

New Fiction by Sándor Jászberény: “Honey”



1.

A rocket hit the village. I woke up to the sound of the explosion. My eyes widened, I jumped out of bed, put on my bulletproof vest, grabbed my helmet and boots and headed for the door. Another missile hit nearby. The ground shook and the wooden beams of the house creaked. I heard nothing but the beating of my blood in my forehead. My nostrils flared, my muscles tensed. The adrenaline was making me unable to think. I was ready to run out into the night in my underwear.

“Calm down, there’s nothing wrong,” said Petya from his bed across the room. He was a miner from Kharkiv. A hundred and twenty kilos of fat and muscle, with dog eyes and a raspy baritone voice. When he slept, the wooden building shook from

his snoring. It was like sharing a room with a bear.

"It's ok," he repeated. "They are randomly shooting the hill."

He sounded as if talking to a child who had a bad dream. Not that I knew how he talked to his son, but his tone suggested the whole Russian invasion was just a bad dream, with missiles thundering down.

My mind began to clear.

I knew if the place took a direct hit, I'd be dead before I could run anywhere, and if it didn't, it would be pretty pointless to run out into the night.

Yet this was always my reaction when the missiles hit too close.

Petya, seeing my confusion, got up, pulled his backpack out from under the bed, and took out a jar. "Come, have some honey," he said. His English was terrible, but I hardly noticed anymore.

I got up and walked over to the window that yawned into the night. Petya unscrewed the lid off the jar and drew his knife. I took my knife out of my vest pocket, dipped it in the jar, and ran my tongue down the blade.

There was thick, black honey in the jar. Not the sickeningly sweet stuff you get in the store.

"I was dreaming about my wife," he said.

"I wasn't dreaming about anything." I gripped the knife tightly so he wouldn't see my hand tremble.

"We were in little house in Ilovaisk, the one I tell you about. Her father's house."

"And?"

"The kids were in bed and she was in kitchen cleaning up."

"Do I have to listen to one of your sex stories? It'll give me nightmares."

"Did not get to sex. I was smelling her hair when the Russians woke me up and fucked up my dream."

"Too bad."

"They fucked up your dream too."

"I wasn't dreaming anything."

"You will if you stay here long enough."

"You know perfectly well this is my last day at the front."

"What time is it?"

"The sun will rise in two hours."

There were crimson hints of dawn on the horizon as we stood by the window. We sipped our instant coffees, smoked, and watched the sparkling shards of glass in the grass under the windowpanes.

2.

They had found a bunk for me in a ghost village with the 72nd Ukrainian Motorized Rifle Division two weeks earlier. The place was on a hillside next to a coal-fired power station lake. A narrow concrete bridge cut across the lake, the only way into the town on the far side. Wild ducks nested in the mud under its pillars.

Gray block houses stared at us from the opposite hillside. The Ukrainians had put the artillery units between the buildings, but there were still plenty of people living in the town.

In the evenings, the lights in the apartments winked out as

the village plunged into total darkness, with residents avoiding any signals that could reveal the soldiers' sleeping locations to the Russian artillery.

The cannons rumbled during the day, but the real show started after the sun went down. The Ukrainian anti-aircraft guns operated throughout the nights, intercepting at least one or two Russian rockets. It wasn't safe for the soldiers to stay consecutive days in the same house. The Russians seemed content to occupy ruins.

On the front, you swiftly learn to differentiate between the sound of your own artillery and that of the enemy. After two days, I had mastered this skill. While most shells landed kilometers away from us, if one hit closer, my lack of proper military training would instinctively lead me to throw myself to the ground, always providing the soldiers with a good laugh.

3.

A young boy took me from Kiyiv to Dnipropetrovsk in a camouflage all-terrain vehicle with no license plate. The closer we got to the front in the east, the more checkpoints there were.

The boy would pull up in front of the roadblocks, roll down the window, and shout the latest password, which was sent to the soldiers every day by the Ministry of War. We set out at dawn, and by afternoon we had reached the town. At a gas station, I had to switch cars. They put me in a car driven by two snipers from the 72nd Brigade. I shared the back seat with AKM machine guns and a hand grenade launcher all the way to Donetsk province. No one had to tell us we had reached the front. The continuous roar of the artillery made that clear enough.

For two or three hours, nobody bothered with the foreign correspondent. I took pictures of soldiers trying to fix shot-

up SUVs in the yards of the houses they had requisitioned. The sun had already set by the time a soldier in his twenties who wouldn't stop grinning came up to me.

"The commander of the Unit, Nazar wants to see you now."

He took me to a two-story wooden house. The ground floor was full of soldiers eating eggs and chicken with potatoes roasted in their peels. The men were sitting on crates of NLAW anti-tank rockets pushed against the wall. The commander who must have been about fifty, introduced himself, put a plate in my hand and gestured me to sit down and eat.

I had a few bites. There was an uncomfortable silence in the room, and everyone was looking at me.

"So, you are Hungarian?" Nazar asked.

"Yes."

"I know a Hungarian."

I felt shivers go down my spine. I sincerely hoped I wouldn't have to explain Hungarian foreign policy to a bunch of armed men in the middle of the night.

"Yes?"

"The best Hungarian, I think. The most talented. Do you know her name?"

"No."

"Michelle Wild."

The men in the room who were over forty laughed. The men in their twenties had no idea what he was talking about.

"She had a big influence on me too," I said.

"Are you talking about a politician?" asked a twenty-something

kid, called Vitya.

"No," Nazar replied. "Talented actress."

"How come I never hear of her?" asked Vitya.

"Because by time you were born, she already retired."

"I could still know her."

"You don't know her because you're homo and you don't watch porn."

"Yes I watch porn!"

"But you don't watch classic porn. Because you're homo."

"I'm not a homo!"

"Yes, you are," Nazar said, bringing the debate to an end.

"So what you come here for, Hungarian?"

"To film."

"Porn?" the kid asked.

"Yes."

"Welcome to Ukraine!" Nazar said.

Someone found a bottle of American whiskey, and by the time we had finished it, they had assigned me to Vitya, who would take me to the front.

The war had been going on for eight months, and we all knew that eight months was more than enough time for people in the West to forget that the Russians had invaded a European country. Ukrainian resistance depended on getting military support. The presence of foreign journalists was a necessary evil to secure arms supplies.

4.

I met Petya upon my arrival to the frontline. Nazar assigned me to one of the wooden buildings where his soldiers slept. When I first stepped into the room with my backpack slung across my back, a huge man with a shaved head was standing in front of me in his underwear and a poison green T-shirt. He looked me up and down:

"I warn you that I snore like chainsaw."

"It won't bother me. Actually, makes me feel at home."

"That's what my wife says."

"Does she snore?"

"I don't know. I never heard her snore."

"I snore."

"No problem."

I unpacked my stuff next to my bed, undressed, and went to bed. I listened to the night noises, the rumble of the cannons in the distance. The branches of the trees were heavy with fruit, and you could hear the wasps and bees buzzing around the rotting apples and pears in the leaves on the ground.

I had trouble falling asleep. Petya was wide awake too—I could tell because there wasn't a hint of his usual snoring. We lay quietly on our beds for a while.

"Do you have a family?" Petya asked from his bed, breaking the silence.

"A wife and a son from my first marriage. How about you? Do you have any children?"

"Two. Two boys. Eight and twelve years old. Do you want to see picture?"

"Yes."

Petya stood. Stepping over to my bed, the boards creaking underneath him, he held up a battered smartphone displaying a picture of two little boys wearing striped T-shirts and enjoying ice cream.

"They are very handsome," I said. Then I shuddered because a shell had struck maybe a kilometer or two away.

"Do you have picture of your son?"

I took out my phone and brought up a pic of my son.

"He looks just like you."

"Yeah. Lots of people say I had myself cloned."

"My babies not look like me, good thing. They like their mother."

"Lucky for them," I said with a grin.

"You're not most handsome man in world either, Sasha."

5.

