New Interview from Larry Abbott: “The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen”

Art After War: The Visual Diary of Danish Soldier Henrik Andersen

As the memory of U.S. participation in the Afghanistan War fades in the minds of most Americans (the report on the exit fiasco notwithstanding), there was probably even less awareness that the military did not “go it alone” but had NATO allies, including Denmark (which entered the war 2001), one of the twelve founding nations in 1949. In Afghanistan the Danish military suffered 43 deaths from combat injuries, with 214 wounded in action. The raw number is low compared to the U.S. but was the highest number of deaths any country suffered if considered per capita, and so had an outsized impact.

That the Danish participation in the war still looms large in the country is reflected in an installation at The Danish War Museum in Copenhagen, which developed *A Distant War – A Danish Soldier in Afghanistan* over 10 years ago. It reflects an on-going presence of the war and its aftermath, a memory embodied in a physical space.

Mai Stenbjerg Jensen, the curator, told me that “the exhibition was made in collaboration with the Danish Armed Forces, more precisely with soldiers from ISAF team 10. Objects in the exhibition have all been brought home directly from Afghanistan. The exhibition shows the Danish soldier’s journey during a deployment to Afghanistan. The story is told from the soldiers’ perspective” (personal communication, July 4, 2023). The exhibit follows a ternary pattern of a soldier

going to war, in country, and back home.

The return home to civilian life can be problematic, as soldiers of any country's forces can be affected by PTSD. In the same way that the war for the American public is largely forgotten, the effects of war on the individual are likewise ignored or misunderstood by the broader civilian population. This can lead to a sense of dislocation and alienation. For many vets, the arts can offer a pathway to understanding their feelings of estrangement upon return by creating a visual or verbal representation of those feelings. Another intention of veterans' artistic creation is to share their work with both the general public and with other vets. The artwork can provide the non-vet with a window into the veterans' war and post-war experiences, helping to bridge the vet/non-vet divide, while sharing their work with other vets can both inspire and create a sense of community, thus reducing that sense of isolation and estrangement.

Henrik Andersen, now 40, served in the Danish army for 15 years and was deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan from February to August 2017. He had the rank of Specialist. When he returned home he was eventually diagnosed with PTSD. He decided that he would use artwork as a way of dealing with the various levels of how the diagnosis affected his daily life. Starting on January 1, 2022 and until December of that year he created a new watercolor each day. He notes in an artist's statement: "Follow my painted diary for better or for worse with my daily companion PTSD. A new picture every day in 2022 that both describes my world in and around me."

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen told me that “the diary concept was one my wife came up with, and for me a way to express myself daily through both good and bad days with a troubled PTSD mind, the thoughts, the emotions and sense of things which made an impact that particular day. I usually made the picture at the end of the day to make sure I got the most important impact of the day down on paper. It’s sometimes really hard to go to a mentally neutral place when you’re filled with anger, depression and loneliness. To empty your mind of judgmental thoughts and emotions and find that one thing that mattered just that day, that in itself can become therapeutic.”

He continued: “It would be really nice for me to be able to reach as many veterans as possible with my art. I hope that it will make a difference and maybe even inspire others and others like me, who are battling with the aftermath of their

deployment, to inspire others to find new ways to express their daily struggle. Even though I have my Instagram account, I've still not reached out to as many as I would like to. I do think it is an important message to get out to veterans and their families, that there are other ways to express yourself than you might think. My artwork is very personal to me, and it was a big deal for me to go public with it. It is meant as a daily diary in pictures and every day a new picture in 2022. My wife convinced me to make it public through Instagram, so I would post a new picture, describing my day emotionally or physically."

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

Andersen is not a formally-trained artist. He was adept at drawing and painting from childhood and was influenced by an eclectic mix of comics, the figures in *Warhammer*, movies, and

the classical sculptures and paintings in museums. Regardless of the medium or the genre he was always interested in how a thought, a question, or an emotion could be expressed. To him, the work begins with an idea and then the manner of expression evolves from the initial idea. The finished product, he says "comes from trial and error, both so rewarding and frustrating."

He does not plan any of his daily images but rather allows spontaneous moments to guide his work. The images are diverse, ranging from the relatively realistic to surrealistic to expressionistic. Even though they are created to reflect what Petersen is experiencing on any particular day they are not merely solipsistic and self-referential; they become a visual correlative that take on a broader meaning. The titles to the works help in this regard.

Photo courtesy of Mads Ullerup

The early pictures set the tone for much of the rest of the year. “Angsten og Vreden del. 1/The Anxiety and the Anger part. 1” is dated January 2, 2022, and depicts a fragment of a face in profile, just a nose and a wide-open mouth in a scream, with a ball of reddish-colored smoke emanating from the mouth.

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness”

“Selvvalgt ensomhed/Self-selected Loneliness” (January 3)

depicts an empty chair in a barren room; a day later, “Fjernsynet viser ingenting/TV is Showing Nothing,” a TV set in a bare gray room has a blank green screen, connoting that there is nothing worthwhile being presented. Each depicts a sense of emptiness and the inability of some vets to re-integrate into the broader civilian society. “Mareridt i rodt, derefter sort/ Nightmare in Red, Then Black,” completed a few days later, shows a bleak, war-torn landscape with a few burned trees in red, mirroring a burned-out psychological landscape.

“Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot”

The January 5 work “Stenen i maven, mørk og varm/ Stone in the abdomen, dark and hot” refers to the physical impact of PTSD, and suggests that PTSD affects the vet not just psychologically but also physically.

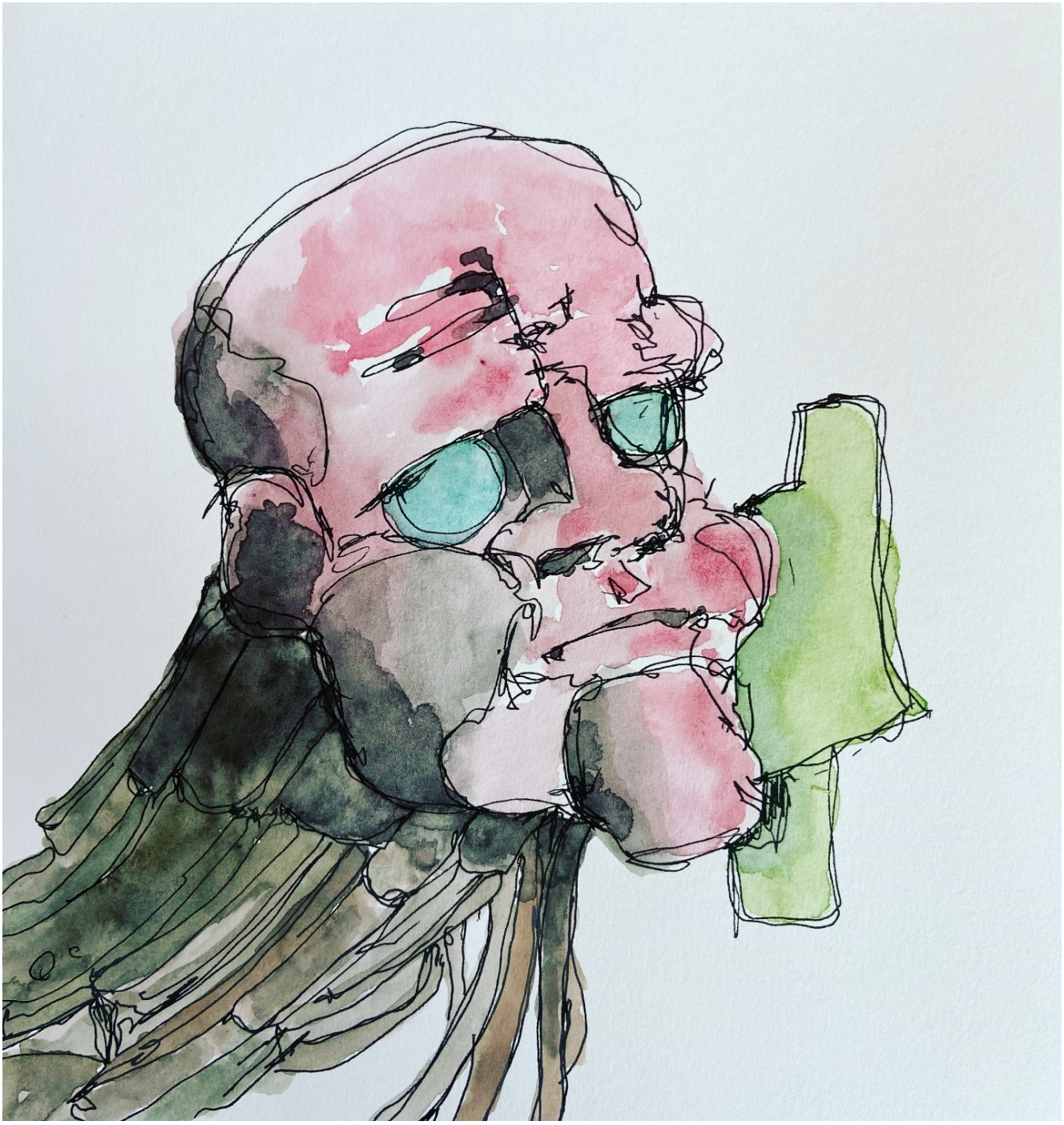
As the year progresses the imagery takes on different dimensions. A few works show recognizable scenes, like the river and bridge of “Ude for at se verden/ Out To See The World” (February 21), a floodlight on a lone power pole (“Sidst i rækken/Last in line,” March 6), steps going down a tunnel (“Sidst i rækken/ What happens if you look inside,” April 15), a dilapidated house with collapsed roof (“Ja der er brug for genopbygning/ Yes rebuilding is needed,” October 11), and an isolated cabin (“Hyggeligt uhyggeligt/Cozy Cozy,” October 14). Interestingly, none of these scenes include people, and even in “Cozy Cozy” there is a sense of isolation and remoteness, while in “What happens if you look inside” there is an intimation of foreboding as the steps lead to emptiness.

