

New Fiction by Michelle R. Brady: Thirty Broken Birds



Illustration by [Jane Yeager](#)

I. Valley of Quest

Before what happened to Christine, before arriving in Iraq, before even leaving Nebraska, all we knew for sure is that there would be violence and sand. We began by trying to solve the wrong problem. And although wearing our gas masks in sandstorms was almost certainly the most sensible way to avoid breathing difficulty and probably eye damage, the memory of her exiting a port-a-potty in one, sand swirling around her, still chills me. So much can hide in the sand when it's like that—some things you want to conceal and some you later try

desperately to uncover. And I guess some that you're just not sure about.

I remember lying and sweating on my cot, mask in place outside our tent where I slept to get some privacy, my head hanging over the edge so that she was upside down in the haze walking toward me, her uniform covered in the white ragged circles of salt from her sweat. It was only Christine, but with the fog creeping inward on my mask's lenses, she seemed like an astronaut on Mars. And in the mask, she looked like the rest of us. Like nothing special at all.

She came from another unit, somewhere far away like Maine. I don't know why she was transferred, but someone said she'd been a stripper there. Her unit wasn't deploying, and ours was—and in need of military police—so I guess that was it; it definitely didn't have anything to do with stripping, if that was even true. She didn't seem like the type.

The rest of us weren't MPs, the rest of us girls, I mean. I was an admin clerk, but the others were medics and food service. Four of us altogether. Well, five if you counted Christine, but we never really did. She slept in the female tent, but she rarely talked, and, yes, I have to say it, even though no one else did, she was startling. I mean that in the literal sense, that her beauty was so strange it startled you. I won't describe her; it wouldn't do her justice. Just picture what you will. Personally, I always thought of her as a bird I'd seen on the cover of National Geographic from one of the donation boxes that came in every week: a grey crowned crane; it has a halo. And dignity, like her.

Her face made her less welcome in our tent, where we sat around, breathing in burn-pit fumes, sweating with IVs in, courtesy of the medics, and watching *Sex and the City* on scratched and skipping DVDs. And being less welcome in our

tent meant being vulnerable. We weren't the only ones bored, and we were far outnumbered.

We had a plan, and in our defense, we did try to tell her. It was when we were washing our uniforms. We only had two because this was the beginning of the war, what we all later called the Wild West, when units of untrained reservists were handed M16s and sent to do infantry work, regardless of their actual job. All that meant, when it came to uniforms, was that we had to wear one and wash the other in buckets with grey water every so often.

When it came to everything else, it meant innumerable things. Like, we took the plates out of our vests on patrol because it was so hot, they were heavy, and it made more sense to us to carry snacks in there. Like, we took pictures with ammo we found out in the desert and explored old bunkers as if this was summer camp. Like, we didn't have armored vehicles, so we put sandbags under our feet to slow rolling over if we hit IEDs, and we actually thought it would work.

Nonetheless, uniform-washing provided a good opportunity to talk. And Christine, perfect as she was, still had to wash her uniform. So, pastel wash buckets in a line next to the water truck, we orchestrated a casual intervention, like hyenas luring our crowned crane to the watering hole.

"May I join you ladies?" Peterson asked, but we were prepared for this.

"Hey, we need to chat about something. Would you mind coming back in twenty?" I said, walking him away. "And tell your friends."

Christine looked up at this. "What's going on?"

Monica, the only sergeant among us, but still just Monica to us, said "Let's take our buckets over there." She pointed to sand far enough from the water truck to avoid overhearing.

“Look,” I said when we’d started washing, water warmed by the sun battling ineffectually against salt stains and dust. “You have to choose someone.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, but I knew she had to understand.

“You have to pick a guy,” Nikita said. “Anyone want an IV?”

She hooked Jen up, and I said, “I can’t believe we have to explain this, but the reason you are constantly fending off guys is because you haven’t chosen one yet. And it’s not just about you, you know. We don’t want random MPs creeping around the tent all the time.”

“You mean like the dudes you guys are fucking?” she asked. “I’m not into *them* creeping around either.”

Monica, perhaps due to the emotional escalation, jumped in. Though, the truth was that even though Monica outranked us, she wasn’t really into leadership. “Look, having a boyfriend at home isn’t enough. You need to have someone here who they respect enough to leave you alone,” she said, kind of too quietly, I thought.

“Christine, they will keep hounding you until you pick one of them,” I clarified. “Simple as that.” My hands were getting pruney, but submergence in water was a luxury, and I didn’t want to be done. I watched the bubbles spread to the edges of the bucket and slowly dissipate, and I wanted to put my face in the water and stay there forever.