During the day, I toured the Ukrainian positions with Vitya and conducted interviews. I grew very fond of the kid very quickly. Once, right before we went to the front, I saw him wrestling on the ground with another soldier. He teased everyone relentlessly, but no one took offense at his rough jokes. Vitya belonged to the generation born into war. War cradled his crib, and armed resistance against the Russians was his first love. He graduated from the war. At the age of twenty-three, he was already considered a veteran among the frontline soldiers. Nazar had instructed that I shouldn't be sent to the active front until he was confident in my readiness.

About ten kilometers from the front, I interviewed the medics

of the battalion or the guys returning in tanks. Several times, I was assigned to kitchen duty. This meant I had to accompany one of the soldiers and assist him in hunting pheasants at the edges of the wheat fields. The birds were confused by the thunder of the mortar shells, so they would run out to the side of the road, and you could just shoot them. There was always something freshly killed for dinner. During the two weeks I spent at the front, the soldiers shot pheasant for the most part. I managed to bag some wild rabbits once. Everyone was overjoyed that day.

I usually chatted with Petya in the evenings. He was stationed at the Browning machine guns. The Russians would shell the hell out of the Ukrainian positions dug in the ground between the stunted trees and then try to overrun them with infantry. There were more and more unburied bodies in the wheat fields under the October sky.

On the third night, Petya asked if I had a picture of my wife.

"Yes."

"Show me."

I showed him one of the pics on my phone. He looked at it for a long time.

"Too Jewish for me."

"Jewish cunts are warmer, you know."

"My wife's cunt is hotter. Want to see picture?"

"Of your wife's cunt?"

"No, idiot. Of wife."

"Sure."

Petya stepped over to my bed and put his phone in my hand. On the screen was a pic of a natural blond, a stunningly

beautiful woman."

"She's my Tyina," he said.

"Poor thing, she must be blind."

"Why you say she is blind?"

"She married you."

"What do you know about true love?"

"Everything. What the hell does she see in you?"

"I don't know. We met at May ball of steelwork. She was in bright yellow dress, so beautiful I could not breathe."

"What did you do to trick her into talking to you?"

"Nothing. I knew her father from factory. He introduced me. It was love at first sight. I dated her one month before she let me hold hand. No one had ever kissed me like."

"Gimme a tissue so I can wipe away my tears."

"Her kiss was sweet like honey."

"You were born to be a poet, Petya, not a soldier."

"After one year, I married her. The wedding was in Ilovaisk. And then came Petyaka and then little Volodya."

"You think about them a lot."

"I do not think about anything else."

"When was the last time you saw them?"

"Seven months ago."

"That's a lot. Do you talk to them often?"

"Yes. Every day."

6.

In the evenings, Petya talked about his family. He told me what his children's favorite food was, how his wife made it, how they kept bees at his father-in-law's place, twelve hives in all. I'd been among the soldiers for a week when Petya came to dinner one night with a bandage on his hand.

"What happened?"

"It's nothing."

He ate, drank some whisky, and went to bed. I played cards with the others.

"The Russians tried to break through today." – said Vitya when he got bored of the game.

"Did you have to give up the position?"

"Yep. Fifty rounds left in the Browning. Can you imagine?"

"What happened to Petya?"

"He's the only one left alive. A bullet went through his hand. We had to shout to get him to leave the post. He grabbed the gun, just in case."

Petya was already snoring when I got back to the room. I went to bed. I was awakened by his moaning and swearing.

"What happened?"

"I rolled on hand. Stitches are torn, I think."

The bandage was dripping with blood.

"We should go to the hospital."

The hospital was about twenty kilometers away. I knew this, because I wasn't allowed to take any pictures there. Anywhere but there. The Ukrainians wouldn't let us report their losses.

"Fuck it," he said. "Just bandage it up again."

"I'm not a doctor."

"Just bandage the fucking thing. I will go to hospital in morning."

"Okay."

"First aid kit is on vest."

I unzipped the pouch marked with the white cross and took out the tourniquets. The gauze and iodine were at the bottom. I used the small scissors to cut the bandage on Petya's hand. The stitches had torn badly. A mix of red and black blood.

"Clean it out."

I wiped the wound with iodine and even poured a little in it. Petya was constantly cursing. English has a limited number of curse words compared to the Ukrainian language. In any of the Slavic languages, you can continue swearing for hours without repeating yourself. I couldn't catch everything he said, but it seemed to involve the insertion of pine woods, John Deeres, and umbrellas into the enemy's private parts. When his wound looked clean enough, I started to bandage it up.

"There you go," I said. "But you should take better care of yourself. You've got your family waiting for you back home."

"They will have to wait a little longer."

"There's no telling how long this war will last."

"It lasts while it lasts. We will be together in end anyway."

"I sincerely hope so."

"You don't have to hope. We will be together for sure. But not now. I still have some Russians to kill."

"I hope you get home soon."

"You are a good man, Sasha."

7.

While playing cards, Nazar said, "Tomorrow you can take the Hungarian out after the attack has started." When I asked what attack he was talking about, no one said a word, not surprisingly.

It later turned out that, contrary to expectations, the Ukrainian forces had launched a successful counterattack at Kharkiv. Nazar thought that this would be the perfect opportunity to send me to the front lines and keep me safe at the same time. The offensive would distract the Russians enough to reduce the artillery fire on their positions.

We were cutting across fields of wheat, with the sun shining resplendently in the sky above us, when the Russians started shelling the position we were headed for. Two shells hit right next to our car, and it felt as if someone had pushed my head under water.

Vitya drove the car into the woods, mud splashing on the windshield from the shells. He stopped the car next to the trench where the Browning guys had dug themselves and ordered everyone out. Two other soldiers were in the car; they knelt to the ground and listened, then ran to take cover in the trees, dragging me along.

Dusty earth and mud. The trenches were like something out of a World War I movie. Petya was grinning as he came up from underground.

"Want some coffee?" he asked.

We did. I glanced where the barrels of the Browning machine guns were pointed. The Russians were less than a kilometer away on the far side. You couldn't see the dead bodies because of the tall grass, but I knew there were a lot of them lying unburied in the field, because when the wind shifted, it brought with it the sweet smell of decay.

I had a cup of coffee in my hand when I heard the shriek of the mortar shell. I lurched to one side and splattered the whole cup on Vitya.

"That was more than ten meters away," he said after the mortar struck, and he pulled me up off the ground. I couldn't control the shaking of my hands.

The biggest problem with modern-day artillery is that you can't see it at all. The legend that 82mm mortar shells were deliberately designed to whistle before impact is widely held. It's nonsense, of course. No engineer would design a weapon so that the targets would know before it hit that it was about to strike. Mortar shells whistle because they cut through the air and leave a vacuum behind them.

But you only hear the whistle of the shells that God intended for someone else.

The Ukrainians knew when the Russians were firing missiles. I guess the front was close and they could hear them launching. Though I'm not really sure. I only know that on the way back to the car, Vitya suddenly grabbed me and pulled me down into a hole.

The ground shook. I heard a big crash, then nothing.

When Vitya pulled me to my feet, I was totally lost, didn't know where to go. He steered me towards the car. My ears felt like they'd exploded, but my eardrums weren't bleeding. Silence stuck around until we hit the ghost village. When my hearing kicked back in, every explosion made me feel like I

was getting zapped by electricity. Trying not to hit the dirt took some work, but I held up okay unless the hits got too close.

8.

Nazar told me that there was a car leaving for Kiev at eight o'clock, and I would leave the front in it.

The brigade was hard at work. All the equipment had to be moved to a new location because the Russian missiles were getting closer and closer. Old flatbed trucks were rolling down the dirt roads, loaded up with fuel, rocket launchers, and ammunition. They drafted me to lend a hand, so I was lugging boxes too, muttering all the while about how nice it'd be if the Russians could please not fire any fucking rockets for just a little while.

The new headquarters was in a granary. It was a concrete building from the Cold War era, with bullet holes and boarded-up windows. We were still hard at work when a green all-terrain vehicle pulled up in front of the entrance.

"What about you?" I asked Petya.

"I am coming with you."

"See, I told you you'd make it home," I said, giving him a slap on the back. "I'm good luck for you."