Faces, especially the eyes, and stylized bodies figure in a number of works, a few of which are self-portraits. “Sidder her bare del. 1, 2, 3/Just sitting here sharing 1, 2, 3” (August 26, 28, 29), is a triptych of sorts. The first two panels depict a skeletal figure sitting on a rock leaning its skull on its right “hand.” In 1, the background is a washed-out gray. The same figure is in panel 2, but some color has been added. In the third panel the figure is in the same posture but is now fleshed out in green. There are three human figures in the October 21 “Bare en fornemmelse/Just a Feeling.” The figures, in foreground, midground, and background, are dressed in brown and wear neckties, but are faceless. The two closest figures have flames around their feet, while the figure in the background is engulfed in flames. The figures appear impassive, accepting pain and death. “Sådan føler jeg mig/This is how i feel” (October 30)

is a self-portrait. The figure is fleshed, not skeletal, yet the posture is reminiscent of the skeletons in “Just sitting here sharing 1 and 2.” The eyes are wide and the face anguished, suggesting the pain caused by PTSD. Although the title “Trivialiteten er skræmmende/Triviality is scary” (February 8) might be considered a bit strange, it points toward the inability to fully reintegrate into the daily minutiae of civilian life. In this self-portrait, the predominant feature in the multicolored, somewhat blurred face are the eyes. Similar to other works, the eyes are wide, staring, fearful. In the July 23 “Selvportræt/Self-portrait” the face is disembodied, outlined in gray and framed by red, and seems to be floating in the clouds over mountains, leading to a sense of disconnection and alienation from the world.

“Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection”

There is also a self-portrait entitled “Tabt forbindelse/Lost Connection” from October 11. There is a disembodied head attached to tendrils with a green object next to the cheek. Both of these works connote a sense of loss, even a dissociation from one’s own body.



“Drukner på land/Drowning on land”

Much of the work has an abstract quality. “Drukner på land/Drowning on land” (November 10) depicts shapes of blue and brown, yet the title reveals a sense of struggle and suffocation. The November 2 “Tankespin/Mind spin” is a burst of reds, and represents both the explosions of war on the battlefield and in the mind. “Hvor brænder det ?//Where does it burn?” (August 20-22) is another series in three parts. In

each piece, stylized and intermixed dark and lighter blue smoke rises from what could be hills. Looking closely at the first panel one sees what could be disembodied eyes in the smoke. In part 2 the eyes become a bit more pronounced. In part 3 an outline of a face in dark red, with what appears to be bared fang-like teeth, is revealed in the smoke. There is an agonized expression on the face. Again, the burning can refer to the destruction of war and also to a mind on fire.

Not all the watercolors represent negative emotions. The March 8, “Et sælsomt lille væsen er mødt op/A happy little creature has appeared” shows a rabbit in a field. In “Foråret kommer nu/Spring is coming” from March 9 a sprig of green grows out of a finger on a green hand, showing the regenerative power of Nature. There is the playful “Guleroden er der, jeg kan se den nu/ The carrot is there, I can see it now” (April 4); a teddy bear is the subject of the October 18 “Ren kærlighed/Pure love”; likewise, a bird is the subject of “Maskot/Mascot” (November 10). These more “gentle” works indicate that even with the traumatic aftereffects of war there is the possibility for beauty and clarity.

As he looks back on his visual diary he told me “this picture [the April 1 “Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”] and others like it, of a withered, sick hand, gives a new meaning after I tried to take my own life in February 2023, and the attempt left me with exactly that, and really makes me think about the dual meaning in a lot of my pictures. I’ll admit that I didn’t succeed every day, but it was just as important to some days paint through a veil of tears or immense anger. I haven’t continued in 2023 with the diary but I am still painting, it is my little safe zone through the day and it has a calming effect to put paint on paper, the colors and the brush don’t expect anything from me, and as long as I don’t try to force something on to the paper it’s very fulfilling and stressless. My pictures surprise me

in ways I would never have imagined.”

“Hænderne, der skaber og ødelægger/The Hands that Create and Destroy”]

The range of Andersen's images offers a broad insight into the post-war experience, including the effects of PTSD. His images reveal the uncertainty and tenuousness of what any particular day will bring. At the same time, the very act of creation becomes a shield or bulwark against this uncertainty and provides a sense of order, not only in the finished product but also in the process itself, which provides a structure that my otherwise be lacking.

All statements by Mr. Andersen were from correspondence with him on October 7, 10 and 11, 2023.

All artwork images courtesy of Henrik Andersen.

All photographs of Andersen courtesy of Mads Ullerup.

Images available on Instagram: **henrikerladetmedptsd**

References:

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A Distant War: https://en.natmus.dk/museums-and-palaces/danish-war-museum/exhibitions/a-distant-war/

Mads Ullerup, "With Paintbrush and PTSD," October 22, 2022, https://www.veterancentret.dk/da/nyheder/2022/med-pensel-og-ptsd/

The Oscar-nominated Danish film *Krigen* (*A War*; 2015, directed by Tobias Lindholm), with echoes of *"Breaker Morant,"* examines the moral quandaries that war occasions and reveals that these dilemmas occur regardless of the size of a nation's forces. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/movies/tobias-lindholm-narrates-a-scene-from-a-war.html