“I don’t want a boyfriend here. I’m not going to have sex with someone so that you guys feel better. None of this is your business.” Christine wrung out her uniform, dumped her bucket, and walked away.

“Hey, we tried,” Monica said. “Right? Victoria?”

It was shocking how quickly the moisture left your body here.

My hands were dry, not a wrinkle on them now. I nodded. "There's only so much you can do," I said.

"And you know she was a stripper in Michigan, right? Maybe she knows what she's getting into," Jen said.

"Maine," Nikita said.

"Right. Well, I'm sure they have strippers there, too." Jen said.

Nikita looked at me, waiting, and I said, "Tell the guys to keep an eye out for her anyway."

She nodded, satisfied, I guess, and we got up to leave. The trouble was that our guys were not MPs, so our guys were never close enough to keep anyone safe but us.

II. Valley of Love

I had a secret. I was happy on that deployment, really happy. I loved being part of a team, being valued. I hadn't fit in in high school, mostly because I was too smart for the normal classes and too poor for the gifted ones. But here, my poverty was an asset. I used tenacity and ingenuity to solve problems, the way only someone with a lifetime of training could. I was used to dirt and hard work and sleeping on the ground and eating terrible food or going hungry. I didn't have to waste time becoming adjusted to our situation or wishing I was somewhere else. When we couldn't get enough water shipped in, some of the girls wasted what we had washing their hair, but I cut mine off. In Iraq, the guys called me Sunshine. For the first time, I flourished. Obviously, I pretended I hated it, but secretly, it felt like home.

Christine had a secret, too.

III. Valley of Knowledge

I spent the day Christine was raped with the People's Mujahedeen of Iran—the MEK, eating biscuits made from chickpeas called nan-e nokhodchi and drinking dark orange tea heated with their samovar. I was the only female who worked in the command tent, mostly filling out forms and fending off the Major's childlike advances, so I got to drive them to the meeting. The MEK was still a terrorist group then, but borderline, in possession of things we needed, and, importantly for me, mostly matriarchal. So, I joined the officers in the Humvee on an adventure outside the wire to represent all American women, though I'm not sure that including one who was so inferior that she was driver, note-taker, and photographer all in one sent the message they thought it did. They were certainly annoyed when the female generals addressed their questions to me and served my tea first.

But that story is always tainted in my memory by the worst sandstorm we saw on that year-long deployment and what happened to Christine when it kept the officers away from camp for so long. It rolled in like waves of a waterless ocean. The tent shook, and the MEK covered their mouths with their hijabs. Less prepared, we pulled our shirts up over our mouths and noses as professionally as we could. But the wind was too strong, and sand stung our faces through and around the tent walls, so one of the MEK soldiers shoved blankets in our direction. I helped cover the officer nearest me, but we'd run out of blankets by then. The youngest general came to me and covered us both. Our faces were side by side, and we smelled like sweat and dirt and tea under the blanket.

I suppose it was obvious I was terrified from my shaking, so she told me a story muffled by the roaring wind, by sand simultaneously pounding and peppering the tent, by her accent, and by her hijab.

It was about birds. The birds didn't have a leader, so the wise hoopoe thought they should find the most righteous and courageous bird to lead them—the simorgh. She lived in the middle of a sea in a tree that held all the seeds of the world. When she flew away, a thousand branches grew, and when she came back, a thousand branches broke, and the seeds fell into the sea.

To get to her, they had to cross seven valleys, each with its own peril. Along the way some of the birds died from fright or thirst or violence, until only thirty were left. When they reached the tree in the sea, they learned that the simorgh was their reflection, their shadow: *si*: thirty, and *morgh*: birds. But not all along; the simorgh was the thirty birds who crossed the seven valleys, not the untested ones that began the journey.

It was dark under the blanket so I couldn't see much of her face while she told the story, but suddenly, the tent, which had been flapping wildly, partially dislodged, and we were exposed to the storm. The wind beat us down, and my young MEK general—I didn't remember her name—pushed me to the ground and covered my body with hers. Sand cut into our skin through the blanket, and then I saw something I never expected. Lightning. So bright, I couldn't mistake it even through tightly woven wool. Lightning without rain, breaking up billowing clouds of sand in brilliant, ragged lines. Although dwarfed in significance by what followed, it is still the most magnificent event I've personally witnessed.

It was night by the time we could leave. We picked ourselves, and what was left of our military bearing, up less gracefully than our hosts, who were presumably used to such intrusive acts of God, and drove dazed and shaking back to camp. But before we left, they agreed to provide us water and internet, so the Major said all in all, it was a successful journey.