There were five of us in the all-terrain, and the trip back was a good twelve hours. Wasn't exactly first-class. I was longing to get a shower and finally take a shit in a toilet, but most of all just to stretch my legs once we reached Kiev.

But that was out of the question. Nazar and the others

insisted that we get a round of drinks.

In the city center, we went to a pub called Gorky's. It was in a cellar, with heavy wooden tables and a bar. We could barely get a seat. I was shocked by the bustle. It felt as if we had arrived in a different country, a country that wasn't being ripped apart by war.

The guys ordered Ukrainian vodka and beer. The waiter brought dried salted fish and five shot glasses.

Nazar filled everyone's glass, and when he was done, he raised his own.

"A toast to those who gave their lives."

He lifted his glass on high, then poured the vodka on the ground and threw the glass on the floor with all his might. The others did exactly the same thing. The place fell dead silent, and everyone looked at us.

"Is there a problem?" Nazar asked the bartender.

"Glory to Ukraine!" the bartender replied.

"Glory to the heroes!" the soldiers said, and everyone in the pub echoed their shout.

New glasses were brought to the table. Nazar filled them.

"And now a toast to the living," he said, and he knocked it back in one gulp.

We drank quickly, and a lot.

"And now," Nazar said after the second bottle of vodka, "we go to see the patriotic whores."

Since the offensive began, downtown brothels gave a 20% discount to frontline fighters due to an 11 PM curfew. Keeping the places afloat and showing patriotic devotion played a

part, but “patriotic” became the buzzword.

I was dizzy from alcohol and fatigue. I didn’t want to go, but I couldn’t get out of it. The whorehouse was in a four-story building. We went on foot. Nazar rang the bell, and the door swung open.

The women were on the fourth floor. Two old, moderately spacious apartments that had been turned into one. There was a big Ukrainian flag on the wall in the hallway. A woman who must have been about fifty and whose cheeks were caked with rouge walked over to us and sat us down on the sofa.

She and Nazar started haggling in Ukrainian. It took me a while to realize that they were arguing about me. I was not a soldier, she was saying, and so I did not get any discount. I cast a glance at Petya, hoping he could get me out of the whole thing, but he was just staring at the wall. Eventually, Nazar must have reached some kind of agreement with the woman, because she walked over to the counter, picked up a bell, and gave it a shake.

The three doors off the hallway swung open, and soon six women were standing in front of us with business smiles on their faces. They were dressed in bras and panties.

“Take your pick,” the woman said, and even I understood.

I also understood the silence that fell over us. When it comes to committing a sinful act, no one wants to go first. Several seconds of silence passed, several unbearably awkward seconds.

And then Petya stood up. He had a bleary look in his eyes. He walked over to one of the brunettes, a girl who must have been in her twenties.

“Let’s go, sweetheart,” he said. She took his hand and led him into the room.

The other two soldiers immediately followed suit, chose a

girl, and then left. I stared in shock.

“What?” Nazar asked, lighting a cigarette. “You look like you have seen a ghost.”

“No,” I replied, “I’m just a little surprised. Petya was always talking about his wife. I never would have thought he’d sleep with another woman.”

Nazar took a drag on his cigarette, grimaced a little, stubbed it out in the ashtray, and stood up.

“Petya’s apartment in Kharkiv was hit by a rocket the day after the invasion started,” he said. “His family was killed.”

He then walked over to one of the girls, took her hand, and withdrew with her into one of the rooms.

New Nonfiction by Dean Hosni: “The Cartoon War”



Egyptian military trucks cross a bridge laid over the Suez Canal on October 7, 1973, during the Yom Kippur War/October War

October 6, 1973. Los Angeles.

The stack of newspapers sat in front of me on the brown shag carpet, and next to it was a plastic bag half full of red rubber bands. I reached into the bag, took a dozen or so bands and slipped them onto my wrist. I pulled a newspaper from the stack and folded it methodically; the right third over the middle, then the left third over that. I snagged a rubber band from my wrist and slipped it over the tri-folded paper. Once done with the stack, I would load the papers into the twin green bags tied to my handlebars, straddle the bike, and start my route, as I did every Saturday.

But this Saturday, my customers would wait late into the afternoon for their morning edition of the Herald Examiner, while I stood statue-like in front of a grainy black and white

television screen. A familiar desert landscape would erupt in fire before my eyes.

As was her ritual, my younger sister watched Scooby-Doo. I did too, as I folded newspapers. I could always identify the villains, the characters behind the mask of the Ghost of Captain Cutler, The Black Night, or The Caveman. Their disguises were thin and their guilt certain. Telling my sister who the villain was just before the unmasking was satisfying in a mean-spirited way.

My sister sat open-mouthed in front of the television and watched Shaggy, Scooby, and the rest in the final chase scene. With the masked villain captured, I pointed a finger at the screen, ready to reveal his identity and ruin the ending for her. But before I could utter the words, a news anchor's face appeared.

"We interrupt our normally scheduled program to bring you a special news bulletin," he said.

Images of tanks and armored vehicles raced across the sandy terrain of the Saini Desert in Egypt, and dark-faced soldiers fired Kalashnikovs at enemy positions. The contrail of a Phantom fighter jet ended in a white plume, intercepted by a surface-to-air missile. My sister looked at me in dismay, her expression asking: Where had Scooby gone?

I knew I shouldn't wake my father. He was catching up on sleep after working a graveyard shift in a low-skill job, the only kind available to some immigrants.

I walked into the bedroom. "Dad...? Dad...? Egypt is at war."

He was up. Glassy eyed, staring at the blurry screen, adjusting rabbit ears.

On the television, artillery shells rocked the desert in an unending barrage. Egyptian and Syrian troops, in a coordinated

attack, advanced on enemy positions in the Sinai Desert and the Golan Heights. On the Sinai front, tens of thousands of Egyptian infantrymen crossed the Suez Canal in inflatable boats under heavy shelling and through clouds of smoke. Key Israeli military positions throughout the Sinai were bombed by Egyptian jets, clearing the way for the advancing ground assault. The Yom Kippur War had begun.

Watching this war unfold before my eyes, I was thrown back in time to a day six years earlier. My mother was carrying my then baby sister and gripping my hand so tightly. Terror filled her eyes as she looked out the window of our Cairo apartment. The flash of bombs lit up the night sky and silhouetted darkened buildings. The air smelled of spent firecrackers. Israeli jets were bombing a nearby airport. A staccato of red tracers shot upward toward them, searching, not finding.

In June 1967, the Israeli Air Force struck airports across Egypt, targeting runways and rendering them useless, then picked off jet fighters on the ground. Egypt lost nearly its entire Air Force in a matter of hours. Then, in a haphazard retreat, the exposed Egyptian army suffered extensive losses and ultimately surrendered the Sinai Desert with hardly a fight. Victory for Israel was swift in what came to be known as the Six-Day War. For Egyptians, it was a humiliating defeat; a war lost as soon as it began.

In the few years that followed the '67 war, Israel built one of the most formidable defensive lines the world had known, the Bar Lev Line, on the eastern shore of the Suez Canal. A seemingly impenetrable seventy-foot-high wall of sand studded with anti-tank mines spanned the length of the canal. Behind it, thirty-three heavily fortified military installations and hundreds of tanks kept watch, ready to open fire on Egyptian forces should they try to cross the canal and retake the Sinai. To Israel and the world, any such attempt by Egypt would have been suicidal. To Egyptians, the Bar Lev Line was

an ever-present reminder of their defeat, a stain on their national honor.

The world didn't seem to care about the lost pride of a defeated Egypt. Not as long as Arab oil was flowing, not with the Israeli military appearing, by all accounts, invincible, and not with the Arab nation lacking the military capability to change the reality on the ground. Egyptians, it seemed, were expected to simply live with their June '67 defeat and accept the occupation of their cherished Sinai by their enemy. Egypt's prized Suez Canal, a source of international prestige and badly needed money, would have to sit idle with Israeli soldiers on its eastern shore, taunting and humiliating. Nothing to be done about it, the world thought.