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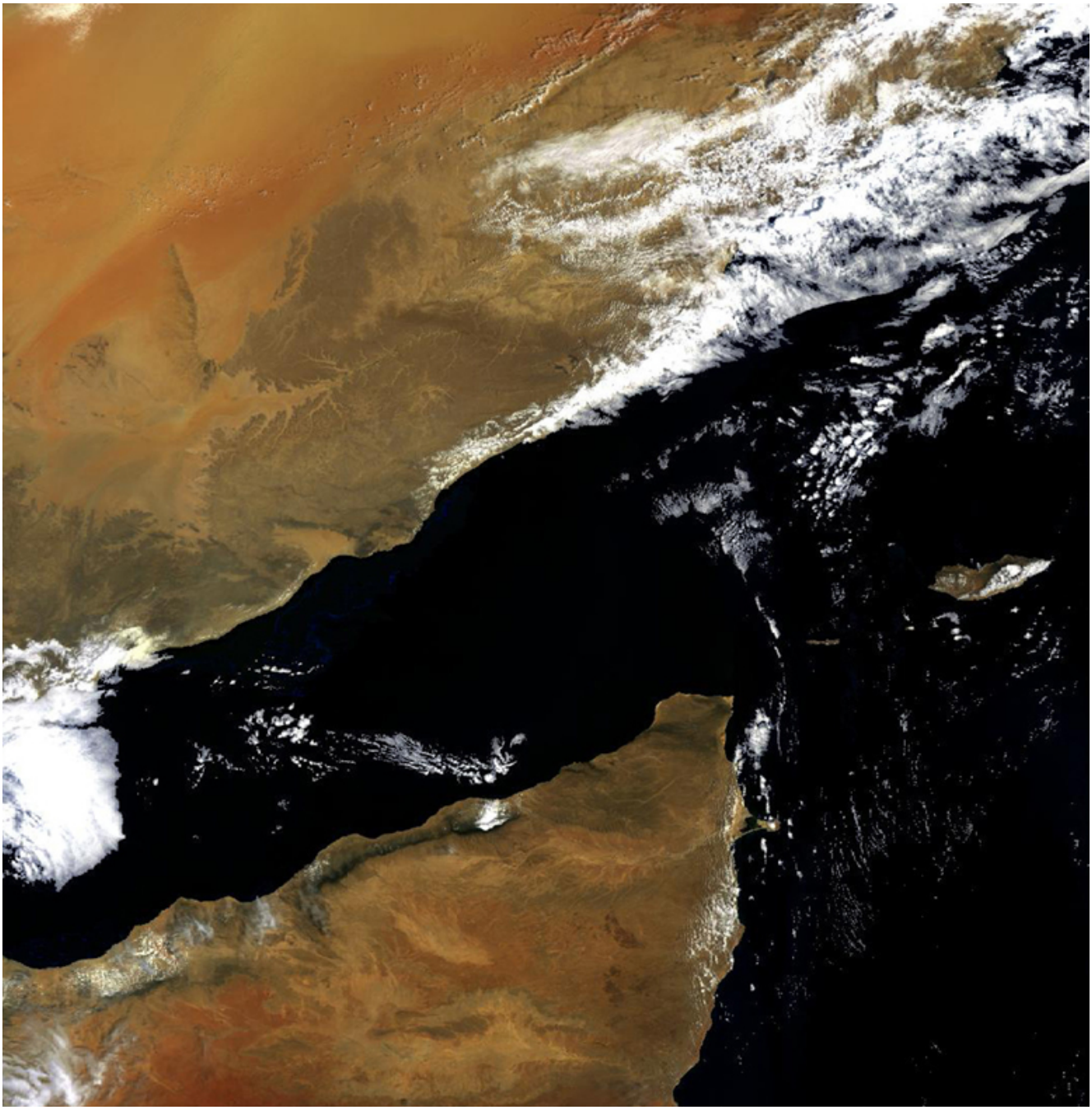
New Nonfiction by Krista Puttler: "Traversing the Gate of Tears"



Envisat Image of the Gulf of Aden

Dubai is one gigantic, grey strip mall.

“Does anyone know why they call this place Dubai?”

I look away from my bus window. The tour guide sits on the edge of her seat in the front row, leaning into the aisle, microphone in hand.

“Come on,” her eyes wide, “Anyone want to guess? ‘Do’ and ‘Buy’! Dubai! Because everyone comes here to shop…”

I look back out the window. Like the last port visit, Bahrain, this port visit is one solid color. But instead of brown, this place is gray. We are on a wide highway. Cement buildings flicker past. We drive up and over a bridge, take the next exit off the highway, and wind back down and under the bridge. A pair of palm trees stand a little way ahead like two green phalanxes guarding the terracotta-roofed buildings behind them.

"…and up ahead is the Trump hotel," the tour guide says.

Everyone continues to look out the windows. Trump became president the first month of our deployment. I wonder if the tour guide expected a different reaction.

"We'll drive around the back and get out so everyone can get a good picture."

The narrow street is lined with plots of manicured grass and palm trees. All the palm trees are exactly the same height.

The hotel looks like the palace at the end of the Candy Land board game.

We pull off to the side of the road. I look away from the hotel and out my window. The expanse of calm, turquoise water merges with the sky in an exact horizontal line. There are no waves. There are no dolphins. There are no seabirds.

I step out of the bus and walk over to the sea wall. It is a little higher than my waist. I lean over the top and look down. There is no sand, just turquoise water. It is as clear as drinking water. There are no clumps of algae, no seaweed, no barnacles in the nooks of the seawall. It is as if everything has been sterilized.

I look back at the hotel. A lot of money has made this a picturesque seaside destination. The bushes are trimmed into perfect geometric shapes; there are no cracks in the paved

road. Everyone holds up their phones, their faces masked in the hotel's shadow. I turn back to the water. I search for a ripple on the surface, anything that shows a scar, an imperfection, a smudge, anything that will tell me this place is alive.

"Ok, everyone!"

The tour guide claps her hands, gives a broad smile. She moved here from the Philippines to work as a promoter of this country. That is what a tour guide does, right? Represents this place in such a way as to get tourists to spend a lot of money, tell people about it, then return sometime in the future to do it again. I wonder if she knew this was going to be her job when she left her family behind. I have to believe there is something here that she has found, something more than money, that keeps her here. Has she found a real, living place here?

"Next stop, the Carpet Factory!"

If so, I don't think we will be shown that place today.

"Surgeon, how was your tour?"

I look up from the liberty log. The Physician Assistant (PA) leans on the bulkhead in the lobby of Main Medical. Over the last five months of deployment, he has assisted me in taking care of patients and has been a workout companion during group cross-fit classes. He always listens when the sadness gets too great, and I need to tell someone I am missing my husband and two young daughters.

"The trip? Depressing."

"How so?"

“Everything seems sanitized…”

He wrinkles his forehead.

“Or covered in sand.”

He nods, “Yes, that is everywhere.”

I put the pen down. “Any updates on the patient we transferred off the ship yesterday?”

“The pelvis abscess patient?” the PA asks.

I nod.

He looks behind him then says, “He had surgery, but I think he did ok. They took out his appendix and drained the abscess.”

I exhale. I was afraid of that. I was up all night worrying I did not adequately convey to the transfer service the potential difficulty of operating on this patient. Not being able to directly dictate a patient’s care, or even just talk to the surgeon taking care of the patient is a very frustrating part about being deployed in a part of the world where I know no one and know less about their medical systems. But often, it is not safe to operate on the ship. The safest thing to do for a patient is get them off the ship. And for me to give up control. I hate that. I had hoped the patient would have gotten an interventional radiology drain, that pelvis would have been a disaster to operate in. I have the equipment to drain a pelvis abscess, but he was at risk for getting very sick postoperatively. We have no blood bank, we are not equipped to take care of a sick post-surgical patient for very long, and he is in for a long recovery. Even though I love operating, the right thing to do was get him to a local hospital.

“They started him on a diet today,” the PA continues.

“Wow, that’s quick.” I pride myself in being somewhat

aggressive when it comes to feeding a postoperative patient, but if I had been staring at a pelvis full of pus, I probably would have held off feeding him for at least a day or two. His intestines won't work normally for a while.

"SMO (the Senior Medical Officer, pronounced Smoh) wants to see if he can be discharged in time to get back on the ship before we leave port tomorrow."

I shake my head.

"Well, that might be ok, right?"

"No. He should not come back to this ship. Besides, he won't be ready to be discharged in a week let alone tomorrow…"

"But his surgery went ok…"

"No," I say again, "He won't be ready. His guts are going to freeze up and not work. That's why all you try to do with a pelvis abscess is drain the abscess, not operate on him. That's what I tried to convey yesterday over the phone anyway."

"Well," the PA says, "We are in port, you couldn't have operated on him anyway."

"That's not the point!"

The PA takes a step back.

I exhale. I can't explain to him how frustrating it is when no one seems to listen; when no one seems to understand how sick this patient is still going to get. Instead, I say, "I'm sorry. I just really miss my family."

He nods. "I know."

"I'll see you at dinner." I walk past the PA, step over the hatch to the lobby, and into the cross-department passageway.

The patient was in septic shock. If I am honest with myself, I was afraid to operate on him, I was glad we were in port. If we were out to sea, I would have had no choice, he would have been too sick for a Medevac flight. And his surgery would have been close to impossible to perform without another set of knowledgeable hands, Surgeon hands. And there is no other Surgeon. There is just me. And as the lone general surgeon I have gotten into the habit of thinking of the worst outcomes. If the worst had happened – me not being able to get him off the OR table alive – I would not be able to walk into that operating room again. Then what would happen for the rest of deployment? There is no one else to take my place.

I walk into my office and turn on the light. There is a large box marked Priority Mail sitting on my desk. It's from my mom.

I open the box, pick up the pink envelope on top and open it. It is a Mother's Day card. Underneath the card there are four pounds of whole bean coffee. "Thanks, Mom." I stow the coffee under my patient exam table then look back into the box. I pull out a large pack of Red Vines.

