard, and the drunk New Orleans' tourists wouldn't be found. Sitting in the blue, still water, oak and cypress trees let their leaves sway back and forth in the wind while the wildflowers bloomed on the shore. Lauren set down a picnic blanket and took a couple of beers out of the cooler for her and Brian. There was a juice box for Ben. She prepared both of their favorites: fried shrimp po'boys. She looked over at Brian, who stood on the shore of the river delta, and thought she saw a slight smile. Ben ran alongside them chasing a dragon fly.

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

in the water, and started making little circles in it. He bent down onto his knees and sunk his fingers in the mud. He dipped his hair, now long and curly, into the water and felt the ripples wash up against it. He felt himself in the river, in the mud, in all of it.

As he closed his eyes, he saw himself amidst the beauty of the Euphrates, surrounded by the same luscious green. He walked the well-worn paths he had watched on his monitor for countless hours during those 9 months. He followed a pair of footprints along the water that did not have a discernible pattern, zigzagging back and forth, stopping and starting, and leaving rocks unsettled from their natural place. He kept walking. He heard laughter. As he turned the corner around a tall poplar tree, he saw a little girl in a red dress dancing in a clearing of mud between the foliage. She laughed as she rocked her head from side to side and twirled in circles, amused by how her dress flowed up with her movement. Her innocent smile and sparkling eyes were oblivious to Brian's presence until he took another step and snapped a branch. Surprised but not startled, she turned towards him and smiled, saying something in Arabic that Brian could not understand. She giggled again and reached her hand out towards Brian, gesturing him towards her. Unthinkingly, he followed, taking her hand and following her down to the water. They walked out into the river, as the water passed her ankles, then her knees, and eventually rose to her hips. She let go of Brian's hand and leaned back, floating atop the water, and let the current take her downstream. Brian began to follow.

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

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

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

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

“Over there?” She asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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