Six years later, I stood by my father in front of the television in our Los Angeles apartment, neither of us able to speak. A surge of patriotism rushed through me, and I felt my heart race as I watched columns of Egyptian tanks and infantrymen pour into the Sinai Desert to reclaim our occupied land.

I wished I was back in Egypt. I belonged in Cairo streets, among the crowds in Tahrir Square, all of us proudly waving our flag with the golden eagle. Had I been older than my twelve years, they might have let me donate blood. A little older yet, and maybe they would have given me a post where, ever-vigilant, I would stand with my finger on a trigger.

Why had my family ever left Egypt? I remember asking myself. And when the answer came to me, I felt ashamed. We left a defeated, virtually bankrupt nation for the American promise of economic prosperity. We left for the possibility of buying our own home, a car, and a television for every room. Things that seemed so trivial as I considered them in that moment.

I pulled myself away from the television, took another newspaper from the stack, pounded each fold flat, and

stretched a rubber band around it. The rubber band snapped in my hand. I felt the burn on my fingers and in my soul.

#

The Yom Kippur War coincided with the month of Ramadan. I had always cherished the joyful celebration of this holy time in Egypt. I remembered the children carrying colorful, candle-lit holiday lanterns and prancing on the sidewalks in the early evening. I had watched their blue, red, and yellow lights dance on the sides of buildings as they sang, skipped, and twirled. But this Ramadan would be different, I knew. Lights in Egyptian cities would be extinguished, even the lanterns, to deprive enemy bombers of easy targets during their nighttime air raids.

That year, in America, Ramadan would be stranger yet.

In a time before call waiting, telephone lines were constantly busy. Our receiver sat on the hook only moments before the phone rang again. Instead of offering the customary Ramadan greetings, callers asked, "Are you watching this?" Shock and disbelief robbed the color from my parents' faces even as they tried to reassure acquaintances who feared for relatives at home, for Egypt. The calls often ended with "Alhamdulillah," an expression of gratitude and praise to God for the early military successes we were witnessing.

The day after the war began, Sunday, the downtown Los Angeles mosque was filled to capacity. Emotions in the grand room peaked with pride and hope. The fiery sermon the Imam gave rendered his voice raw. All in the mosque raised their hands to God. We prayed for victory, and more than that, we prayed for redemption. Let it not be like the last time. Let it not be another Six-Day war—another humiliation. At the end, the Imam gave many of the worshipers, including me, a firm handshake. He told me to be brave, to be proud. I nodded and told him that I would. But this, I later learned, would not

be easy.

#

Monday afternoon, I sat in my seventh-grade classroom waiting for an instructor to arrive and begin teaching a subject I was hardly interested in. I wanted to be home, to pull a newspaper from the stack and thumb through it, looking for a headline with the word "...Egypt." How many miles would it say we had taken back from our occupied land? How many enemy jets had our SAM-6 missiles shot down? And would it answer the big question: Were we still winning?

I fanned through pages of pencil sketches in my notebook, talentless drawings of tanks and jets in desert combat. I was startled by a voice close to my ear. "Your country attacked my country," said the taller of two boys standing over me, a known bully.

His country? He wasn't Israeli. There was nothing foreign about him. I was the immigrant, the one with the strange name. The one who stuttered trying to decipher English words in a textbook while other kids snickered. I did not respond.

With his finger poking my thin chest, punctuating each word, he said: "Are you happy about it?" Again, I didn't answer. He rested a fist on my desk, his face close to mine. His friend stood behind him, helping make the point. I looked for the teacher, who still hadn't entered the classroom. I scanned the room for anyone who might help, anyone who would be on my side. Kids chatted and clowned about. None of them had taken notice, nor would they help if they had.

Looking up at my adversaries, I cowered. This was their classroom, their school. I was an immigrant, tolerated in their country. I was alone. I flinched at the boy's feigned punches. I endured his provoking slaps, barely blocking them, never getting up from my seat. I did nothing to stop him. Finally, the teacher walked into the room and told my

assailant to take his seat. The insult of that day lingered, as did the shame of having not stood up for my country's honor.

In the days that followed, one question played on my mind. The American boy had said that Egypt attacked his country. Was Egypt fighting Israel or America? Or were they one and the same in this? How could America someday be my country, my home, if it gave aid and comfort to my enemy?

#

Ten days into the war, America's Department of Defense delivered on a promise: an airlift so massive it reconstituted the Israeli army, which had been heavily compromised on the Egyptian front. Now, with even more advanced weapons in Israeli hands, the tide of the war would turn, and not in Egypt's favor. I pulled the knife's edge through the string holding my daily stack of newspapers. I took the top copy, and without looking at it, I began folding; the right third over the middle, and the left third over that.

The phone stopped ringing. Conversations about the goings-on of the war were less frequent, more subdued. I heard adults around me grumble about Egypt having to make do with outdated and inferior weapons from the Soviets. No bombers, no long-range missiles, only defensive weapons for Russia's Arab client. In the eyes of many, this reflected the Soviet's long-standing strategy: to help Egypt survive, but never win a war. A victorious Egypt might need Russia less. And if Russia lost its largest client in the region, its influence over the oil-rich Middle East would diminish. Frustrated by the limited access to needed weapons, Egypt's then President Anwar El-Sadat had expelled 15,000 Russian military advisors a year before the start of the Yom Kippur War. While Israel had the full might of American power behind it, Egypt's backer seemed less committed.

As a child, watching the politics play out with Egypt and America on opposite sides, I was torn. Where should my allegiance lie, with my native Egypt or my adopted U.S.? I feared what Americans would do to me, to my family, if they knew of my questionable loyalty.

#

A couple months passed, and the war was over. And mine, it seemed, was the last shaky voice crying out: "Egypt won. We did it." But my truth was cast aside as fables of super-human feats by Israeli soldiers in the battlefield took center stage. Then came the pictures, splashed across magazines. Handsome Israeli soldiers with lovely light-eyed girls posing next to American tanks. Rockstars selling victory, democracy, freedom, and sex; a marketing campaign for a Western audience. And in time, I began to doubt my own truth. Perhaps our victory, the one talked about in Egyptian media, was exaggerated, even fabricated.

My heroes, once again, became cartoonish villains, unsophisticated and unrefined. Hopeless in their fight against a foe superior in every way. They were faceless in a grainy sepia-toned picture, a sandy landscape. Draw your best dark-faced bad guy here.

For the rest of that school year, my classmates largely ignored me. I was that kid who held on to a fantasy, a crazy story about a victorious Egypt, a version of events neither believed nor cared about. The world had moved on. In a noise-filled classroom, I sat alone.

#

A year later, in eighth grade homeroom, a boy with an accent introduced himself to me.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

“Egypt.”

“Oh... I’m from Israel.”

I tensed up, saying nothing.

He leaned over. “Here, in America... no war. Okay?”

Before I knew it, before I decided whether it was something I wanted to do, I extended my hand. We shook.

My new friend asked me if I had seen any fighting when I lived in Egypt. I thought of the night when I stood alongside my mother and watched the airport burn.

“No. I didn’t see any fighting.” I lied.

“I did,” he said. “Egyptian jets attacked my town. For a while, it was maybe once a week.”

I felt a jolt of pride run through me, though I kept it hidden from my friend. His words affirmed my belief. Egyptians had fought back. They had punished the enemy for its sins. That evening, done with my paper route, I held my bike on top of a hill. The empty green bags hung from the handlebars. Traffic had died, and the street was empty. I straddled the now light and agile bike, unburdened by the weight of newspapers. I rocked the Schwinn forward, then back, then forward again. I kicked off. Peddling, harder, faster. I raced down the hill, the cold air making my eyes water. The empty bags fluttered at my sides, their straps pulling. Could they tear away? I peddled faster still. A jitter, then a high-speed wobble tested me, but I held on. The fluttering sound grew louder in my ears, a make-believe engine, roaring—an Egyptian jet fighter. My front wheel lifted. I soared into the night sky.