IV. Valley of Detachment

A farmer from a family of Quakers, the Major maintained that attaining water rendered the mission a success, "because, Sunshine, we can't live without water." But he didn't sound as convincing when the doc visited the command tent with news from Christine's examination. Of course, the other officers didn't notice I was there, but the Major sent me outside. The thing is that a tent only blocks eyes, not ears.

"There's considerable damage," the doc said.

"Definitely forced? Or borderline? What's she saying?" one of the officers asked.

"I mean, I can't say for sure, but it looks bad. She's saying forced."

"Who was it?" the Major asked.

"That's not really my department. I think you should ask her."

I didn't finish listening because I decided to ask her for him. And for her. Our camp was in shambles from the storm, so almost everyone was helping rebuild it. Returning to their owners personal items scattered across the sand and re-erecting tents in groups of four or so. If I didn't know better, this could have been the scene from any missionary trip—college kids setting up an area to feed refugees or provide medical aid. Because we *were* college kids; almost all of us joined the reserves to pay for school and left it to play soldier. Though, I guess, some took it more seriously than the rest of us, testing the line between machismo and misogyny.

I took a deep breath. How much she must hate us to go to the doc alone, to feel safer without the only other females in camp. I knew there was something wrong with us, something

damaged. Why else would we have abandoned her? It was the only explanation. We were broken.

V. Valley of Unity

Before I even found Christine, everyone was unified in the narrative. Nothing else we did was particularly efficient or organized, but in the face of a threat, suddenly we were the dream team. Hers was a voice shattering what we wanted to believe in. That we were the good guys, the civilized ones, doing something worthwhile. It was a lie, I could see then, that made it bearable for them. I didn't need that lie; I just wanted to belong to something, and, at the time, I didn't think I cared if it was something good.

Christine was behind our tent, on top of a shipping container, staring out into the world beyond the concertina wire. I climbed up, sat down next to her, and handed her my water. From the container to as far as I could see there was nothing but sand. Nothing. "So, everyone knows?" she asked.

"No. Only you know."

I was watching the nothingness, not her, so her sob surprised me. She crumpled next to me, and I wrapped my arm around her and pushed her head onto my shoulder. "I'm supposed to be a cop," she said through tears. "I can't even protect myself."

"No. *He's* supposed to be a cop. You're supposed to depend on your battle buddy to watch your back, not *assault* you. What a piece of shit."

"I can't go down there."

I nodded. "Then I'll bring you food up here. She hugged me and drank the rest of my water.

"Are you scared?" I wanted to ask, but I didn't, and I didn't

say: "You have to turn him in. He can't be allowed to go around hurting people. Was it Martin? DeMazzo?" I just hugged her back.

But she *was* scared, so we stayed on top of the container where she could see anyone who approached. And I could feel the unit holding its breath to see what damage Christine was going to do. What she did was tell me her secret.

"Did you drink with him or was that just something else they made up?" I asked, still not knowing who *him* referred to.

She shook her head.

"Do you want me to tell them that?"

She stared at the desert. "No. It doesn't matter."

"It might help—"

"It doesn't matter, Victoria. People have consensual sex without alcohol every day."

"I'm just saying that it might make it more likely—"

"Victoria," she interrupted quietly. "Can I trust you?"

"Of course," I said. "Look, if you tell me that you made the whole thing up, I will take it to my grave."

"What? No. The reason it couldn't have possibly been consensual is because," she breathed out. "I'm gay."

So, I finally understood. "And he knows."

She nodded. She didn't have to tell me that it was worse to be gay than raped in the Army in 2003, when "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was still enforced. And she didn't have to tell me that she could be kicked out and unable to pay for college. "I'm so sorry," I told her.

She looked at me, and I think she understood what I meant. She handed me the hot sauce from her MRE. She hated it, and I loved it, so it worked out well.

I looked at the little glass bottle. It seemed so out of place in an MRE. "You know, I've never met a gay person before," I said, the way only an eighteen-year-old from Nebraska two decades ago could.

She laughed. "I bet you fifty bucks that's not true."

After a day or so, the rest of the girls started taking shifts watching while she tried to sleep, stockpiling MREs, taking her to the latrines. And slowly we all moved up there with her, our cots in a row with her in the middle, and she slept again. Through the whole night.

VI. Valley of Wonder

The other girls still had to do their jobs, so they left during the day, but the Major strongly implied that my mission was to watch Christine ; whether to keep her safe or to keep them safe, I never asked. So, I brought up binoculars to make her feel like she was contributing to security, and when I returned with more MREs and some magazines from care packages, she said, "Come here."