"Ha! Well, at least they aren't Twizzlers," I say, remembering the sea story I had heard on my first day out to sea. On the ship's last deployment, the supply ordering had gotten mixed up and the only things that were sent to the ship were pallets of Twizzlers. The joke was that there were surely still boxes of Twizzlers oozing red crust into the bowels of a ship storeroom somewhere. Ah, so that's where the cockroaches are coming from, I had remarked, putting in my two cents like I always do. But I worried I had upset the storyteller. Instead, my comment was incorporated into future retellings, and will probably continue to be a part of this ship's lore for longer than I will.

There is one last thing in the box, wrapped in floral paper. I pick it up and tear open the wrapping. It is a folded pink T-shirt. I hold it up and the shirt unfurls under the

fluorescent lighting, its silver looped script sparkles: I am a mother and therefore blessed.

This is not what I need to hear today. I am about as far away from being a mother as I have ever been, even before I had children. I can't ask my daughters about their day, I can't tell them about mine, I can't give them a hug. I have left their day-to-day care to a nanny – a very capable, loving nanny – but what mother leaves their five- and two-year-old children? For a career? For a duty? For medicine? I realize I am not the only mother who has deployed. I realize mothers will continue working, striving, and loving their children all at the same time. But it is hard to do everything all at once. Especially when I physically cannot right now. Being reminded of that impossibility is not what is going to help me feel better about being here. I refold the shirt with the words on the inside and toss it into the trashcan.

Just before Memorial Day, the ship re-enters the Gulf of Aden.

"Is it hot in here or what?" I ask the Radiation Health Officer (RHO), a member of the medical department in charge of monitoring shipboard dosimeters. Condensation drips down the bulkheads. Sweat drips down the side of my face. So much for taking a shower this morning.

RHO opens his mouth, raises a finger, but I cut him off. "Never mind. I'm going to breakfast; would you like to join me?"

"Sorry, I have a rad health physical with SMO in a few minutes."

"Wow. Both of you here? This early in the morning? Is the world ending?"

“Don’t remind me! Plus, I think he said he was going flying later or something.”

“Oh, great. I really am always the last person to know.”

“Ha! I know!” RHO says, “And you are the one who has to cover for him…”

“Don’t remind me,” I echo and walk down the passageway.

I push open the Wardroom door. There are only two occupied tables. I exhale; some days it is preferrable to eat breakfast alone. I decide on a hard-boiled egg and a bowl of oatmeal and walk over to an empty table in the corner. I put my tray down, walk over to get some water, then head back to my spot. An officer who sometimes goes to the same weekly exercise class as I do sits at my previously empty table.

“I hope you don’t mind, Surgeon,” he says as I sit down, “But I hate eating alone.”

I nod because it’s the nice thing to do, roll the hard-boiled egg on the tray until it cracks, then start to peel it. I exhale; I need to make conversation. “How’s your day going?”

“Oh,” he replies, “I just came off duty. Going to get some sleep, then back on duty tonight.”

“Busy schedule on the Bridge?”

He nods, then puts his fork down. “Surgeon, are you ever not on duty? I mean, who covers for you if you get sick?”

“No one.”

“What’s your secret?”

“About working all the time?”

“No, about not getting sick.”

“Oh.” I look down at my oatmeal. It looks like a lumpier version of grade-school paste. “I don’t know.” I push the oatmeal away. “I have two young daughters at home, so my immune system is primed, I guess.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He takes another huge bite of scrambled egg, swallows, then stands up. “Well, if I have your permission, Ma’am…”

“Yes, please.”

He picks up his tray. “I’m off to get some rest, we’ll be busy going through The BAM tonight.”

“The what?”

“The BAM…something,” he twirls his hand in the air, “Mandeb,” he shrugs, “You know, The Gate of Tears.”

“Oh,” I nod, but I have no idea what he means.

I wait until he leaves the wardroom then I pick up my tray, guiltily turn in my uneaten bowl of oatmeal at the dirty dishes window, and rush back to my office. I open the search engine on my computer, but per normal, the connection is painfully slow. I see sick call, clinic patients, cover for SMO while he goes flying, grab a quick lunch, see a walk-in abscess patient, and look at an X-ray for the PA before I can google, The BAM.

To re-enter the Red Sea from the Gulf of Aden, the ship has to traverse the Bab el-Mandeb, shortened to the BAM, translated as, the Gate of Tears. It is the narrowest part around the Arabian Peninsula, a choke point for container ships because of the minimal room they have to navigate safely around the point. Are aircraft carriers bigger than container ships? I don’t know. When we went through the first time, I did not know to ask that question. I was blissfully unaware; I did not question my own safety. Something has happened to me between

the beginning of deployment and now.

I look up at the television screen on the bulkhead in my office. It is on the black and white flight deck camera channel. The sky is a deep grey, the water a dark black. I can't clearly see the edge of the deck. We are going through this narrow passage at night. I know that I personally try not to do anything at night – I try not to operate at night, I try not to medevac patients at night – everything is riskier at night, right? Or does this mean that it is riskier to traverse this place during the day? I don't know.

My heart races. I can't make it slow down.

I want to go home. And I have no control over that desire. I have to trust that our Captain, just like a Surgeon, has tirelessly prepared for all possible contingencies. But I also know that not every part of a surgery can be planned. An anatomic variant, a hesitation from a team member, or just plain old bad luck, can end an operation prematurely. We got around this point the first time without a scratch – I didn't even know I should have been worried.

I turn off the TV and rush out of my office.

The passageway is deserted. The ladderwell is deserted. The overhead lights in the hangar bay are off; everything has more shadows tonight. No one is working out in the hangar bay gym. All the Weapons Department office doors are closed. I make it all the way to my stateroom without seeing anyone. I am all alone.

I enter my stateroom. It is dark except for a small light on over the sink. My roommate's bunk is empty. I take off my boots and lay down on top of my blanket. I don't take my uniform off. I don't take my hair out of its bun. Most nights I know I will be woken up in the middle of the night for a medical emergency, but I always change out of my uniform and get into pajamas to at least attempt to have a good night's

sleep. I don’t want to risk it tonight. I don’t want to use up all my luck. Perhaps, if I don’t change out of my uniform, the one thing I have control over tonight, I won’t be needed, I won’t have to get out of bed, and then perhaps we will have enough luck left to eventually get all the way back home.

“Surgeon?”

One of my Corpsmen stands in my office doorway. “Is it time, HM3?” His rank is Hospital Corpsman, third class.

“Yes, Ma’am,” the Corpsman says, “My flight leaves in an hour.”

I look back at the TV on the bulkhead. The morning after the BAM crossing, I rushed down to my office and turned it on. The waters of the Red Sea looked the same color grey, there was no indication on the screen that we had done anything significant while the TV was off. And this morning, the waters of the Mediterranean also look the same color grey. Perhaps that is the point.

I stand up and walk to the door. “Goodbye, HM3. Good luck at your next duty station.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

The Corpsman turns to leave, then stops. “Ma’am?”

“Yes, HM3?”

“When I first heard that you were leaving the Navy, I thought, there goes all the common sense.”

My breath catches in my throat. I don’t know what to say. Am I giving up? That is my greatest fear. And will there be anyone left who will continue?

“Ma’am?”

“Yes, HM3?”

“Can I get a hug?”

My chest aches. I nod and walk over to my Corpsman – my Corpsman who had worked tirelessly on the ward with me, who had carried his Medical Response Team bag to countless medical emergencies, who had cared for mass casualty patients and sailors in his repair locker, a remote location on the ship where sailors stop flooding, put out fires, and repair damage – and I pull him into a hug.

“Goodbye, HM3. Do good things.” And I let him go.

“Yes, Ma’am. Goodbye.”

I sit at my desk and close my eyes.

I shake hands with patients daily. I place a hand on a shoulder when I listen to a heartbeat inside a patient’s chest. My fingers touch tender abdomens. But in actuality, I have very little human contact.

I leave the department, change into gym clothes, and walk aft through the hangar deck. I catch a sliver of the turquoise sky just above the dark green of the sea. I walk up to the O-3 level, enter the cardio gym, and go for a long run on a treadmill. For the next hour, I forget about the pelvis abscess patient who flew back to the states and had to have another emergency surgery. I forget that my daughters are growing up without me. I ignore the constant questioning thought – What good am I really doing here? – and I just run.

At the end, I stop the treadmill, and clean the console. I

exit the gym via the long port-side passageway. My chest burns: my legs are spent. I pass a berthing area, a lounge area, go up two steps, pass through a hatch, then walk by a humid open machinery room. I go through another hatch, go down two steps, and pass single-occupancy staterooms and the radio office. I stop in front of one of the midships knee knockers.