#

Decades later, more was revealed about the Yom Kippur War—declassified top-secret reports, clandestine tape

recordings, and never-before-seen newsreels. First came the picture of the Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, her hand holding up her forehead, distraught at the calamity of a war she never saw coming. Then, a video of the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, shaken, looking small in his military uniform, broadcasting to a frantic Israel on October 10, 1973; his words offering no relief. I pointed at the computer screen: There it is. Proof, we beat them. From their own mouths. Then, as the video stopped playing and the screen went black, I saw my own reflection. Sitting alone, no one by me to co-witness.

More recordings came: soldiers' recollections, nightmares, acts of heroism and of humanity. One such recording still lives in my mind. A transmission by an Israeli soldier, a hold-out in an underground Bar Lev Line fortification. His frantic calls for reinforcements—tanks, airstrikes—go unheeded on a static-filled radio channel. He pleads for his life as the structure collapses around him. His voice strains, calling for God as artillery shells fall. "They're coming... breaking in... I'm burning." About to meet his end, he curses the ones who would leave him to his fate: "God will not forgive you..." Then, his final words, to his mother.

I had not prepared myself for this; a voice reaching through the decades and gripping my chest.

#

When she was in the ninth grade, my daughter's class was given an assignment. "We're going to have a town meeting about the Arab-Israeli conflict," she said. "Each of us will talk, like...you know...like we live there. Like Arabs or Israelis."

"Easy A," I said. "I got you covered, kid. Your dad knows everything about the Arab-Israeli conflict."

"I'm supposed to give the perspective of someone my age. A boy. His name is Shlomo."

"Shlomo? What kind of an Arabic name is Shlomo?"

"It's not Arabic, Dad. It's an Israeli name."

"Wait. Does your teacher know you're Egyptian?"

"Yes."

I was impressed. It was a lesson in empathy.

#

Through the years, I had watched one fictionalized Mossad movie after another. Miraculous ventures projecting Israeli superiority. The same story, repeating, image-building, propagandizing.

But in 2013, I came across "the postmortem." That was what the senior CIA analysts and directors called their video-recorded discussion held at the Richard Nixon Library. It was the intelligence community's examination of what had gone wrong, how the CIA and the Israeli Mossad failed to see the Yom Kippur War coming. As the experts spoke, I leaned in. I watched, rewound, and watched again.

They said it plainly. Egypt's President Sadat launched a war of deception that took advantage of inflexible American and Israeli mindsets. No one believed Sadat would start a war with his country in such a weak military position. Israel, still high on its victory in the Six-Day War, believed no Arab nation, least of all Egypt, had the will to fight. With every Sadat promise of an attack that didn't come to be, with every mobilization of his military forces that he later recalled, Israel and the West became more certain that war would come no time soon. They grew to disregard what appeared to be Arab bravado, saber-rattling, amounting to nothing.

No one saw Sadat's gamble for what it was: a limited war, not to conquer an enemy, but to reanimate a dead peace process.

#

Heroes achieve what in the moment seems unimaginable. In the first two hours of the war, Egyptian forces had overrun the formidable Bar Lev Line. They advanced into the Sinai and retook the Suez Canal, along with seven-hundred square miles of enemy occupied land. In so doing, they ripped away Israel's mask of invincibility.

As the war progressed, Israel gained momentum. Israeli forces moved into the western side of the Suez Canal and encircled the Egyptian Third Army, cutting off its supply lines. But, as a condition of the ceasefire agreement that ultimately ended the war, Israel retreated from those gains. Pundits took turns spinning the outcome of the war, each claiming victory for their side. As, I presume, they forever will.

Having achieved his objectives in the Yom Kippur War and created a path for diplomacy, President Sadat walked into the Israeli Knesset and began the work of peacemaking. This time, Israel was less eager to let slip such an opportunity. It would no longer reject out of hand peace efforts that required it to surrender occupied Egyptian land.

I still remember Sadat putting a match to his smoking pipe and saying: "No one will capitulate here. I am not ready to capitulate. [We will not give up] an inch of land or a grain of sand from our land."

In signing the 1978 Camp David Peace Accord with Israel, Egypt gave up its privilege to use its military against Israel in support of its Arab neighbors. But after twenty-five years of war, this was a privilege it no longer wanted. Within this Agreement, Egypt endorsed a framework for peace negotiations between Israel and its other Arab neighbors. This framework was used as a foundation for the Oslo Peace Accord signed by Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the early eighties.

I knew the Camp David Peace Agreement was an admirable achievement. But at the time of its signing, my teenage heart had not yet learned to appreciate the virtue in peace-making. It still sought vengeance. I wanted the chance to stand before a classroom and bask in the light of undisputed victory. I searched for evidence of victory on the battlefield through books and news articles. What I found was this: No longer would Egypt stand in the shadow of its defeat in the Six-Day War. No longer could its enemy claim invincibility, not without a note in the margins, not without a question mark. That was what mattered to sixteen-year-old me.

On October 6th, 1981, the eighth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Sadat was assassinated. It was then that many began to speak of the man's achievements and sacrifices, to contemplate his legacy. Anwar El-Sadat; the great strategist on the world stage. The hero who did more than win a military objective, who did more than win back the Sinai for Egypt. Here was the man who successfully executed a war to win peace.

#

I recently turned on a Scooby-Doo episode for my grandson. It was The Funland Robot episode. One of my favorites, I told him. At the end, after the unmasking, I said: "You know, in real life, it's not so easy to tell good guys from bad, winners from losers. Sometimes, you have to look hard to find the truth. It's not like in cartoons."

My grandson looked at me and said: "That show was boring, Grampa." He reached for his game controller, ready for combat. Enemy soldiers scurried, shooting. He returned fire.

My daughter entered the room. "Time to go home, baby," she said, as blood splattered the inside of the television screen.

"One more minute, mom." He answered, ditching his AR-15 for a pump-action shotgun.

“Are you good with him playing these games?” I asked. “I mean, they desensitize.” She gave me that I-can-raise-my-child-on-my-own-thank-you-very-much look.

“Now, young man!” she said to my grandson. He obediently clicked off the game.

Teasing, I said: “Next time you come here, boy, you leave that game controller at home. We’ll play checkers.” I wanted to see them roll their eyes in exasperation at Grampa. They did, and I laughed.

Violent as my grandson’s game was, it fostered no hatred in him. I knew he saw no evil in his cartoon-like adversaries. I hoped that things would always remain this way, that he would never know a real enemy.

As I watched my grandson leave, I thought about another boy—on his bike, tossing newspapers. I thought about that boy seeking retribution. I thought about the rage in his voice, unheard. I thought about him growing up, so long unable to see the glory in the fight for peace.

New Poetry by Almyr Bump: “Plowing Water”

New poem by Almyr Bump: “Plowing Water”

New Poetry by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat”

New Poem by J.S. Alexander: “Sabat (Loyalty)”

New Fiction by Adrian Bonnenberger: “King Tide”

We'd been expecting the fascists for a few days but they'd gotten hung up on Newark. Usually they moved fast. Camden had gone quiet just a week after the government had evacuated from Washington, D.C. to some secret location. Then, abruptly, the fascists flowed south, a growing mob of pickup trucks and tractor trailers bristling with guns, fuel, flags, and ammunition: to Richmond, although Baltimore was closer; finally hastening back northward after wrecking that old city, the capital of The Confederacy. Each of those cities had fallen in weeks, carved into pieces and starved, capitulating before the threat of fire and murder that appeared to have come anyway, in spite of surrender. Here and there the cities of the South and Midwest still stood, but were cut off – separate from each other, separate from us, isolated by long stretches of forest and strip malls patrolled by men in multicam holding AR-15s and shotguns, lines of utility vehicles across tracts of the largely deracinated terrain.

The suburbs across the river in New Jersey were filling up with refugees and transients, huddled between the homes of New Yorkers who could afford to live outside the city. Hedge fund managers, software engineers, salesmen, bankers, cops, lawyers, university faculty handed out blankets and food at

first. Then later they became stingy, alert to any word of crime. These people were of the city but not in it – their loyalty, dubious. The thousands and later hundreds of thousands fleeing the fascists were bound for sadness and tragedy, driven from homes that would likely never be seen again. Once the center began to crumble, none but the bravest returned to their previous lives, and the bravest were not those running headlong from the hatchet and gunfire.