She handed me the binoculars and pointed in the direction of the MEK camp. It was still beyond sight, and I didn't know what I was supposed to see. "Are you at the horizon?" she asked.

"Mhmm."

"Okay, down three inches and two to the right." She waited. "Do you see it?"

"The rock thing?"

“Yes! It’s a fulgurite! From the lightning the day of the storm.”

The thing I was looking at was like a weird coral rock, ragged and crooked and thin. But it was strange because there was nothing else out there at all. “How do you know that? Are you sure?”

“I was a meteorology major. And I guess I could be wrong; it’s pretty far away, but I’ am pretty sure. It’s *glass*. Glass formed by lightning hitting the sand. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Like a sculpture,” I said. “Out there, in the middle of nothing.”

“People used to call them fingers of God,” she said.

I looked through the binoculars again. It was pointing toward us. “Let’s go see it,” I said, and she smiled.

Borrowing a Humvee was easy at that point because the officers were terrified of her. When the Major gave me the keys, extra ammo, and a walkie talkie, he just said, “It’s a four-seater, so fill all four seats. And be careful, Sunshine.”

He knew that she would never leave the wire with a man, and I like to think he also knew that she needed this. Still, I had to say, “Could you call me Walters, Sir? Victoria is okay, too.”

He nodded and looked tired. “Be safe, Walters.”

VII. Valley of Death

We all went. There were four seats and five of us. Jen said, “I can’t believe this is happening” from the back between the medics. I drove, and Christine directed. The cool thing about nothingness and an off-road vehicle is that you can drive in a

straight line, and it was actually safer than roads there because no one plants IEDs in the open desert. All you had to worry about were landmines from the Gulf War, and most of those were probably too old to blow up.

The fulgurite was about twelve feet long, curved like an elderly finger toward our camp. It felt like hollow rock, and when we were finished touching it and gazing at it, we sat down under its crook. Christine started laughing and couldn't stop. We exchanged looks that were somewhere between worried and hopeful and waited. When she caught her breath, she looked at us and wiped her eyes. "I told him I wanted to see the lightning, so he came with, and we had to hide in the shipping container when the storm got bad."

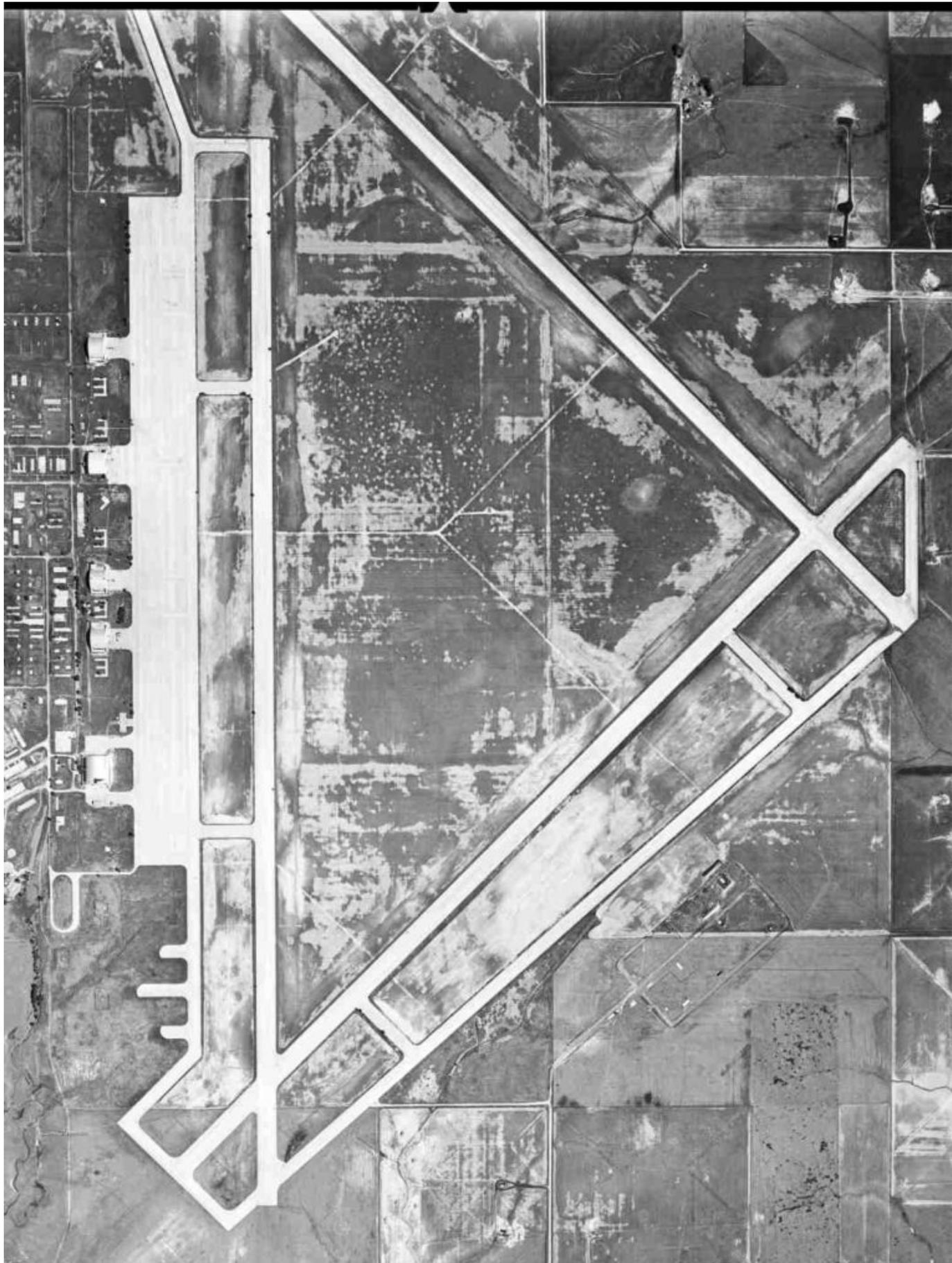
"The container we've been living on?" I asked, shocked. I could not believe we moved onto the place she was raped, that she had wanted to stay there.

