New Nonfiction by Dean Hosni: “The Cartoon War”

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

October 6, 1973. Los Angeles.

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

But this Saturday, my customers would wait late into the afternoon for their morning edition of the Herald Examiner, while I stood statue-like in front of a grainy black and white television screen. A familiar desert landscape would erupt in fire before my eyes.

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

My sister sat open-mouthed in front of the television and watched Shaggy, Scooby, and the rest in the final chase scene.

With the masked villain captured, I pointed a finger at the screen, ready to reveal his identity and ruin the ending for her. But before I could utter the words, a news anchor's face appeared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Watching this war unfold before my eyes, I was thrown back in time to a day six years earlier. My mother was carrying my then baby sister and gripping my hand so tightly. Terror filled her eyes as she looked out the window of our Cairo apartment. The flash of bombs lit up the night sky and

silhouetted darkened buildings. The air smelled of spent firecrackers. Israeli jets were bombing a nearby airport. A staccato of red tracers shot upward toward them, searching, not finding.

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

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

The world didn’t seem to care about the lost pride of a defeated Egypt. Not as long as Arab oil was flowing, not with the Israeli military appearing, by all accounts, invincible, and not with the Arab nation lacking the military capability to change the reality on the ground. Egyptians, it seemed, were expected to simply live with their June ’67 defeat and accept the occupation of their cherished Sinai by their enemy. Egypt’s prized Suez Canal, a source of international prestige and badly needed money, would have to sit idle with Israeli soldiers on its eastern shore, taunting and humiliating.

Nothing to be done about it, the world thought.

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

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

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

I pulled myself away from the television, took another newspaper from the stack, pounded each fold flat, and stretched a rubber band around it. The rubber band snapped in my hand. I felt the burn on my fingers and in my soul.

# # #

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

nighttime air raids.

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

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

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

# # #

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

I fanned through pages of pencil sketches in my notebook, talentless drawings of tanks and jets in desert combat. I was

startled by a voice close to my ear. “Your country attacked my country,” said the taller of two boys standing over me, a known bully.

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

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

Looking up at my adversaries, I cowered. This was their classroom, their school. I was an immigrant, tolerated in their country. I was alone. I flinched at the boy’s feigned punches. I endured his provoking slaps, barely blocking them, never getting up from my seat. I did nothing to stop him. Finally, the teacher walked into the room and told my assailant to take his seat. The insult of that day lingered, as did the shame of having not stood up for my country’s honor.

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

# # #

Ten days into the war, America’s Department of Defense delivered on a promise: an airlift so massive it reconstituted the Israeli army, which had been heavily compromised on the

Egyptian front. Now, with even more advanced weapons in Israeli hands, the tide of the war would turn, and not in Egypt's favor. I pulled the knife's edge through the string holding my daily stack of newspapers. I took the top copy, and without looking at it, I began folding; the right third over the middle, and the left third over that.

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

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

# # #

A couple months passed, and the war was over. And mine, it seemed, was the last shaky voice crying out: "Egypt won. We did it." But my truth was cast aside as fables of super-human feats by Israeli soldiers in the battlefield took center stage. Then came the pictures, splashed across magazines. Handsome Israeli soldiers with lovely light-eyed girls posing next to American tanks. Rockstars selling victory, democracy,

freedom, and sex; a marketing campaign for a Western audience. And in time, I began to doubt my own truth. Perhaps our victory, the one talked about in Egyptian media, was exaggerated, even fabricated.

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

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

# # #

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

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“Egypt.”

“Oh… I’m from Israel.”

I tensed up, saying nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# # #

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

More recordings came: soldiers’ recollections, nightmares, acts of heroism and of humanity. One such recording still lives in my mind. A transmission by an Israeli soldier, a

hold-out in an underground Bar Lev Line fortification. His frantic calls for reinforcements—tanks, airstrikes—go unheeded on a static-filled radio channel. He pleads for his life as the structure collapses around him. His voice strains, calling for God as artillery shells fall. “They’re coming… breaking in… I’m burning.” About to meet his end, he curses the ones who would leave him to his fate: “God will not forgive you…” Then, his final words, to his mother.

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

# # #

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

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

“I’m supposed to give the perspective of someone my age. A boy. His name is Shlomo.”