It is like all the other knee knockers – an oval opening for a hatch without the hatch, like the one that caused a large scalp laceration in one of my patients. The bottom metal rim of this knee knocker is immaculately shined. There is not one speck of dirt on it, no smudges, no fingerprints, no faint boot marks. I have never seen one so clean before. It is as reflective as a mirror.

I turn and look down the passageway behind me. I turn and look up the passageway in front of me. I am alone. I lean forward over the metal lip, hoping to see my face upside-down, like in a circus mirror, but all I see is a thin dark shadow.

I stand up, lift my foot over the shined metallic surface, and for a moment, my shoe meets only empty space. Where is the deck on the other side? I look down at the bottom of the oval. Its reflective surface is gone, replaced by one large shadow. I feel as if I am falling into that blurred image; I feel erased.

I am going to die.

I am going to die here, on this boat, and my family won’t ever know what happened.

I am going to die.

And I am all alone.

A rushing sound fills my ears. The bulkheads seem to vibrate.

Then, my daughter’s voice calls to me from across the void.

You aren’t going to die, Mama, just the part of you that you don’t need anymore. Everything is going to be ok.

I blink.

The rushing and vibrations stop.

I look back up and down the passageway. I am still alone. I am still going to die. Just maybe not today.

I lean forward, put my running shoe down on the solid deck, and continue walking down the passageway.

“Good run?” the RHO asks.

I nod. I open my mouth to ask if he ever felt like he was going to die. Now. Today. Or if he has ever heard his daughter’s voice in his head as clear as I hear his voice right now, calling him back from an abyss. But something tells me to shut my mouth. I can’t tell anyone about that shadow in the knee knocker, that void, that nothingness. But that also means that I can’t share my relief when I heard my oldest daughter, Evelyn’s voice.

Not that it matters. No one will believe me anyway.

Perhaps, I am just hungry. “Dinner?”

“Yes! I’m…”

“Medical Emergency! Medical Emergency! Medical Emergency in…”

The RHO looks at me. There is fear behind his eyes. “That is deep trunk extraction territory.”

In certain areas of the ship, particularly some Engineering spaces or Reactor spaces or Weapons spaces or Supply

department storerooms, the only way to get in or out is up a long, narrow, vertical ladder. If a medical emergency occurs in any of these spaces, the Medical Response Team cannot carry the patient out on a stretcher. The only way to get out a non-ambulatory or unresponsive patient is by hooking them into a stretcher and hauling them up as quickly as possible by a big cable and pulley system.

“Surgeon!”

I unclip my radio. “This is Surgeon. Go ahead.”

“Surgeon. This is SMO. A sailor was found down, not sure if he’s breathing, not sure if he fell, either way, non-ambulatory. Senior Chief and HM1 are heading down there now.”

“A deep trunk extraction?”

“Yes. I already called CHENG.” CHENG is short for Chief Engineer. A team from the Engineering department manages the cable and pulley system.

I grab my go-bag from the bottom drawer of my desk. I push the talk button. “SMO. This is Surgeon. Where is the extraction point?”

“The aft mess decks. I’m on my way there, now.” My radio clicks off.

I look up at RHO. Do I ask him about that voice anyway?

I shake my head and run out of the department.

I jog down to the aft mess decks. If the patient fell, a closed head injury or a high cervical spine injury could cause airway compromise. But why did he fall? Sailors go up and down these ladder wells all the time, many times a day. Dehydration? Exhaustion? Did he have a heart attack? A stroke? Did he take too much Benadryl? Did he take too much of something else? Did he want to fall or was he just ok with not

being able to re-grab a rung?

To erase one's life, to take it away, means we all have failed that one person, our shipmate. It means there is no purpose in the mission anymore. And I am not talking about the dropping-bombs-on-bad-guys mission. I'm talking about the working together for something bigger mission. Freedom. Hope. Justice. Big lofty, naive ideals. Ideals I have had to hold close in the middle of the night. Tightly. If I did not naively believe, well, how would I have been able to treat patients with my limited supplies and personnel? How would I have been able to look a transfer patient in the eye and tell him he will be ok, he will be given better care at the host nation medical facility than with me on the ship, even though I fear I am lying? How would I have been able to hope that my daughters will someday understand why I had to leave?

And when those ideals fail us, it doesn't matter how tightly you hold on. Like knowing the potential consequences of traversing the BAM in daylight. Like deciding, despite all the work it took to get to where I am, The Ship's Surgeon, I cannot do it anymore.

The bulkhead closes in, the fluorescent lights buzz down, my vision flickers. I have to stop thinking about my decisions. I need to focus on helping this sailor. This is why I am here. And there is no one else.

Up ahead, a group of dark blue shapes bends and twists. I blink and my vision clears. There are so many people working to save this one sailor. Working, not for the mission of the ship, but for our shipmate.

I will my tired legs onward.

A group of sailors bends over a large pulley next to a hole in the deck, an open escape hatch. My Surgical Tech is crouched next to the opening, his Medical Response Team bag next to him. The Executive Officer (XO, the second in command of the

ship), the Command Master Chief (CMC, the highest-ranking enlisted member on the ship), and the Senior Medical Officer stand off to the side. I nod to SMO. His role is clear – he will oversee, he will support the command, as needed. My role is less clear. I am supposed to do something, swiftly and expertly, if the patient needs it. No one cares if I will be called on to do something I have never done before. I am just supposed to be able to do it. Expertly.

My legs wobble. Even before surgeries I have done so often that I can do them in my sleep, there is always a brief moment before I operate when I doubt my abilities. That moment has gotten longer the longer I have been on this ship. It is hard to know if you are about to do the right thing when you are all alone and have no one to tell you that what you are doing is right.

“Ready?” one of the Engineering sailors yells down into the open hatch.

I cannot hear the response. I open my go-bag and take out two fourteen-gauge needles, the plastic wrapping slippery in my fingers. It is mechanical, my hands reaching for these life-saving devices. I do not think about it. If the sailor is unconscious from a fall, and cannot breathe from collapsed lungs, these needles will save his life. All I have to do is put them in the correct place.

Sound, buzzing, rushing returns to my ears. The clank of the cable against the metal hatch opening, the calls and grunts of the sailors around me.

It will be soon.

The machine clanks, pauses, then clanks again. My Surgical Tech stands up. The orange end of a stretcher peeks up over the hatch in the deck. He grabs the handle on the end as the stretcher emerges.

I cannot tell if the sailor is breathing. I want to rush at the stretcher, assess for signs of life, to work quickly. But I stay where I am. I wait until the stretcher is righted. I wait until it and my Corpsman are away from the gaping hole.

“Surgeon!”

I rush over to the patient. I see fog in the oxygen mask.

I bend down, place my fingers into the hole in front of his cervical collar. I feel a bounding pulse. “Stretcher bearers!” I yell.

I let our shipmates carry the stretcher down the passageway.

I lift my radio and call Main Medical. “We are on our way.”

I turn back to SMO. His face is tense. I nod and he returns it. Then I rush down the passageway.

“Surgeon, is the patient going to be ok?”

I nod, then hesitate. “I hope so, Nurse.”

I don’t know what it is like to be on the other end of a deep trunk extraction team. I can imagine it is far lonelier than stepping over a knee knocker and thinking there is nothing but blackness, an absence of hope. I can fix a collapsed lung, I can stabilize a broken neck, but I did not have to do any of those things for this patient. All I had to do was listen.

“Nurse, have a good night. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Yes, Surgeon.”

My patient is asleep in his bed on the ward. I nod to the shipmate already at the bedside, I hope my gratitude washes

over him, and I walk on.

I walk past the closed OR doors. I don’t feel much like celebrating or raising a fist in the air. We work and we work, and we try to do the right thing. But is what we are doing, right?

I walk into my office and sit down.

How are we all going to be ok so we can continue to do this job until the end? I think that is the question Nurse is asking.

I look over at a drawing on the bulkhead next to my desk. My youngest daughter, Waverly, sent it to me. It has been next to me the whole deployment, retaped several times, the edges curling. It is labeled, My Family. I look at the row of faces with our arms and legs sprouting directly from our heads. That always makes me smile. There is a D beneath the biggest one, and an E and a W below the two smaller ones in the middle. And at the end of the row, beneath the medium-sized smiley face, there is an M. I lean forward. But there is something else. I have never noticed it before. Perhaps the pink construction paper needed to be faded enough for me to see it. Directly in front of the letter M there is a tiny, pink-colored heart scratched into the paper.