But she didn't seem to hear me and said, "And here it is. A fulgurite is petrified *lightning*. It would have waited for me forever."

"Yeah," I said. "But you'd never have known if you weren't sitting on top of that container with a pair of binoculars."

She looked at me for a second and ran her index finger across God's. I looked up at the glass suspended by a force I hadn't even known about and saw a tiny clear spot that reflected my eye and nose and some of Christine's face, too.

**New Memoir: Solitaire by
Lauren Hough (Part I)**



Part I of II

My first time at the closest gay bar to Shaw Air Force Base, the bouncer asked me if I had a membership. I wasn't expecting that question. But South Carolina blue laws only allowed private clubs to serve liquor on Sundays. So every bar in South Carolina called itself a private club. I was expecting to have to show my driver's license. It was my twenty-first birthday. And I didn't want anyone to notice, least of all this bouncer with bad skin and frosted tips that made him look like a youth minister.

I told him I was not a member. "Well, you gotta sign up here. Fill this out." The bouncer handed me a card. Name. Address. Driver's License number.

"I can't fill that out," I said. "I'm military. I can't be on a list at a gay bar." My paranoia wasn't unfounded. This was 1997 and Don't Ask, Don't Tell was the law. I'd heard rumors of witch hunts at other bases. Though so far, it seemed no one suspected me.

There's an oft-repeated maxim about women in the military—you're either a whore a dyke. You hear it first from your recruiter, as a warning. You hear it thereafter as an accusation, sometimes it's meant to be a joke. But even so, if there's a useful side-effect to homophobia, it's that most people who find gays abhorrent, find it rude to assume someone's gay, despite all obvious signs. Which is why any gay person could have told you Ricky Martin was as queer as eight guys fucking nine guys. And yet people were shocked. It's not gaydar. It's the ability to see reality without the constraints of judgment.

Still, I knew I had to be careful. All it took was one person, the wrong person, the wrong grudge, the wrong rumor, and my career was over. The criminal investigation arms of the military would find one gay whose roommate or ex turned him

in. They'd use that one person, his emails, phone calls, confession, to root out as many homosexuals as they could. For the most part, they'd just kick the gays out. But some went to prison for violating the UCMJ, the military code of law. I was determined to keep my secret.

My pen hovered above the line. I hated that I couldn't just write my name without thinking of all the ways this could hurt me. Fear is, above all else, exhausting. And the frustration of my indecision made me want to cry. The bouncer leaned toward me. "Honey, I don't care what you write on the card," he said. His voice sounded like he'd smoked a pack of road flares. "You put a name down there, and when you come in next time, that name will be on this list." He held up a clipboard with a list of names and coughed. "You point to what you wrote. And I put a little check mark by it. I don't give a shit if it's the name your mama gave you." He coughed again. Swallowed something large. "Look babe," he said and pointed to the list. "We got Mary Jane, Trent Reznor, Anita Dick, Cherilyn Sarkisian, Sam Iam, and that's just the obvious ones. You sure as shit ain't the first military we got."