“Shlomo? What kind of an Arabic name is Shlomo?”

“It’s not Arabic, Dad. It’s an Israeli name.”

“Wait. Does your teacher know you’re Egyptian?”

“Yes.”

I was impressed. It was a lesson in empathy.

# # #

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

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

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

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

# # #

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

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

their side. As, I presume, they forever will.

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

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

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

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

On October 6th, 1981, the eighth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Sadat was assassinated. It was then that many began to

speak of the man’s achievements and sacrifices, to contemplate his legacy. Anwar El-Sadat; the great strategist on the world stage. The hero who did more than win a military objective, who did more than win back the Sinai for Egypt. Here was the man who successfully executed a war to win peace.

# # #

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Violent as my grandson’s game was, it fostered no hatred in him. I knew he saw no evil in his cartoon-like adversaries. I hoped that things would always remain this way, that he would

never know a real enemy.

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

New Fiction by Nancy Ford Dugan: “Flow”

So, Abe, the pleasant guy who buzzes you in every week at the bubbled-roof tennis facility, takes your thick wad of cash (he appreciates exact change) and makes the usual small talk: weather, recent professional tennis matches, how he’s doing fixing up the fixer-upper he just bought in Queens, etc.

Lately, you’ve also been discussing updates on when the tennis club is scheduled to permanently close. The date keeps shifting, but it’s imminent.

He’ll lose his job. You’ll lose your precious hour of weekly tennis.

Today, you notice for the first time a large swelling at Abe’s neck. Behind the plexiglass, you suppress a gasp and try not to gawk. You glimpse. It’s protruding like an Adam’s apple, but halfway down his neck and on the side.

Is it new? Is it painful?

Should you tell him?

Is he blithely unaware?

Or is he fully aware and ignoring it?

Or is he aware and already undergoing medical treatment to deal with it, to keep it from growing, to keep it from consuming all of his neck and possibly his friendly, dark-eyebrowed face and even his shaved head?

Your long-time tennis partner would know what to do, and whether you should bring it up with Abe. She was raised down south and has impeccable manners.

But she's in Egypt for a climate change conference and to see the pyramids. Or so she says. You imagine she is a perfect spy or a radical activist. She is tiny, nondescript, unassuming, and so soft-spoken no one has a clue what she is saying. She is traveling despite all the warnings and articulated dangers associated with travel for someone her age during what is hoped to be a waning phase of the pandemic.

If you wait for your tennis partner to return (in a few weeks) to consult on how to handle Abe's situation, it may be too late for Abe. And it will be solely on you if Abe dies before her return from her high-risk trip because you neglected to mention the large swelling attacking his neck.

Abe is functioning fine. He's busy juggling multiple phone lines, multiple demands for coveted weekend court time. Not knowing what to do, you wave at him through the plexiglass, he smiles back, and you wander to your court, fully masked for action.

You and your tennis partner have been playing with face masks on for several months now; they fog up eyeglasses, pinch behind ears, cut visual perspective horizontally and vertically, and muffle attempts at conversation. On the other hand, there is the possibility that wearing masks while exerting and running could improve lung capacity.

After ten minutes on the court with the young local pro, you

are huffing and exhausted. So much for lung capacity. Fifty more minutes to go. During the expensive lesson, you want to make every costly minute count. But you are distracted. You hit the ball wide or long or inaccurately into the sloping net.

Is the distraction due to concerns about your partner's long, potentially dangerous trip? The amount of extra money you have to pay for a lesson while she's away?

Or is it all due to thoughts of Abe's neck growth? To wondering if it will intensify or expand to the size of a yellow tennis ball, while you are selfishly hitting one instead of helping him? What will Abe's neck look like when your lesson is over?

Will the growth turn yellow? Will that mean it is full of pus?

Why aren't you racing off the court to beg Abe for the love of God to go immediately to an urgent care center (there's one only a few blocks away) to address his neck issue?

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You are unaccustomed to the steady onslaught of briskly and accurately placed balls the pro provides. He plucks the balls nonstop from a jam-packed grocery cart and smacks them at you.

You are accustomed to a sluggish weekly pace with your tennis partner, filled with rambling delays between points as she collects loose balls and places them in odd arrangements at the back of the court. You imagine she is plotting to overthrow a government on a continent oceans away, beyond this smooth, immovable, and bright blue deco surface. You impatiently pace, wait, and sometimes perform jumping jacks until she is finally ready to successfully hit her serve with the intensity of ten thousand suns. Or she hits it directly into the net.