Perhaps that is the answer to Nurse’s question. With enough time, as long as it needs to take, we will eventually get to the answers. And hopefully, we will be ok.

New Fiction from Steve Bills: “Bombing Pearl Harbor”

29 April 1971

From: Naval Science Department

To: Midshipmen Second Class, Navigation and Piloting 301 (NAV 301)

Subject: Final Navigation Project-Due: 1600 hours, 13 May, Luce Hall, Room 104

Mastering navigation is critical for every Naval Officer. This project covers topics from the last eight months and represents 40% of your grade. Instructions, answer sheets, and charts are provided. The exercise simulates USS Robinson’s

(DDG-12) transit from San Diego to Pearl Harbor as part of a carrier task force. You will serve as Robinson's navigator.

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"Company, ten-hut. Dress right. Attention to morning announcements."

Our midshipman company commander's voice was stern at our 0645 morning meal formation. "From the Battalion Officer: This is the final warning for whoever is bombarding the eighth wing tennis courts with debris. If littering continues, an all-night watch will be manned by eighth wing residents."

Chortles and snickers filled the company ranks.

"It's not my fault; business is business," whispered my roommate, Billy Gleason, beside me in formation.

"Maybe it is your fault," I said. "Did you look? Rubbers are everywhere."

The company commander continued. "Alumni returning from their first duty stations will attend a reception in Memorial Hall at 1700 today. First Lieutenant James Creeson, USMC, class of 69 from our company is scheduled to attend if anyone wants to say hello."

"We should go see him, hear his Vietnam stories," I whispered.

After classes we changed from working uniforms to whites and rushed to the reception, anxious to see what had become of Jimmy Creeson. He was alone on the balcony, smoking Camels, flicking ashes into a plastic cup. He was five-six, muscular, a former collegiate wrestler. His skin had a yellow tinge, his hands quivered, the flame dancing when he lit his cigarette. The Marine Corps logo was engraved on his class ring stone. As our first midshipman squad leader when we were plebes, he'd been disciplined but upbeat, always smiling. We respected his demanding nature because the tasks he gave us seemed to have a

purpose. We saluted him, excited to see him, but he didn't return it, nor did he smile. He discreetly took a flask from inside his left sock and poured vodka into his Kool-Aid. He offered us some and Billy, at the risk of expulsion, accepted. We had listened intensely to periodic announcements of the Academy's Vietnam casualties, including Creeson's classmates, relieved that his name was not among them. He looked exhausted, his eyelids drooped, but he had survived. His uniform was immaculate, with three rows of new ribbons, including the Silver Star.

"How's football?" he asked Billy.

"I didn't make the team," Billy said, slouching. "Lost my touch."

"Football isn't everything. It just seems like everything. It's a diversion from all the BS," Creeson said, his voice without inflection.

"How's the Marine Corps? What's Vietnam like?" I asked.

Creeson looked puzzled, perhaps offended, glancing about without eye contact. He took a long drag and gulped his drink. "I shouldn't have come here. You guys, be careful. Really," he said. He walked away, not checking out with the officer managing the reception. With perfect posture and bold cadence, he walked, heels clicking, down the Bancroft Hall stairway into Tecumseh Court.

I felt terrible about asking my questions. We talked with feigned interest to a few of the naval officers at the reception who had completed sea tours. Some had participated in naval gunfire support off Vietnam's coast; others had cruised the Mediterranean, gladly assigned to ships far from war. None of them, except James Creeson, seemed damaged.

"Creeson looked terrible. He didn't look like the same person. My uncle's skin is like that when he needs dialysis," said

Billy.

“The Marine Corps is out of the question for me. I’m going to drive ships,” I declared. Billy, perhaps a little tipsy, was falling behind as we walked, maybe frightened by what he’d seen. “What about you, Billy? Ships? Planes? Submarines?”

“I haven’t thought much about it. We don’t have to decide until January. I guess the National Football League is off the table.”

We were not exactly model midshipmen but did the best our consciences allowed. Billy, from New Mexico, and I, from Nevada, roomed together during junior year. We were brothers in western solidarity, sons of landlocked mountain desert states that were isolated from the Navy. We stayed mostly under the radar, not shining, not failing, getting by. Billy’s business acumen made him famous in an underground way. By junior year, our classmates seemed to forget that he was a football recruit.

Billy’s right glutes, hamstrings, and calves were marvels. His right leg juxtaposed with his left appeared to be twice as big. He held his state’s high school records for the longest field goal and consecutive PATs, leading to his induction into New Mexico’s High School Football Hall of Fame. He was 5’10” and weighed 165—perfect for a kicker. His 800 math SAT and 20-20 vision, coupled with kicking skills, made him a perfect Navy recruit. He told me he’d dreamed of being interviewed on CBS following his winning kick in the Army-Navy game.

After a successful year on the freshman football team, Billy was cut from the varsity because he developed a chronic hook. His range exceeded fifty yards, but he couldn’t shake the portside hex. The team hired an ex-NFL kicker to assist—no luck. His father engaged a sports psychologist who calmed Billy’s sweating nightmares but didn’t correct kicking problems. The Academy medical staff warned his father that too

much psychological treatment could hinder Billy's ability to obtain a security clearance when the time came. Treatment ceased.

Ashore in Italy during a summer training cruise, a fortune teller told him he would live until he was ninety, but kicking was, "I am sorry, che sfortuna." He tried confession in Saint Peters, seeking higher authority than the Academy Chapel confessional adjacent to the crypt of John Paul Jones. Religious entreaties failed. For two years, on his way to class, Billy threw pennies at Tecumseh's statue overlooking the Yard. Tecumseh, a Shawnee warrior, brought luck to penny throwers.

"That won't work," Bobby Williams scoffed, throwing a penny on his way to an exam. "It only works for tests—not kicking."

Billy suffered anxiety and boredom with the curriculum that he might have liked if playing football were included in his life. He suffered as an anonymous spectator among the rest of us. I marched next to him many times on our way through Annapolis to Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium for home games. Standing on the field within his kicking range of the south goalposts, waiting for the Brigade to complete the "march on," he softly read aloud names of famous battles decorating stadium bulwarks—Leyte Gulf, Midway, Iwo Jima, Pearl Harbor.

"This is chip shot range for you," I commented, attempting to change his mood.

"No kidding," he whimpered.

In the first game of junior year with ten seconds to play, Navy's kicker missed a thirty-five-yard field goal. We lost by one. A ray of hope emerged when Billy was invited to varsity practice on Monday—he was uninvited on Tuesday.

Billy searched for distractions. He wasn't interested in

Weapons Systems or Seamanship classes, earning lackluster C's. He effortlessly earned A's in calculus, physics, and physical education. He read passages aloud to me from his father's letters, mocking his father's chagrin. When the grades didn't improve, sterner letters arrived.

"Can't you try harder? You're embarrassing us. How hard can 'Introduction to Shipboard Weapons' be? What's going to happen when the weapons are real?"

Instead of studying more, he conjured a plan to become the entrepreneur of Bancroft Hall. He was our black-market Yossarian, a money-making machine, using his version of Wall Street analytical shrewdness.

"I can see the market," he exclaimed in October before midterms. "Everybody wants comfort food that reminds them of home."

"What?" I asked, looking up from homework.

"I can relieve homesickness. I'm going to sell grilled cheese sandwiches at night during finals week. We're going to make a fortune. The sandwiches probably don't even have to be good."

He piloted his business plan during midterms. The Brigade had extended study time beyond normal taps during test weeks and midshipmen were hungry late at night. Billy borrowed money from our banker classmate, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and he recruited Bobby Williams and me as cooks. We practiced grilling in a Teflon-coated electric frying pan—a violation of every fire code and hygiene regulation in our universe. Billy hid the pan in his basement storage locker and retrieved it at night when we should have been studying. Instead, our spartan team wrapped steaming sandwiches in foil, stuffed them in paper bags with chips, and sold them door-to-door for two dollars each, quickly selling all we had.

When first semester finals week came, applying lessons from

the pilot, Billy upgraded production capacity with six electric griddles and more workers. The buttery aroma of sandwiches filled the hall. We posted guards to ensure that our kitchens remained hidden. Our company's seniors liked the grilled cheese so much that they turned a blind eye toward our enterprise and its brazen violations. We sold over 1000 sandwiches for four dollars a bag, five nights in a row. Miraculously we passed our exams, exhausted, cash happy. Billy repaid Stonewall with interest.