Many of us still half-believed the whole thing was a joke taken too far, a mass hallucination or something illegal rather than outside the law, a matter for police or maybe the FBI. Even after D.C. and Richmond and Camden we felt that it would be stopped somewhere, by others. Certainly not by us. Psychologically we were in the denial stage of grief, preparing, though far too slowly for what was coming. In that moment they had laid siege to Newark. While we'd been waiting for the fascists to mount their inevitable northern push, the push had happened; like a bullet, or a hypersonic missile, they'd moved too fast for us to track.

This sent us into a frenzy of preparation. The George Washington Bridge came down, and the Tappan Zee. All week, tens of thousands of anxious eyes stared round the clock at the western approaches to New York. But once news from Newark slowed, it was almost a week before we saw the first movement from our perch in Manhattan, across the Muhheakunnuk River.

I'd dropped out of my fifth year at Muhlenberg college to join the 1st People's Revolutionary Corps. Academics came slowly to me so college was taking more time than it should have. My dad didn't believe much in getting a bachelor's degree. He'd done fine for himself in construction without one. But it was important to my mom that I graduate from college. That's how I ended up at Muhlenberg instead of the Army or Marines like my dad wanted. As far as I knew, my folks supported the fascists. I hadn't heard from them in months.

Now I was in a reserve detachment of scouts stationed at an observation post (or OP) in what used to be called Washington Heights. We'd renamed it Canarsee Hill. The OP overlooked the Muhheakunnuk. Mostly we were watching to the northwest but just before the weekend, Smith, another scout, who had come down from Yonkers, spotted men moving on the bluffs opposite us due west. Smith called Vargas over to the telescope to confirm.

Vargas was our leader, though our unit's military hierarchy was still inchoate. We didn't have ranks, we were all volunteers and organized in a broadly egalitarian way. He was our leader because he'd been (or claimed to have been) an Army Scout during the 1990s, and had definitely been in the fighting that first broke out south of here. He seemed to know his business and we respected him for his quiet competence and willingness to teach us basic fieldcraft. His crypto-reactionary loyalties and remarks we overlooked with trepidation.

"That's them all right," he said, his flat, battered mug pressed squinting and grimacing against the telescope. Vargas's life hadn't been easy since leaving the military, and in addition to a scar running across his face from eye to cheek, his nose had been mashed in a fight and never fixed. He motioned to me. "Take a look kid. See how they move? That's discipline. They're out of range but they're spaced out, two by two. Way you need to remember to do things. Understand?"

In the round, magnified slice of world across the river, there they were: camouflaged shapes hunched over, moving tactically in pairs. One would stop while another moved, rifles up and at the high ready, in both pairs, presenting an appearance of constant motion and menace, rippling like a snake.

"Here, you've had enough," Vargas said, taking back his position. "Ok: total 8 troops, that's a squad... one tactical vehicle. Looks like an M-ATV. Must be another back there

somewhere, or a technical. Smith, you report that up to HQ yet?"

Smith gestured at the radio. "It's offline. I think the batteries are dead."

"Christ," Vargas mumbled. "Well call them with your phone. Look this is important. Tonight get new batteries from the command post."

"I'll get the batteries," I said, wanting to impress Vargas. Also my girlfriend, Tandy, lived down near 180th. It wasn't far off the way to her place, an excuse to drop in and get some home cooking.

"You think we'll see some action?" Smith said.

"Action, action, all you want is action," Vargas said. "If you'd seen what I did in DC, you wouldn't be in such a hurry to get your gun on. But yeah, if there's one thing the fascists mean, it's action. Sooner or later."

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orps at that point was mustered mostly from New England and the suburbs of NYC itself. It hadn't seen fighting in the winter and spring since the contested election. Smith and most of the others (myself included) hadn't been there in D.C. when the fascists had made it almost to the White House and a motley, improvised group of citizens, soldiers, and loyal law enforcement had gone street to street pushing them back so the government could escape. Vargas was there – he'd been someone's bodyguard. Who – a Senator – a woman from New York? The Midwest? What was her name... It doesn't matter any more, though at the time it was an interesting anecdote...

Like everywhere, New England had seen violence when the fascists rose up, but nothing like what happened on the West Coast, the South, or the mid-Atlantic. Up in New England things had been resolved quickly. There weren't enough fascists to make a go of it outside New Hampshire, and those fascists who did rise up in New Hampshire were brutally repressed after their comrades were defeated in Boston, Springfield, and Hartford. Enough police forces and national guard units had refused to betray their oaths to the Constitution, enough of the democratic revolutionary spirit remained within the breasts of New England men and women, that the reactionaries there had floundered and failed early – spectacularly so, even.

Whether they did so as part of a plan or not, what the fascists of New England accomplished was to tie northern pro-democracy states up with fighting internal enemies instead of helping their neighbors. We didn't know that at the time, but at moments when swift and decisive help might have forestalled great bloodshed, the attention on potential local foes consumed everyone's attention. It wasn't long before a second wave of those enemies would appear at their borders, a howling, hostile army.

But in most other places the fascists had translated their

quick offensive into victory more often than not and with surprising scope. Perhaps they sensed their vulnerabilities lay in us being able to organize our superior strength in manpower and industry. They'd been chewing the national and most state governments up since January, keeping the legitimately elected authorities and their forces on their heels, hitting them over and over where they least expected it. In our region Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had time to brace and fortify, so the fascists ran at Camden with full strength – wiped it nearly off the map. In their haste to capture Newark, they'd surrounded nearly 22,000 anti-fascist volunteers there, the entire 3rd People's Revolutionary Corps. Most evenings one could see flashes and hear the fascist artillery thumping in the distance.

Smith and Boucher and a few of the other guys had been excited to see the fascists arrive. To them it meant taking part in a battle. Boucher, a Marxist from New London, compared them to the Germans outside Moscow. Morale was high, and Vargas didn't do much to pour cold water on it.

A few hours after reporting their scouts up to higher, we'd observed several armored fighting vehicles and a tank maneuvering on the bluffs. The fascists put up a couple drones and tried to fly them across the river, then sent them high into the air when they realized we were outside the drones' range. What struck me more than the size of the group was its cohesion, and its audacity. They moved up to a point and acted. They didn't ask for permission or wait for orders from higher. We had armored fighting vehicles, we had tanks, just like them. We didn't have artillery – only the Army had artillery – but we had drones. Seeing the fascists there, flying their black and white flag with a blue stripe down the middle, made me nervous. They'd reduced the space between them and us to that narrow band of water on which so much depended. A free and diverse New York City, the heart of our revolution, was exposed and vulnerable. How had this happened?

A half hour or hour later, further down the river, the fascists launched a motorboat. Vargas told me to observe its progress through the telescope and report movement to him as it crept across the sun-dappled surface. The boat circled wider and wider, seeing how close it could come to our lines. At the middle of the river at the apex of its approach it abruptly beelined for the city. An old red "MAGA" flag was visible on its stern, flapping in the wind. The boat's three occupants wore tactical vests and helmets; one was scanning our side with a sniper rifle, another was piloting, and the third was talking on a portable radio, probably doing to us what we should've been doing to them.

I appreciated their daring. They presented a confident, professional air, like they were straight out of a movie or video game about the Navy SEALs. They knew exactly what to do. Slapping across the water at high speed, these fascists, veterans of the bigger battles to the south, were getting down to business, getting it done.

We were far enough upriver from the source that we saw the boat tossed high into the air, tumbling end over end from the explosion before we heard the shot and the boom. No forms emerged from the wreckage, and the boat sank slowly into the river. This was the first time I'd seen our side fire first. I was glad we had.

Shortly after the fascists had turned their attention to Richmond, while New England, New York, and Pennsylvania were wrestling with their own fascist problems, New York City had declared itself a free city. Run by an alliance of Democratic Socialists, progressive Democrats, anarchists, and independents, the historic agreement put an end to strikes and labor walk offs, stabilized a questionable police force, and, in short, unified and anchored what we all hoped would be a fresh start for the city and maybe for America, too. Hopes

were high for a nonviolent revolution ushering in the promise of a full, meritocratic democratic polity.