I stood there trying to make up my mind. Trying not to ask if Cherilyn was Cher's real name, afraid he'd laugh at me. Part of me wanted to run back to my car, drive back to base, and forget about gay bars. I'd sat in my car listening to the radio for a good ten minutes just trying to build up the courage to walk in the door. I'd been waiting three months, for my birthday, just to come here.

But even if I gave up now and turned around, it's not like I felt any more at ease on base. On base, at Shaw, I worked in an office building, the headquarters of CENTAF, the part of the Air Force that worries about the Mideast. To say I worked is a lie. I showed up every morning at eight, jiggled the mouse to wake my computer, and read news for an hour or so.

Sometime around ten, Major Coffindaffer would hand me the

half-filled-in crossword from the USA Today he bought on the way to work. He'd switch his radio from the John Boy and Billy show to the right wing AM channel.

The guys in my office loved John Boy and Billy. There was this clip they'd play for anyone who hadn't heard it. My supervisor, a big cornfed looking guy called Sergeant Ewing, played the clip for me my first day—some guy from the radio show, their serious news guy, reading what was supposedly a news story about queers and a gerbil. I got grossed out and laughed, asked which desk was mine. But Ewing blocked my path and said, "no, wait this is the best part." I'll spare you the "best part" (there was a fireball). The guys were all looking at me, waiting for a reaction. I smiled and tried to force a laugh. I wasn't angry. I was just sad. It's easy to hate what you don't understand. But I'd never be able to explain how stupid it was to believe gay men played with gerbils, without the inevitable follow-up, "How do you know?" They're like kids, really, guys in the military. They never get tired of gross-out jokes, trying to make the girl gag, and suspecting anyone who doesn't get the joke of being different.

All day long, I'd listen to Rush Limbaugh and friends debate the President's treasonous blow job, and gay scout leaders, and gays in the military. Major Coffindaffer would mutter about how we should just go ahead and hold public hangings like back in the good ol' days. And I'd fill in the crossword. Sometimes I'd read at my desk, what Major Coffindaffer called "book report books."

I couldn't see myself spending two years in that office. I'd been there two weeks when I heard this guy who worked in my building complaining one day at the smoke pit. He'd received orders for a four-month stint in Saudi. His wife was pregnant. They didn't have a car. I told him I'd go for him if he could get permission to switch.

He tried to argue with me. I didn't blame him. I can relate to

a suspicion of altruism. But I wasn't motivated by altruism. He said, "You can't drink there. Seriously. Not even beer."

"I'm twenty. If I keep drinking here, I'm gonna get caught. And I don't need an Article 15."

"There's nothing to do."

"There's nothing to do here."

"You'll really do it? I mean, if I go ask my sergeant and then he asks you, you won't

change your mind?"

"I'm totally serious, man. What's your job? I mean, what do you do in Saudi?"

"I'm a one-charlie-three. Same as you." Meaning we'd both been trained to answer phones and follow checklists in a command post—the nucleus of a military base. As there's only one command post on each base, the rest of the command post techs get assigned to command units like CENTAF, where we were, to fill desks at operation centers—larger command posts. We were basically phone operators with really high security clearances.

He said, "But there, we only do the briefing. You just need the clearance to be in the Op Center. We take the sortie numbers and build the slide for the daily briefing."

"I can probably figure out a power point slide. I don't have to stand out on the runway and count planes as they take off for sorties do I?"

"Shit. You don't even have to make the slide. We just switch the numbers out every day. And then you hang out in case the numbers change. It's boring as fuck. You'll really go to Saudi?"

"I'll go anywhere that isn't Shaw. I'm bored out of my skull here. Can't be worse." The truth was, I was itching to leave the country. No one joins the Air Force because they're dying to see more of South Carolina. I wanted to travel, even if that meant Saudi Arabia. But more than that, I needed a place like Saudi to keep me out of trouble. My problem wasn't the drinking. Though, had I been caught, the penalty would've ruined my career. I was gay and didn't know what to do about it. I needed time. It's not that I'd put much thought into going to Saudi. But, determined to avoid the problem I couldn't solve, I saw four months in Saudi as the perfect way to buy time.

We shook on it. And I went to Saudi. I left him my car keys while I was gone. I preferred Saudi Arabia to Shaw. I preferred being locked on a base that we only got to leave twice, and only in full-body abayas with the hijab. At least in Saudi, I'd had something to do. And because we were all locked on base, I'd had something of a social life. I'd go to the base bar where they served near-beer and play cards with all the others who had nothing better to do.