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Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, from South Carolina, was the son and grandson of Academy graduates; his father was an oil company president and a member of Augusta National Golf Club. Stonewall received unsolicited monthly deposits, "from Motha," to his bank account and became a lender to classmates in need. After his successful investment in Billy's business, the two briefly seemed like close friends. They played golf and Billy helped him with calculus. In April their friendship crumbled.

"You have Masters tickets?" Billy inquired, a month before Spring Break when the golf tournament was scheduled.

"Of course," Stonewall replied. "Do you want to come? Mason's coming. You should come too."

"I can buy the tickets from you," said Billy.

"Are you kidding? You're a guest," explained Stonewall.

Mason, from Raleigh, was Stonewall's roommate and teammate on Navy's golf team. Mason would do almost anything to escape Annapolis and return to Raleigh for weekends. He bragged obnoxiously about his harem there.

Two days before Spring Break, Stonewall cancelled Billy's invitation explaining that his family "wasn't going to the tournament because MeeMa was ill." Billy had watched the

Masters with his father on TV for years. He was heartbroken not to see it in person but gracious with the bad news. “Hope your grandmother gets well soon,” he said. We heard that Mason was still going on the trip, so Billy suspected that his own Yankee roots and lack of Navy “blue blood” had caused the family to veto the visit.

Instead of the Masters for Spring Break, Bobby Williams, Billy, and I took the train to New York, stayed in a Times Square hotel, drank beer, and watched the New York Knicks using free USO tickets. On Saturday in between tourist excursions, we watched the Masters on TV.

“Hey, that’s Mason,” yelled Bobby. “He’s wearing a Navy golf hat.”

Billy angrily glared at the screen, his blackball suspicions confirmed.

When we returned from break, Mason told us all about the Masters. Stonewall’s grandmother had miraculously, “praise the lord,” recovered. Mason bragged about the “ladies of Augusta” with whom he’d “had relaaations.” We didn’t believe him until we spotted the antibiotic on his desk a week later.

Billy became analytical about Mason’s illness and devised a new enterprise to exploit the ways of midshipmen tomcats. He ordered a case of condoms that arrived in an enormous box with no return address. “If I’m right, we have a bull market—more profitable than sandwiches,” he predicted. Advertising required delicacy—but he was convinced that confidential sales would be appealing. Mason and Stonewall were his first customers.

“Twenty dollars a box? Steep,” complained Mason.

“Not for quality,” explained Billy. “You don’t have to leave Bancroft Hall. I know you don’t want to be caught with your pants down again,” warned Billy, winking.

They bought two packages each and I thought Billy was going to be sick with excitement when he considered the profit potential.

Gradually, however, Billy realized what liars comprised the bragging Brigade. He made a few sales to guys like Mason, but no significant market emerged. Even when Billy lowered the price multiple times, nobody wanted rubbers. Occasionally someone would “buy one for my wallet, just in case, you know, better safe than sorry.” Billy sulked. “I should have run a pilot,” he lamented.

Reengineering Billy’s condom business was inspired by my chemistry professor, a Navy Commander whose whites were decorated with Vietnam War medals and a command-at-sea button. He seemed bored, unengaged with class, dreaming of the bridge of his destroyer. During class, he filled a latex glove with water and casually lobbed it to the lab’s deck where it exploded.

“The purpose of the Navy, gentlemen, is to deliver ordnance,” he proclaimed, suddenly inspired to provide us with important truths beyond the chemistry curriculum.

His explanation of the Navy baffled me. No one challenged his manifesto or even commented on the mess he created. My trouser legs were soaked, making me wonder how much water would fit in one of those high-quality condoms. Around three gallons, we discovered.

“The problem is lifting that little boy,” proclaimed Billy. He lowered his prices and began an aggressive advertising campaign, showing others a condom’s superb ordnance potential. They were nothing like conventional water balloons. Rubber wars erupted. Bombs were launched and booby traps set throughout Bancroft Hall. Vicious warriors, creative future ordnance deliverers, added Kool-Aid to their payloads—red water bombs were death sentences for Navy whites. For several

weeks floods and condom remnants were everywhere.

Billy became a cautious arms supplier, warning overly aggressive warriors of risks. “Dropping three gallons from six flights up could injure somebody,” Billy counseled.

“We’re not going to hit anybody, just get them wet. This is America; shut the fuck up!”

Water wars waged by future Navy and Marine Corps officers escalated. Just opening a door could be disastrous and bomb squad pre-clearance became a requisite. Booby traps were planted in the most unexpected places. Halls were awash in a rainbow of colors, slippery, treacherous.

After a month, the antics died, skirmishes completed, scores settled; mutually assured destruction necessitated a cease-fire after so many uniforms had to be replaced. Business subsided and remaining condoms were sharply discounted, deployed mostly to nightly test bombings from rooms above the tennis courts at the base of Bancroft Hall. Spring-fevered weaponeers sick of studying jettisoned enormous bombs that barely fit through the windows. Noisy splashing geysers were so commonplace that we no longer watched them. Custodians grew tired of policing the mess and complained to the Battalion Officer.

****

Billy and Stonewall had jointly organized and financed a weekend party for eight of us earlier in the year. The party was scheduled for May, a month before our Ring Dance and the semester’s end. They had each paid half the deposit for a big house on Chesapeake Bay, ten miles from Annapolis. Because of continued tensions between them as the date approached, Billy requested a refund from the owner, a 1948 Academy graduate, who resolutely refused and reminded him that final payment was due. Seven of us wrote rental checks to Billy who consolidated payment. We cautiously proceeded with party plans, despite the

lingering animus.

Along with our dates, or drags, in Academy vernacular, we arrived at the majestic, weathered house, greeted by warm southern breezes, azaleas exploding with color, Marvin Gaye blasting over speakers, and picturesque views of the shipping lane to Baltimore. The place was calming, filled with the owner's Academy mementos including a signed poster of Roger Staubach. The intended calming effect of the party settled over us, temporarily easing the pressures of upcoming finals and the problematic Navigation Project. Our location, outside the seven-mile limit, a radius from the Academy's chapel dome, allowed us to drink beer and other "laaabations," Stonewall's phrase, without violating Academy rules invoking severe penalties.

Billy prepared detailed plans for the weekend in the same manner he ran his businesses-an inclement weather plan, a transportation plan, menus, assignments for cooking, clean-up, sports equipment, security, safety. We mostly ignored his fastidiousness but were immediately thrilled to see the results of his food planning: blue crabs in bushel baskets and a keg of Michelob greeted us on the screened porch.

"How do you do this again?" asked Alison, Mason's girlfriend.

With his mouth full of crab, Mason explained and demonstrated crab dissection. Alison, a student at Georgia Tech, was the reigning Peach Bowl Princess.

"See, there's nothing to it. The biggest legs, that's where it's best."

"Mason, I've ruined my nails. Can you hit this crab with the little mallet for me? The last one splattered crab guts. Smell your hands, Mason. How are you gonna get that off? If you think you're gonna touch me with those hands, you're dreamin, Darlin."

We fifteen, minus Alison, pounded away at crabs, swilled beer, and occasionally took breaks to eat salad and cornbread and dance to the music. A salty breeze rustled our newspaper tablecloths as the sun disappeared. With his planning, Billy sought harmony, mostly for the sake of recovering his damage deposit. Nevertheless, his planning had gaps. In this case, his oversight was sleeping arrangements.

We had four bedrooms, eight couples, and no plan. Some would be stuck sleeping on couches or on the floor. The relationships, including mine, having just met my girlfriend in March, were in various stages. Most seemed relieved with sleeping arrangements that posed no pressures.

Mason, on the other hand, desperately wanted a bedroom. In the hastily executed straw drawing for bedrooms, Alison and Mason were stuck on the living room floor. Mason continued his entreaties.

“Please, Bobby, you don’t want a bedroom. You hardly know that girl and she’s only seventeen.”

“Fuck you, Mason,” Bobby’s date snarled, taking Bobby’s hand, leading him through the bedroom door, sticking out her tongue at Mason.

Mason waved his checkbook, offering to buy a bedroom. He whined and threatened to leave, but classmates who’d drawn bedrooms ignored him.

Alison had been steadily sipping Manhattans after declaring that she couldn’t deal with crabs. Her speech was slurred as she coddled Mason’s arm and kissed his neck. With no bedroom, she made a cocoon-like bed on the floor with two air mattresses, quilts, and blankets she’d found in a closet. She changed into her Georgia Tech T-shirt and silk gold shorts with a yellow-jacket insignia.