From his side of the court, the agile-legged pro speaks liltingly about flow. “Where is your flow?” he asks. “Don’t rush your shots. Get your arm back early. Get it! I like that one. Pivot! Run up to the net. Keep your wrist steady.”

You have heard these commands, especially about wrist and flow, nearly every time you take a lesson when your tennis partner is unavailable and your back-up options (a sturdy friend from college, a hard-hitting former work colleague) don’t pan out.

Your wrist is the size of a pencil, so what’s a woman to do? It doesn’t wobble on return of serve since you have time to prepare. But impromptu, at the net, it dips. Some might say it collapses. You start mumbling your “Grip!” mantra to yourself under your multiple masks. It helps you focus and slightly improves the wrist flailing.

As for flow, some days you have it and some days you don’t. But honestly, how can you flow when a young man’s neck might now be the size of a Buick while you, a masked idiot, gambol all over your side of the court and contend with an unreliable wrist?

You associate the word “flow” with menstruation, something you have not had to worry about for quite some time. Years ago, at a Long Island party where everyone discussed furniture, you were introduced to a much older, wizened man. Over the course of your very brief conversation, he chose for some reason to confide in you that he only dated women who still “flowed.”

At the time, you silently wondered:

- Who invited this guy to the party and why? And who uses the word flow in this manner, much less in party patter with a stranger?
- How does he screen for flow status upfront, before dating anyone? Does he require a doctor’s note? Does he check out bathroom cabinets? Does he ask women directly?

Do they punch him in the nose as he deserves and as the woebegone look of his nose implies?

- Has he incorrectly assumed you no longer flowed, or God forbid that you were interested in dating him?
- You have a gorgeous and smart friend, a mother of twins, who went through early menopause in her thirties. If he had met her “post-flow” would this presumed Viagra user find her lacking? Chopped liver?

Now you wonder why couldn’t that guy have a tennis ball affixed to the side of his creased neck instead of poor, young Abe? Abe, who hasn’t even finished fixing up his house.

In fury, you use your two-handed backhand to nail a deep, perfect shot down the line past your lilting-voiced pro. He’s unable to return it. He smiles broadly at you and says, “Nice!”

Flow or no flow, for a moment, you’ve still got it. And it feels so good to hit something.

Maybe Abe just needs some drainage.

Maybe your tennis partner will return safely and virus-free from Egypt.

Maybe the tennis club will stay open.

All unlikely.

But, maybe, and it’s a long shot, a very long shot, maybe you will learn *finally* to go with the flow.

But, then again, why start now?

New Memoir: Solitaire by Lauren Hough (Part II)

Part II of II

I should've been more concerned when someone fingered the words "Die Dike" into the dust on my rental car. I should've told someone.

I was a twenty-three year old Combat Rescue Controller in the Air Force. Sounds like a cool job. Makes you picture me jumping out of a helicopter, returning enemy fire, and saving a pilot. What I really did was read, play a lot of solitaire, and once a week, sit in the corner of the briefing room, clicking "next" on Power Point slides.

When I found that first threatening message, my unit was on an exercise in Egypt, a welcome trip away for our middle-of-nowhere base in South Carolina. An exercise is when you go somewhere else to play solitaire on your computer because you're not allowed to read at your desk—reading would look unprofessional. You spend your off hours pranking each other—gluing sleeping bags shut, dropping raw eggs into someone's boots, duct taping people to cots with cardboard "free blow job" signs.

That first note, I wanted to believe someone just had a bad sense of humor. I rubbed the dust off the car, hoping no one had seen it. And I forgot about it because something else happened while I was in Egypt. I got orders to Araxos Air Base in Greece.

All I had to do was keep my mouth shut about the stupid prank

that read like a threat. In two months, I'd leave my miserable base in South Carolina. I'd move to Greece. I'd swim in the sea. I'd drink ouzo. I'd play more solitaire. I'd be more careful about who I told I was gay. I'd become someone else—something I'd been doing as long as I can remember. New country. New town. New story.