When I got back from Saudi, nothing had changed. I was still gay and still in the military. Still stationed in South Carolina. Still sitting next to guys who I was sure, any day, would look at me and recognize what they hated.

This fear never left my mind, but day-to-day, the good thing about the little office where I worked was that the officers like Coffindaffer mostly ignored me. The NCOs, like Sergeant Ewing, were busy sending out resumes to government contractors where they'd double their pay once their enlistments were up. So that Friday, no one knew or cared that it was my birthday. No one had to know I was going to check out a gay bar.

Now I was standing outside the bar and worse, people were

noticing me. I'd told myself *just walk in, don't be obvious, get a drink, look around. Then you can go home.* I wondered if I'd worn the right clothes. I could see inside, just over the bouncer's head. Gays. And all I knew was I was gay and these were supposed to be my people, my community.

Someone came up behind me, and asked what was going on. I turned around. He was about my age. Just a kid. Military haircut, the unmistakable ill-advised mustache that, following military regulation, always rests one shaving mishap away from Hitler-lip. He lived in the same dorms I did. Not my floor or I'd know his name. But I'd seen him in the laundry room. I felt better seeing him, until I realized this meant I might see others from the base. They might see me. I hadn't considered this. I'd driven thirty miles to have a drink where no one would see me. I told him I didn't want to put my name on a list.

"Why? I'm on the list," he said. The bouncer handed him the clipboard. "Right here, Truvy Jones."

"Steel Magnolias," I said. He clapped like I'd learned to roll over. And I realized then he had just as much to lose as I did. But he didn't seem at all scared. I put down Ouiser Boudroux on the card, filled out the address for the local carpet company with the annoying radio jingle, and Papa John's phone number on the line for driver's license.

I sat at the bar waiting for the bartender to finish wrestling with the little airplane bottle of Jack—another oddity of South Carolina's liquor laws. And I watched the room through the mirror behind the glasses. Truvy was nowhere to be seen. I'd hoped he'd come get a drink. We'd talk about Steel Magnolias. He'd be impressed with my vast knowledge of Dolly Parton trivia. We'd bond and maybe become friends. I wouldn't feel so obvious sitting there alone.

Seemed like everyone at the bar knew everyone else. Everyone

was divided into factions. The younger lesbians owned the pool table; the older lesbians occupied the tables outside. As I walked by, they all stared like I'd walked into their private house party and changed the music. A few older gay men took turns on the poker machines. The younger gay boys held the dance floor. I didn't belong here. That I was used to the feeling didn't make it any more comfortable.

I found a payphone in the alcove for the bathroom. I dug my calling card out of my wallet, hoped I had minutes left on it. And I called my brother, Mikey. He answered. "Where are you?" he asked. "Is that Prince?"

"Yeah. I'm in a gay bar. I don't think the lesbians are in charge of the music," I said.

"That's a relief. But still, gross," he said. "Not gross that you're in a gay bar. Obviously."

"Obviously. There's a mirror ball over the dance floor. Your bedroom is bigger than the dance floor."

"Jesus. You spent a year in San Fran."

Right out of basic training, I spent a year in Monterey, two hours south of San Francisco. And I'd had a fake ID. But I was too scared to drive to San Francisco on weekends and hang out in the Castro. Of course, if I'd known I'd be sent to South Carolina, I might've worked a little harder at accelerating my coming out.

"Monterey isn't San Fran," I corrected him.

"Okay. But you're still dumb. What's a gay bar like in South Carolina? Are you counting mullets? Oh, dude, you should find the butchest woman there and bring her home for Thanksgiving," he said. Then added, "Gabe wouldn't let you in the house." I'm sure he was picturing the scene. But even alone, Gabe wouldn't let me into the house if it were burning.

"I don't think I'm coming home," I said. And it occurred to me I wasn't sure when I'd see my brother since I was no longer welcome there. He was nineteen but still living at home. I thought about buying him a ticket to come visit. "Oh, there are three. And that's not counting the almost mullets. I think they want to fight me," I said.

"If you knew karate, you'd probably live," he said. "I was thinking it would be cool to have a gay brother. He'd run off to New York and starve a couple years. But then I'd get to move into his shitty studio and paint. And he'd introduce me to all the rich guys who'd buy my paintings 'cause I'd be the hot brother of a gay guy."

A skinny kid with what I thought was a bad cold because I'd never been around a coke problem came out of the men's room. I flattened myself against the wall so he could pass. But he just stood there across from me and sniffled and stared. You could've fit three of him into his jeans.