Many people left the city, but many more came, attracted by the promise of a just new world. One of the first things we did was rename things: The Hudson River became The Muhheakunnuk, or "River that flows two ways," in the original Lenape. Madison Avenue became Liberty Avenue. Rockefeller Plaza, Veblen Plaza. Trump Tower became Mohican tower, for the indigenous Mohican peoples. And so forth.

Where we could reduce the damage done by naming places and things for white European settler colonialists who caused real and literal ethnic cleansing and genocide, we remedied as best we could. While the fascists were shooting and murdering, we were getting resolutions passed in bipartisan committees. As the shitlib pro-government forces were fighting desperate retrogrades, we were setting up a new way of compensating labor on the blockchain: Hours (pronounced "ours") of labor were our new, profession-blind currency. A person worked the hours they did and were rewarded based on that flat rate, digitally, plus a small bonus in consideration for specialty labor or difficult labor nobody wanted to do. My daily wages, for example, were 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ Hours per day: 12 Hours for the 12 hours of work I did for the militia, plus a 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ Hour bonus for the hazardous nature of my work (though I had, up until that point, done little hazardous duty – that would change soon).

What a sound and simple system; what a fair and just means of compensation. I'd never seen anything like it, and haven't since, though home ownership and other realities of adult life have given me a better appreciation for modern economies than I had in my youth.

The People's Council of New York had compensated those New Yorkers who had stayed in the city with Hours on a prorated basis for the dollars and real estate it confiscated in order to trade with external partners, and signed an alliance with

its neighboring states, the state of New York, and the federal government. Everyone was relieved it hadn't come to shooting. Putting nearly 120,000 people under arms, such as myself, made the city by itself one of the largest standing armies on the territory of the former U.S.A. We were all proud of what we'd accomplished in such a short amount of time.

At the end of our shift, I took the spent batteries from our radio and headed down to HQ. The arrival of the fascists had sent everyone into a frenzy of activity and worry. When I poked my head into the command tent, I caught our commander, a woman who had flown C-17s for the Air Force, yelling at our XO for the comms situation. I saw that there weren't any fresh batteries to be had, then made a swift retreat from the scene so as not to contribute to the man's confusion and embarrassment.

"Where's the RT0," I asked one of the guards who was vaping and lounging outside the entrance.

"Over there," he said, gesturing upslope toward another tent about 50 meters away. I walked over, passing three soldiers setting up some sort of fortified machinegun position.

"Look downhill at the road. Now look at the sandbags. Now look at the barrel of the gun," the first soldier was saying. "Aha! Aha! Now do you see the problem? Move the machinegun around, like so... now you see more problems. Do it again!"

Scenes like this were common. None of us had more than a week's training – it wasn't even formal training, more like pre-basic. While there were more leftist veterans than many had probably thought before the war, in general the stereotype of veterans as moderates or pro-fascist was pretty true. A small group of sympathetic veterans were running round-the-clock training ranges up in Connecticut and Long Island, and NYC's soldiery was permitted to access this as part of our

agreement with our neighbors.

At the signals tent, I found the commander's radio operator fiddling with two banks of battery rechargers. "You need to get these up to your position ASAP, the CO's on the warpath about bad comms and using smartphones," he said.

"I'll be back in six hours," I said, and left the heavy green blocks on the black recharger alongside several others, while the recharge status blinked red.

Next I headed north to Tandy's building, a fin de siècle mansion that had been converted to high-ceilinged apartments, and was now housing for students and workers. It was a 10 minute bike ride from our positions, or a 25 minute jog, easily accomplished if the sirens signaled an attack.

I checked my Hours on my phone which promptly updated on the hour with my day's work, plus the bonus for military service. Then I stopped at a bodega for provisions. One of the best-managed parts of the city was its city-wide revolutionary food cooperative. Food came in from upstate and Connecticut, and was rationed. There was enough of it on any given day, but hoarding was strictly forbidden so what was available was whatever happened to be on hand, often local produce.

The proprietor of this bodega was an Iraqi man who'd immigrated to the U.S. after the war there, Ahmed. Together with his family he supervised the bodega's co-op labor, and had a keen eye for organizing. He greeted me when he saw me walk in, much as he greeted everyone in uniform.

"My friend, thank you for protecting us! You must be hungry: what would you like? Eggs, corn from Poughkeepsie, sausage? Please, take what you need, eat, stay strong and healthy! And say hello to your beautiful girlfriend! You're a lucky man!"

Ahmed may or may not have known me, but he certainly *seemed* to know me, and that was appreciated in a strange city. I picked

up a couple sausages, a quart of milk, and a half dozen eggs. There wasn't any cheese, so I had to hope Tandy or one of what she called her "mates" had some at their place. Then, in the back, I procured a glass bottle of Long Island red wine.

"Five and one half Hours," Ahmed said. "Did you hear our forces repelled a fascist invasion today? Maybe you were part of that?"

He was talking about the boat. "We spotted them," I said. "It wasn't anything serious."

"Please, it wasn't serious, you sound like me when I was in the Iraqi Army. I helped liberate Mosul from ISIS, you know. It's never serious. Until you're in the hospital!" He raised his shirt, and pointed at several scars near his abdomen. "Here, take some chewing gum, free. It helped me stay awake during long nights. When you don't have your girlfriend around," he said, winking conspiratorially.

Tandy was still at class when I arrived. James, a PhD candidate in Political Science at Columbia greeted me at the door and when he saw what I was carrying he invited me in, shepherding me to the kitchen where Vince, a militiaman from Danbury, Connecticut, gladly took my contribution to the dinner. "You're always welcome here," Vince said, "when you have food and wine!

This was one practical way in which being a militia volunteer translated into good social standing, but I didn't lord it over people, just showed up with what I had and got whatever amounted to a single portion in return.

This particular collective was mostly students, so my portion was usually appreciated, in spite of my taking part in what was a violent endeavor. Only the most radical students felt that in defending our political ideals, I was participating in an immoral and unethical war, but even they sat down to eat with me. The main course was a cabbage- and barley- based soup

with my eggs and sausages as a garnish— again, no cheese — food wasn't in short supply, but the variety had significantly diminished thanks to the war. The Californians and Midwesterners were probably eating great.

Seven of us sat around a small round table. I was briefly the center of attention as I talked about the motorboat reconnaissance, and the arrival of the fascists. Before I offered my eyewitness account, I was treated to another more outlandish product of the rumor mill I'd first encountered at Ahmed's: the fascists, I heard, had attempted a crossing in force, and were driven back only by the killing of their general in the lead boat. I was glad to correct the record.

My much more prosaic account of the fascists' arrival was held up to the various perspectives present at the meal. Some felt as my fellow militiamen did, that this was an opportunity to strike back while the fascists were few, that we should take the fight to them. Others that the fascists were too strong — that they'd make their way across the river sooner or later and so we should head up to Canada while we still could. Most held the opinion that nonviolent resistance was the way to resolve this, that fighting would only lead to more fighting, that perhaps the situation could be resolved through discussion and diplomacy. Reports of atrocities, this last group dismissed as liberal, pro-government propaganda.

The apartment's owner, who also owned the building and had been well liked and admired before the war for his egalitarian and attentive approach to ownership, asked why we couldn't come to some accommodation with the fascists.

"Let them have their wretched dystopian hell. Let them live in the rot that accompanies dictatorship, fascism, and all abominable authoritarian places," he said. "Give them the land they have and tell them not to come any further."

"What about our comrades in Newark?" said one of his tenants,

Jenny, a black girl whose parents had moved to New York City from South Carolina in the 1960s for work. Jenny worked at a small factory sewing uniforms for the militia, and was one of the more prescient of us when it came to the threat of the fascists, and the importance of fighting. "If we abandon those like us in the South, or in Newark, why did we abstain from voting for Biden? If we don't fight for our convictions, to help each other, shouldn't we just join the fascists?"

"I voted for RFK Jr.," said the former apartment owner to good natured jeers and boos, "*I voted for RFK Jr. and I'd do it again*" he yelled, with similar good-natured energy. Here, having voted for RFK Jr. was far less objectionable than voting for "Genocide Joe Biden," which was tantamount to heresy.