After two years at Shaw Air Force Base, I'd been to plenty of exercises. But I'd never been to Egypt. I was thrilled to go. I saw the pyramids and the sphinx, all the images I'd studied in my picture Bible when I was a kid. Knowing I was headed to Greece next, that annoying threat was just that—annoying.

I returned to Shaw and hoped, nearly believed, I'd left that problem in Egypt. Maybe that problem hadn't come from my base. Maybe one of the Marines from Camp Lejeune or a soldier from Fort Bragg who'd come to the exercise had left the threat on my car. Then I woke up one morning to four flat tires. This was not the kind of "prank" we played on each other – it looked like I wouldn't be able to just forget about that first threat. I should've called the cops then. Should've saved the next note, the one on paper, stuck under my windshield wiper, the one that said I'd burn, or the one after that that said we're going to kill you.

When my car burst into flames one night in early December, I knew things looked bad, but I still held onto some slight hope—I had my escape plan. I had received orders to move to Greece in January. They were signed. I'd been issued plane tickets. I just had to wait it out.

The night of the fire, I'd agreed to babysit for Sergeant Little because it meant spending a couple nights with HBO and without roommates arguing about who emptied the dishwasher last or what movie to watch. I liked Sergeant Little. He only hit on me once and only sulked about my rejection when he was drinking. I'd been in the Air Force long enough to know that's about as much as you can hope for in a military guy. I found

they took rejection easier if I told them I was gay. Of course, they'd tell others. After two years at Shaw, most of my small unit knew about me. But other than some unfunny jokes, it hadn't been a problem. Anyway, I liked Little well enough, his kid wasn't too much of a pain, but mostly I liked his two german shepherds.

That night, I'd sent the kid to bed, popped EDtv into the VCR—because I was lesbian and required to watch every Ellen movie—and I settled in on the couch in the family room at the back of the house. Then I heard the windows rattle in their frames. Sergeant Little's dogs went nuts. I ran to the front window and saw my brand new car, my shiny black Acura Integra engulfed in flames.

The kid wandered into the hallway, half asleep in her pajamas. I told her to go out back. I didn't know if the house was on fire, but if it wasn't, it would be soon—I hadn't parked but two feet from the garage. I was trying to get a hold of the dogs when I saw the Little's idiot kid open the front door. I think she was twelve at the time. When I was twelve I was taking care of twelve younger kids. She couldn't figure out not to run towards the fire. Anyway, I got her turned around. I threw the dogs out back with her and ran back in for the phone, and a blanket so she wouldn't freeze. I called 911 and watched a fireball shoot into the air high enough I could see it from the back of the house.

The firemen doused the flames, and called the sheriff. They told me the house was safe. I sent the kid to bed. I called Sergeant Little, and he said not to let anyone in the house. Little liked his guns and maybe they weren't all legal.

Sheriff Horton moseyed up to the front porch where I sat on the steps drying my hair with a towel. Didn't take much to dry it. I'd chopped off most of my hair that summer when the swamp that is South Carolina hit a hundred degrees with a hundred percent humidity and walking outside was like opening a

dishwasher mid-cycle and climbing in.

He took his hat off, beat it against his thigh to shake off the water. I stood and realized he was shorter than me. I stepped back. I'm six feet tall, and guys don't like feeling short. I offered him my hand which he crushed in his own meaty palm. .

"Looks like arson," he said and stared at me like I was supposed to respond with something more than no shit.

So I said, "Yeah I can smell the gas." I mimicked his accent. Sometimes the mimicry's unintentional. The way someone talks is the fastest way to tell someone isn't like you. Come back from years overseas to West Texas, you learn the accent fast. If you sound different, people start asking you questions you don't want to answer, like "where are you from?" After a while, you mimic without even thinking about it. It's safer when people don't think you're different. And an accent is easy to change if you learned to change it when you were young.

I lit a Marlboro, something to do with my hands because I knew better than to put them in my pockets. Southern rules often follow military rules. You don't talk to an authority figure with your hands in your pockets.

I offered him a cigarette. He asked if I thought that was a good idea, nodded over to where my car sat, still steaming. The firemen were packing up their hoses, shouting and joking on the lawn. I said I doubted there was much risk of combusting. He asked if maybe we should go inside. I raised the cigarette like that was the reason we would not be going inside. He raised his eyebrows like that wasn't a good reason. I told him it wasn't my house. I couldn't give permission, because I thought that seemed reasonable. I don't know what he expected to find. A lighter?