"Sorry," I said. "I know this is tough on you." This was not tough on him. I'd officially sealed my brother's role as favorite child by being gay. He'd recently been caught smoking pot. Gabe, the stepfather most likely to call the cops on his stepchildren, laughed about it.

"You should be. I can't hear you though. I'm gonna get off the phone. Gabe's coming home soon." The skinny kid was staring now. Assuming he wanted the phone, I held up a finger to show I'd be done in a minute. But he shook his head and sat down on the wet tile floor. I turned around.

"Are you not allowed to talk to me?" I asked. "Last time I called to talk to Mom, he just hung up on me."

"No, but he thinks this is something you're doing to him. Like, on purpose to piss him off. It's just weird now. I think they're getting a divorce," he said.

"Well, fingers crossed." I didn't believe my mother would ever leave Gabe.

"Shit. Happy birthday," he said. "I'm gonna send you a book. I'm almost done with it." I wasn't offended he'd forgotten. He forgets his own. But the reminder didn't help my mood.

Maybe it was weird to call my brother from a payphone in my first gay bar. But I'd always had him with me in these situations, when I didn't belong, when everyone else knew each other, knew the rules, and the language, the dress code, knew who and what to avoid.

My brother and I grew up overseas, in one of those cults that sprang up in the late sixties. Ever since we came back to the States, after we left the cult, I'd tried to feel like an American, like I belonged. Funny thing is, I felt more American in the cult than I ever did out of it. Back in the cult, being American was part of my identity. I had what the other kids told me was an American accent. I had an American passport. My grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins lived in America. My parents were American. And so, from the time we landed back in Texas when I was fifteen, desperate for any identity, I tried to be what I thought was American, the way I understood it, which was not at all. I said the pledge of allegiance in school. I listened to country music. I ate junk food and drank more soda and milk than water. I smoked Marlboros. I tried to love football and pretend I found soccer painfully boring. I joined the military and took an oath to defend the constitution. I actually read the constitution. I hung an American flag on my wall. I considered buying a gun. I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I read. None of it worked. I felt nothing. And I couldn't understand what I was supposed to feel.

I walked back to the bar but couldn't get the bartender's attention. So I drove home alone. When I was a kid, I never

thought I'd live to be twenty-one. The Antichrist was supposed to show up around the time I turned sixteen. Even if I survived the wars and the persecution of Christians, the world would end soon afterwards. By the time I realized all that was a lie, I didn't have much time to plan a future. The Air Force recruiter was very helpful with that.

There's this day in Air Force basic training where they try to make you feel like you're really in the military. They keep you up most of the night before working in the kitchen. At dawn, you march a few miles carrying your duffle bag, singing jodies to keep cadence. You shoot the M16 for a couple hours. You sit in the dirt and pick through MREs for lunch. Airman Eudy who watched all the right movies tells everyone else to avoid the Lucky Charms—they're bad luck. And because you've never eaten an MRE, you enjoy the plastic food. Then they march you back, into an auditorium.

You file in without speaking because you've been in basic training six weeks now, and no one has to tell you not to speak. The lights go out and there, on the stage, a single spotlight pops on to show a guy, one of the instructors, tied to a chair. The bad guy enters, stage right. You know he's the bad guy because he's wearing a towel on his head. The bad guy slaps the good airman around a little. But the good airman won't give up the mission plan. Just name, rank, serial number—which is really your social security number, but I didn't write his down. The bad guy pulls a gun. Shoots the airman dead. And the lights go out. Then, I shit you not, you hear Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" kick on.

At that point, I looked around. Everyone was crying, shouting the words. Some of the kids fell back on their evangelical upbringings and waved their hands in the air to the music. I knew I was supposed to feel something. And I did. I felt revulsion. Because I'd been through this before. All of it.

The sleep-deprivation, the fun outdoors preparing for war, the play-acting interrogation by the bad guys, and the singing. Always the singing.

When I got back to the base, I sat on the hood of my car facing the highway. Just past the highway stood the fence surrounding the base, and just past that, the runway. The runway lights never went out, but no one was flying tonight. I leaned back against my windshield to see the sky. I'd always searched the sky when I felt alone. I'd look for the constellations my mom taught us when we were little. I don't remember the stories she told about Cassiopeia or Andromeda. I only remember how to find them. But here, in the South Carolina lowlands, there were no stars. The damp air was too thick and glowed a sickly yellow from the lights on the runway and the sodium lights on the highway. I could see the moon, but barely.