“Goodnight classmates and thanks so much for giving us a

bedroom after I found this place and made the arrangements," Mason spouted, emerging from the bathroom with toothpaste on his lips.

"Mason, you didn't find this place, Billy did. And your contribution to the rent is pitiful. We should make you sleep on the beach," I said.

"There's room on that boat by the dock. You could move this little bed under the stars and practice celestial navigation," Stonewall suggested.

Mason and Miss Peach Bowl looked comfortable, framed by the pinewood floor, perched between the wall with Staubach's poster and a table filled with the owner's collectibles. Twelve of us, now in sweatshirts, paraded past them. We took our drinks to the beach, revived the fire with driftwood, and breathed in cooling breezes. It was not yet midnight—why sleep with so much beer left? The lights shining from Bobby's room ruined the starlight. We saw him through the window playing Yahtzee with his girlfriend. We banged on the panes, beckoning them to douse the lights and join us. The fire, the Old Bay aroma, beer, and female company created a lazy coziness.

"How far did you guys get on the Navigation Project?" Bobby asked.

"I'm past the fog in San Diego Harbor," Stonewall said.

"Relax, enjoy this last weekend," implored Billy. "We have until Thursday. It won't be that hard once the enemy submarine gets out of sonar range and the ship doesn't have to zig-zag. I think it's a straight track from there to Pearl Harbor. If there's some trick, we'll find it."

Under the stars the only sounds were the fire and the squeak of rubber fenders on the motorboat rubbing against the pier. No one seemed sleepy. Suddenly, the embarrassing sound of Miss Peach Bowl's groaning, muffled screaming, and pounding fists

against the pinewood emerged from the house, providing evidence that Mason was indeed the biggest stud since War Admiral. The ending to our jealous, disdainful listening came with the crash of glass shattering—a lamp or vase had been knocked to the floor. We assumed the amorous noises would cease, but they continued. I knew Billy was cringing at the thought of paying damages, but he remained calm, sipping beer, adding firewood. “Mason is such an idiot,” he complained.

On Monday Billy’s bank called informing him that Mason’s rent check had insufficient funds. The landlord also called wanting to know “What the hell happened to my wife’s crystal vase? I am taking the replacement cost out of the deposit.”

Mason immediately promised to pay his rent money the following week but grew hysterical when he heard about the additional cost of the broken vase.

“If you assholes hadn’t made me sleep on the floor it wouldn’t have happened. How did we know that vase was on the table? I can’t pay for it for a while.”

“What about you, Stonewall? You want to help your roomie out here?” Billy asked. “Should we convene a meeting to see what our classmates think about this?”

“It’s not necessary. When the owner tells you how much, let me know,” Stonewall said.

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We were deluged with end-of-semester work. The Navigation Project took hours, but Billy was uncharacteristically inspired to finish. Thirteen charts and ten pages of problems covered the spectrum of navigation and piloting we’d studied—deriving fixes, ship positions, using Loran, radar, magnetic and gyro compass readings, celestial navigation with stars, sun, and moon. My charts seemed messy, bleared, smeared with erasures, and sweat. In all, I thought the Naval Science

faculty had created interesting problems. I finished on Wednesday evening and packaged my project as prescribed. Smiling, Billy returned from Luce Hall, waving his receipt after submitting his project early.

“You’re finished, right? We can talk about it without worrying about an honor violation?” Billy asked.

“My charts are ready. I’m not opening them again,” I declared.

“Did you find the math error in the Antares star line calculation? If you correct the math, the stars cross in a point, a perfect fix,” he explained.

Billy’s math error discovery was ingenious. I’d never considered the possibility that math errors would be purposefully inserted in the problem. He stood beside our window, rubbing the strings of a football.

“Having the task force arrive on a Sunday morning in December was a clever touch. You noticed that didn’t you?” I asked. Distracted, he didn’t hear me.

“Look at those idiots.” He was peering down at Stonewall and Mason’s room, kitty-corner to ours on the deck below. Bobby’s room was next to theirs. Football fields and the Chesapeake Bay formed a scenic panorama to the south. Rooms were not air conditioned so in spring everyone kept the windows open. A cacophony of music blared from the open windows.

“What idiots?” I asked, examining the court lit with lights from dozens of rooms where midshipmen were studying.

“Mason and Stonewall. Look at them down there. You know damn well they’re working on the project together. We should turn them in.”

We turned off our lights and clandestinely watched them, reviving our anger at Mason, confirming our distrust of Stonewall who was peering out the window, yawning, checking

his Rolex Submariner. Mason was marking fixes and drawing tracks on the large-scale chart of Pearl Harbor where the transit ended a short distance from USS Arizona's memorial.

"It wouldn't be that hard to hit them from here, do you think?" Billy asked.

"With what? Noooo," I said. "No."

"Let me ask you something. If you'd broken the vase instead of Mason, do you think Stonewall would have offered to pay for it?"

"Of course not," I said.

"We're just not in the same Navy as they are. Don't you think an attack is justified? My balloons?"

"It wouldn't be that hard, but it's a bad idea."

"One try. If we miss, they'll just think it was another tennis court water bomb. We'll be Yamamoto—surprise attack."

"I have some line and canvas we can use—we can't just throw it. Aim and stealth are the problems."

Billy smiled. "Where's the hose? I've got red Kool-Aid that will be perfect."

"Don't fill it too much," I warned. "The plebes always add too much water and end up exploding it on themselves."

With the big red balloon, like a rising sun in the middle of our deck, we plotted our attack. We meticulously practiced with a shoe tied to the end of the line hung from a window in a room across the hall from us, out of sight from our target. As we prepared in the twilight some of the plebes noticed us slide the rope out the window. We decided to risk one more test and swing the shoe toward the target to validate trajectory and line length. I could see a sweaty sheen on

Billy's face. Mason continued charting, head down, and Stonewall was adjusting his stereo, raising the volume of "Give Peace a Chance." Despite their egos, they would surely see us. They glimpsed our way but somehow didn't notice the line. After several perfect practice swings with the shoe, we marked the line length with chalk and pulled the rope inside. When we raised the giant red condom to our window ledge and fitted the canvas straps around it, we could hear the plebes above the music gasping and applauding. Billy shook his fist at them, demanding silence.

The ball was heavy but manageable. We lowered it slowly to the marked line length and began swaying from side to side across the sill. The red ball moved smoothly, gaining momentum, bulging where the latex was weak, inching toward the target. It grazed the bulkhead below us, and we cringed at the thought of a rupture.

"Okay, here we go," Billy whispered. "One more big swing."

I guess we didn't account for the size of the ball compared to the shoe, or the added length of the cradle, or the line's stretch from the weight. The enormous red orb swung directly through Bobby's window and exploded over his Navigation Project, turning his world ubiquitously red. Bobby screamed, overwhelmed by the explosion, a casualty of friendly fire. The plebes were flashing lights, jumping up and down, shocked, awed.

We threw the rope to the middle of the tennis courts below. Billy sat down, pretending to read, listening to Bobby's profanity echoing across the court; I held a pillow to my face, fighting an explosion of laughter. Of course, we'd missed our target, like Billy's kicks, to the left.

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Second Class Ring Dance traditions prescribe that class rings be strung on ribbons and worn as pendants around our dates'

necks until each couple ceremoniously dips them into a binnacle containing waters from the seven seas. We completed the ritual and donned our rings. After three years of anticipation, the ceremony seemed anticlimactic. We'd been counting the days, and now, entitled to wear rings like Jimmy Creeson's, they embodied alarming burdens we'd face in one year when we were commissioned.

Billy and I returned to our room after the dance just before curfew. Billy was jumpy, energized, twisting his ring, singing songs from the dance. Two Navy ships were anchored in the Bay, ablaze with strings of celebratory lights. The athletic field to the south was abandoned, its goalposts lit by streetlamps and a waxing moon.

"Come on," Billy insisted, pulling his bag of footballs from the closet.

"What?"

"Come on!"

We trudged down the back stairs in Navy tuxedos with yellow cummerbunds, pleated shirts, gold buttons, and dance-scuffed shoes. The damp grass soaked the knees of my trousers as I held the ball for Billy Gleason on the forty-yard line.

"Look," he exclaimed. "Antares is right between the goalposts. This is for Jimmy Creeson."

His kick soared triumphantly through the uprights.

New Poetry by Joshua Folmar: “Sudoku”

New Poem by Joshua Folmar: Sudoku

New Poetry by Lawrence Bridges: “Time of War and Exile” and “Taking an Island”

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