He asked me if I knew who'd done it. I said it was probably

the same person who'd been leaving me death threats. He pulled out his notepad and asked for names. I told him I didn't have any. He asked with a smirk on his face why someone would threaten me, but he already knew the answer.

I'm not always this cool and collected, not even usually. This is what happens when faced with an authority figure. I can't meet their eyes. But I wouldn't show fear, either. I know better. I'd been through this before. Not with the cops, but when I was growing up, interrogation was one of the adults' favorite pastimes. I knew the drill: Stay calm. See the question behind the question. Stick as close to the truth as possible. Don't give too much away or they'll think you're hiding something—liars always explain too much.

I took a drag off my cigarette to buy enough time to think of an answer. I told him someone thought I was gay. I didn't say I was gay. I wasn't all that clear on the rules but "I'm gay" was a pretty clear violation of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

He asked me if I was gay.

I said, "Hey, don't ask, don't tell, right?" The decade's favorite punchline.

Sheriff Horton didn't laugh. He said he didn't have a problem with gay people. He liked Ellen.

I told him, "I can't answer that. You know I can't answer that." He asked me if anything was wrong with the car.

"Other than it's smoldering in the driveway? No." And I remembered what my brother, Mikey said when I last saw him at our grandfather's funeral that August. I hadn't owned the car a month. I'd been circling the restaurant parking lot where Mom and her sisters said to meet for dinner, searching for a spot my doors might be safe from other car doors. "Seriously," he said. "I'm gonna get out and kick one of your doors in and you'll thank me 'cause you won't have to worry about it

anymore.”

I said, “The fuck you will.”

I think the sheriff caught my smile. One silver lining of being a cult baby is that you learn, if not to expect the worst, to not be surprised by the worst. I’ll cry in frustration when my internet’s out. But when someone torches my car, well, that seems about right.

Sheriff Horton took down some information on his notepad with a pen he held with four fingers: name, insurance company, number, address. There wasn’t much more to tell him. He tried to be my buddy then, like we’d go out for beers after. Asked me where I was from. That question. I never know how to answer. I’d been telling people I was from Boston. I said Texas because guys like Sheriff Horton aren’t too fond of yankees.

He asked how I liked South Carolina, the Air Force. I said it was alright. But I was going to Greece in January.

He said, “We’ll see about that.” And he snapped his notebook shut.

The firemen left. Another squad car pulled into the driveway. Sheriff Horton walked over to the car, met the new deputy. Gave orders. The new deputy, a skinny kid who looked like he’d slept in his uniform, took some pictures, collected evidence in plastic bags.

I asked Sheriff Horton if I could get my things out of the trunk, see if anything survived—the chem warfare suit I’d been issued for Egypt that I still hadn’t returned, souvenirs I’d bought in Egypt, a chess set for my dad, a painting on papyrus for my mom, a hookah for my brother, little trinkets for my sister’s kids. He said I’d have to wait until they were done processing the car. Everything was evidence now. I watched from the porch but no one was talking to me. I told them to

knock if they had any more questions. I went back inside. I gave the dogs a couple biscuits, sat on the couch, and waited for morning.

My buddy Sheriff Horton called my office a few days later. He said someone had seen a white car speeding away from the house. Asked if I knew who drove a white car. I couldn't think of anyone. Then he asked me take a polygraph. I'd watched enough television and read a few legal thrillers. I knew I was a suspect, so I called the base legal office. The base lawyer told me I shouldn't be too worried. I should stop talking to the cops. Tell them to talk to her. Don't talk to anyone. Call her back if anything changed.

I waited while the Air Force took over the investigation. I waited as the investigators asked every airman on base if they knew Senior Airman Hough was being harassed, if they knew Senior Airman Hough was gay. She's gay. I waited while investigators showed up at my grandma's door in Texas. But they didn't know she'd been an Air Force wife. They didn't even finish introducing themselves before she slammed the door in their faces and called me.