Vince spoke in the lull that followed the yelling. "Anyway the fascists have started and they won't stop. The real choices are Canada – assuming they don't roll up there next – or fight. Fight or flee and hope someone else beats them. They'll chase us to the end of the earth, they'll never halt. Might as well be here."

"They'll negotiate when they're punched out," said Christina, a journalism student at City University of New York and one of the more moderate people in the collective. She was a bit older, in her 40s, and had been a public school teacher during an earlier life that hadn't quite worked out on Long Island, near one of the Hamptons. "If we make a deal they agree to – ceasefire, a demarcation of borders – they'll just rearm and keep going. These people are always the same – Hitler, Genghis Khan, Putin, Alexander the Great. Read history. They stop when they're stopped, which is when they die. Because they know stopping means dealing with the violent energies they've unleashed, and they want to be fighting external enemies, not internal enemies."

"It would have happened sooner or later," added Jenny. "The

moderates, the Democrats and shitlibs spent the years since the end of the Cold War selling everything as fast as they could, and supporting global racism and genocide. They're as responsible for creating this movement as anyone else."

Sometimes I wished I was confident and practiced in my public speaking, like the students. My first day with the unit I'd brought this line of reasoning, about Biden and the Democrats and the shitlibs, to Vargas, and he'd scoffed at what he called my naiveté.

"What happened in D.C. was, when they couldn't get to the people they said they were mad at – the government, the globalists – the fascists made do with the vulnerable. They headed right for the poorest neighborhoods on their way out of the city and just about wrecked them," he'd said. "As bad as Biden and the Democrats were over the years, I've never saw the suburbs where most of his supporters lived reduced to a smoking ruin, their inhabitants murdered, captured, or fled."

I didn't mention that perspective here at the table. It didn't seem like the time or the place for it. Besides I wasn't sure what I thought about it all. Sometimes in describing the fascists as intolerant of other viewpoints and dogmatic in their application of violence, I thought maybe we were guilty of that, too, in some ways. Certainly nothing like what the fascists did, but still... when I thought about our project, sometimes I questioned its wisdom or justice.

"You'll never convince me violence is the answer," said James. Soft-spoken and charismatic, when he spoke, people listened. His father was a first-generation immigrant from Cuba, and his mother, a Chinese immigrant. They'd met in Flushing, Queens, a real American love story. "Violence begets violence. Without anyone to fight, the fascists will fight each other. Ultimately they'll lose interest in the cities and fall to quarreling among each other. You'll see."

We did see, just not in the way James meant. But those dark days were yet to come.

After dinner I waited around for Tandy, but she still hadn't come home. After an hour, still restless after the day's events, I decided that rather than hang around and look desperate, I'd put in some volunteer time. It was still too early to get the batteries. I picked up my rifle and wandered down to the Muhheakunnuk. It was summer, and the weather wasn't bad. Ideal for nighttime strolling provided one had the proper identification so one wasn't accidentally shot.

At the river's edge I stopped and stared at what remained of the George Washington Bridge. The moon illuminated the ruined structure's contours, rendered its demise somehow more tragic, more human. Its skeletal wreckage jutted up from the river's calm surface, like ancient ruins. In places, the bridge had twisted as it fell, partially damming the river's flow. Now it resembled nothing so much as a memorial to America, the ruins of a vision for peace and prosperity that could not last forever, because nothing in this universe ever does.

Destroying the GW made sense from the perspective of guns and firepower; the fascists had an edge in that department owing to personal stockpiles as well as those seized by various police and traitorous military units, but weapons require people, and they had far fewer volunteers than we did. In spite of their military successes, their victories over larger but poorly-led, poorly equipped units, everywhere they went they engendered fear and hatred, an occupying force that looked and talked like your racist neighbor. The strategy, then, was to attrit them, draw them into the cities, grind them down until there weren't enough of them to the point where we could start pushing back. Of course as I mentioned earlier the hope at that time was that some disaster or calamity or miracle would forestall our having to fight them

at all.

The fascists fielded excellent soldiers and combat leaders. Their units moved quickly and punched hard, and wrecked or absorbed local and state law enforcement organizations wholesale. Their units hung together well, and were led (mostly competently and capably) by veterans and former police officers.

Further down toward the bay loyalist Army units kept the Verrazano intact and were fortifying our side. I didn't understand the logic behind keeping that bridge but taking out the much larger GW and Tappan Zee. Maybe the destruction was partly for the symbolism. The fascists claimed to stand for law and order and tradition, and part of how it had all started (insane as it sounds to say it now looking back over the great Golgothas we made for each other during the fighting) was over statues and names. What was an iconic bridge between New York and New Jersey, named for one of America's founders, if not a statue, a monument to an idea like traffic, interstate commerce, a community based on trust and the exchange of goods?

Then again, it was also a symbolic loss for us—if we couldn't control the George Washington Bridge, what did that say about our long term prospects? Vargas said slowing the fascists down was our best shot and the people who were placed in charge of our efforts at first — people who as time would demonstrate were not up to the effort — were a little too enthusiastic about doing so, and less enthusiastic about actually preparing us for what came next.

Loyalist Army units had sealed the Lincoln Tunnel, which was similar to blowing it. The decision had been made with some procedure for removing concrete in mind, but when you walked down near midtown and saw the familiar entrance, saw the white and gray spill as though trolls had melted the world's biggest marshmallow, it was hard imagining that tunnel ever working

again.

From the bones of the fallen GW, I walked south for 5 minutes until I came to one of our fortified positions, down near the water, forward and downhill from HQ. It was crewed by my unit, but not one from the scouts, conventional infantry. We all had the same challenge and password. I didn't know this group, but stopped in to chat about the motorboat, ask if they'd seen any other movement. They hadn't. Didn't have thermal scopes down here, were worried about night landings and infiltration. I was shocked – I thought frontline positions would have thermals for sure.

"One every 5 positions," said the duty sergeant. "We rely on them and tracers to figure out what's happening. Moonlit night like tonight, seems unlikely we'll see any more action. Especially considering the tide."

I asked why the tide was significant. Prior to the war I hadn't spent much time near the ocean.

"Oh, a full moon corresponds with high tide. This particular high tide is what they call a "king tide," get them in winter and summer," the sergeant said. "Higher water means a longer distance to cross, and stronger currents. Groups trying to cross in boats would be pulled far upriver or downriver of where they were hoping to cross – maybe even swept out to ocean."

"You think the fascists know that?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it... they're mostly country folk, people who know things like the tides, and hunting. No that's not going to throw them. Sad to say it. That's the sort of thing our generals would probably fuck up."

We stood there quietly in awe of the sergeant's demoralizing statement, one we both felt to be true, the GW's shredded metal beams and cables clanking and squealing upriver. A

rumble of artillery in the distance and flashes of light roused us from our reverie.

"Won't be much longer. No way they can hold out without reinforcements."

"How do you know? How do you know they won't grind the fascists up street by street and block by block?"

The sergeant gestured toward the southern end of Manhattan. "Brother works at one of the fish markets. Buddy of his is a fisherman, solid American and New Yorker, told him he's been in touch with fishermen out of Newark. Apparently they're getting pummeled. Never seen the fascists put so much work into destroying a city."

"You think we should move down, try to help them?"

In response, the sergeant now nodded up at the GW's ruins. "Not part of the plan. Anyway, we barely know how to hold a defense. Most of the guys here have never fired their rifles, it's all we can do to point them in the right direction. How are we supposed to move to the attack?"

For this question and all the others, I had no answers. I'd joined the movement, I was a scout, and all I knew was that if the fascists wanted a fight, we ought to give it to them. Even then I sensed that simply to accommodate their desires would be a mistake. I looked out at the river, to where the boat had been earlier. The fighting would get so much worse in the days and months to come, far worse than almost anyone could imagine. But on that day, the thing that I noticed was the water – how high it had come up the pier – how close we were to it, lapping at the moorings and the concrete stairs, closer to our boots than it had ever been. And what terrible creatures teemed beneath its opaque surface!