The investigation took another bad turn when they talked to my roommate. He said I was a liar. Sometimes when we watched a movie set in a place I'd been, I'd say, "Hey I've been there." I grew up all over the place—Japan, Switzerland, Argentina, Chile, Texas. Sometimes I forget that some people never stray too far from home. Most people know where that is. But I didn't understand why he thought I was a liar just because I said I'd been there, unless I'd slipped. Maybe I'd forgotten my backstory. Maybe I'd switched stories, told him I'd grown up everywhere, told someone within earshot I'd grown up in Texas. Maybe I shouldn't have been drinking around people.

The truth is, I am a liar. If you ask me where I'm from, I'll lie to you. I'll tell you my parents were missionaries. I'll tell you I'm from Boston. I'll tell you I'm from Texas. But

those lies, people believe. I'm better at lying than I am at the truth because the lies don't make me nervous. It's the truth, the thought of telling it that triggers my nervous laugh and my sweating palms, makes me not want to look you in the eye. I know I won't like what I'll see.

I moved back into the dorms on base that I'd been so eager to leave a year earlier. Senior Airmen were allowed to move off-base where most of us shared the rent on run-down trailers to save money. Off-base, there were no dorm inspections, no First Sergeants trolling the common areas for rule-breakers. I liked thinking I had some privacy, but I'd been wrong. I'd let my guard down, trusted the wrong people with little bits of information like, I've been there. So now, at least on base, I wouldn't have roommates.

2000

It hadn't been a year since Barry Winchell, an Army private, had been beaten to death with a baseball bat in a barracks hallway at an Army post in Kentucky because he was gay. I was scared before. But the worst I feared was getting kicked out of the Air Force. Even the act of torching my car seemed like a far leap from murder, a beat-down seemed more likely. That is, until June, when I got the next note: "Gun knife or bat I can't decide which one." And of course, I thought of Winchell. And I was terrified.

The note clarified my priorities. I'd been happy over the past few months that it seemed whomever torched my car was finished with me. I thought they'd leave me alone now that I was being investigated, afraid to show themselves. Maybe they'd transferred to another base.

The investigation had stalled. My insurance company, frustrated with the lack of an outcome, sent their own investigator. He looked at the evidence the cops had,

interviewed me and a few people on base, called Sheriff Horton some names, and cleared me of wrong-doing in two days. I figured the Air Force investigators had given up trying to pin the arson on me when I got new orders to Greece. Maybe they'd let me go this time, if only to wash their hands of the problem.

But now, with this new note, getting kicked out of the Air Force was no longer my biggest fear or the most likely outcome. I called the Air Force investigators. They asked me if I'd touched the note. They took me over to their office, led me down a hallway, into a room, told me to sit there in an office chair, and they sat across from me.

Campbell was built like a linebacker, all shoulders and forehead. He was wearing a navy suit in mid-July. I wondered how many times the FBI had turned down his application before he took this job, Air Force Office of Special Investigations, OSI. He'd be playing bad cop. Maldonado was pregnant and her legs didn't reach the floor. Campbell waited while she tried to adjust the office chair—the paddle that lowered the seat wasn't working. They switched chairs. This didn't look much like an interrogation room. No mirror on the wall. No metal chairs. Just a government issue gray desk and three blue office chairs.

I stared at the gold cross that had slipped out of Maldonado's blouse during the fight with the chair. She'd be playing good cop but she'd push for execution if she could. She tucked the necklace back in, cleared her throat, opened a folder. I half expected her first words to be, "should we pray?" That's how this used to happen. But they just sat there looking at me like it was a game to see who'd speak first. I looked at my hands. I asked for a lawyer. Maldonado said I wasn't a suspect. I shouldn't need a lawyer. Not a very convincing good cop.

"When did you find the note? Who left the note? Is this the

first time this has happened?”

“I want a lawyer. The base lawyer told me not to answer questions.”

“You’re not a suspect. This isn’t about your car. This is about the threats. We’re trying to help you.”

And the tears filled my eyes and I wiped them with the back of my hand. I wasn’t crying. My eyes were leaking. There is in fact a difference. The leaking happens when I’m frustrated.

Maldonado asked me, “Why are you so upset if you didn’t do anything?”

I wanted to shout at them. I wanted to tell them I grew up in a cult. That they used to pull me out of bed late at night and make me confess to things I didn’t understand. I told them I wanted a lawyer.

They gave up after a while. Wrote some notes down in the folder. Maldonado said she had to eat something. Campbell took me to another room where another agent, a lab rat with dandruff and a yellow collar, spread ink on my hands and arms and took impressions. He pulled hair from random spots on my head for a DNA test.

I knew then they weren’t looking for who sent me death threats. They didn’t believe me. Maybe they thought I didn’t want the investigation to stall, didn’t want to go to Greece. They were still convinced I’d torched my own car.

They wanted my DNA because a rag had been stuffed in the gas tank. The rag never ignited. Whoever did torch my car filled it with gas and lit it that way after trying to light a rag in the pouring rain. The cops had found a hair on the rag. Campbell had mentioned it earlier, hoping for a reaction.

And they let me go. I walked across the street, back to the legal office and sat down to wait for a lawyer because I

wasn’t in a cult anymore, and a lawyer could make them stop asking me questions I couldn’t answer. The lawyer said to stop talking to the investigators. He couldn’t represent me because he’d just moved over from the prosecuting side and had worked on my case. If there was to be a court martial, they’d have to send a defense attorney from another base. I hadn’t considered there would be a court martial, at least not with me as the defendant. Up until that conversation, I assumed they’d either figure out who did it or drop the investigation, because I hadn’t done anything. But I had bigger worries than a court martial.

I’d always slept with a knife by my bed—too many nights when some drunk airman tried my doorknob. I replaced the knife with a little snub-nosed .38 I bought at one of the ten pawn shops between the base and Sumter, the nearest town.

I drove out of town and practiced a few shots on a row of beer bottles. The bottles remained intact. I’d barely qualified with a rifle back in basic training. I wouldn’t have qualified with a 9mm, if the good ol’ boy major beside me at the range hadn’t pitied my piss-poor shooting, said, Aw shit, and blown a few more holes in my target. His target had a single hole through dead center, where every one of his bullets had passed. And, if I had to shoot, I’d be shooting without my glasses at night. I hoped I wouldn’t need the gun. I’d end up killing my television or someone across the hall.

They told me I couldn’t work in my office anymore. My security clearance was suspended because of the investigation. They moved me to the gym where I traded IDs for towels, where no one looked me in the eye.

I only had two friends before all this. We used to drive up to the gay club together in Columbia every weekend which was better than the bar in Florence by virtue of having more than ten customers. We’d try to forget we were in the military, try to forget we might be seen by some airman who liked the music

and the drugs, who'd get popped on a piss test one day and sell us out to save his ass. Now they couldn't risk being seen around me. They'd be gay by association. I didn't blame them. Even as a kid, being my friend had been a risk.

So I spent my evenings in my dorm room reading through the slim pickings available at the base library. I was used to being lonely. But I'd see groups of friends in the dining hall, at the gym, at the weekend keg parties in the courtyard between dorm buildings, and mostly, I just wanted the distraction of hearing someone talk.

One morning in August, I was told to report to my commander's office. I called base legal. They said they'd assign me a lawyer now that I was going to be court martialed. Don't say a word. You'll have to sign the charge sheet. Call us back.

I stood at attention as my commander, Colonel Young read the charges: Arson with intent to defraud. And something about conduct unbecoming but I hear they always add that. If there's a crime becoming of a US Airman, I'm guessing they wouldn't charge anyone for it.

I signed the charge sheet, headed over to base legal, locked myself in the bathroom and cried. I was going to have to call my parents.

The legal office let me use a desk and a phone. I called my mom first because I didn't know how to reach my dad. When I'd told her about the car back when it happened, she said, "Oh Jesus, Lauren. This gay thing. I don't know about it. You're running with the wrong crowd."

I wasn't running with any crowd. I was sneaking off on occasion to a gay bar. Sometimes I'd go home with someone. Sometimes I'd go home with the same person more than once which is basically marriage if you're a lesbian. But I didn't know how to have a relationship or what that word even meant. And I barely had friends much less a crowd.

I was worried she'd tell me more about how this lesbian thing wasn't a good idea, "you can't have kids, it's just hedonism, Lauren." Hedonism would require some degree of happiness.

Mom hadn't had much time to get used to what she called this lesbian thing. When I told her a couple years ago, she'd said she hoped I'd change my mind. Since those first arguments, when it seemed like all she did was cry on the phone, and I'd cry after we hung up, we'd agreed to a sort of don't ask, don't tell policy of our own.

She said she'd pray for me. She said she'd come to the trial. She asked me if I needed money for a lawyer. I told her the Air Force was providing one.

"I'll be okay. I need a number for Dad." She said to ask Valerie, my sister. She might know.

Valerie was still at work when I called. So I tried to call my brother. We didn't talk much, not since I left home and joined the Air Force. He was in college, still living with our stepdad, Gabe, even after the divorce, after Mom had moved to Massachusetts.

I hadn't talked to Gabe in years. I called the house and Gabe answered. I didn't get the words out, can I talk to Mikey, before he hung up. I wasn't sure until that moment that I would call my dad. But somewhere between the click of the line going dead, and my setting the phone back into its cradle, I knew I would call him. I walked back to my dorm room and waited for my sister to call. She gave me the number for a commune in Sweden where she thought Dad might be.

We were never sure where he was, because Dad was still in the Family. Cults like that word—family. I didn't know if he'd ever leave. He'd visited a couple times since we'd left the cult when I was fifteen. But the joy of each visit had dissolved into heated words and tears as he defended them. His eyes damp, he'd say, "Let's just agree to disagree." And I'd

tell him, “They told you to say that.” Because they had. I’d read the memo. But sometimes his love for me broke through the fog of a cult member’s brain. When I’d told him I was gay, he didn’t condemn me as I knew he was supposed to. Instead all he said was, “Oh, honey, that must be so hard on you.” I hoped I could break through again.

I called the home. I never concerned myself with time zones. I didn’t care about who I woke up. They’d never been all that concerned with respecting my sleep. The guy who answered the phone pretended he didn’t speak English at first. Said he didn’t understand. That line, “I don’t understand,” is the sum total of my Swedish. I said I’m was looking for my dad, tall guy, American. I think he’s going by Stefan. Married to a woman who probably goes by Esther.

He said, “Oh he’s not here?” Something close to an American accent. Hard consonants, gratingly positive inflection. “Listen. Can you call back in a few hours?”

I asked, “Is he not there right now, or he doesn’t live there?” I had to be careful. If this guy hung up the phone, there would be no way to reach my dad.

He said, “Doesn’t live here.”

“Well, I can’t call back. I have to find him. It’s an emergency.”

He said, “Okay. Call back in a half hour? I need to ask someone. God bless you.”

I could hear a party gearing up in a room down the hall, loud voices, Limp Bizkit—Friday night in the dorms.

I called the number again. Three rings. Four. I was afraid he wouldn’t answer. I was afraid they’d pack up the home and leave because of a phone call. But on the seventh ring, he picked up. “Hello?” he said.

“Were you able to find anyone?”

“Oh yes,” he said. “I’m not sure, of course. This is the number of a home in Moscow, but you’ll have to look up the country code? He might be there. If not, ask for Swiss Aaron. He might know.”

Moscow. The OSI was going to open and entirely new investigation into my phone bill. But I couldn’t worry about that. Swiss Aaron passed me on to someone else who passed me on to someone else. Another home in another country. In all, I went through five numbers before I called a different home in Sweden, and Dad answered. Even in Swedish, I knew his voice. I said hi.

He said, “Shatzi!” He always calls me that, it’s something like a German version of “sweetie.” “Hey, kiddo. How are you?” I’d done the math by this point. It was five am and this was how excited my dad was to hear from me. I wanted to cry. I wanted to ask him if he’d been fishing lately, anything but what I had to tell him.

“I’m in trouble, Dad.”

“What? No. What’s the matter?” he said.

I told him everything—started with the death threats, moved on to the car, the investigation. “Anyway, there’s going to be a court martial,” I said. I knew he might be fuzzy on what that meant. “It’s like a trial, Dad. It is a trial. And if they say I’m guilty, I’m going to jail. The max is ten years.”

“But you didn’t do anything,” he said. “So there’s no need to worry?” At least he didn’t didn’t offer to pray with me.

I told him, “No. It looks really bad. I’m the only suspect because they never looked for who did it. And they’re saying I didn’t want to go to Greece.”

He interrupted me then, “Why wouldn’t you want to go to

Greece? That’s so stupid.”

I said, “Fuck if I know, Dad. But they’re saying I couldn’t afford the car and didn’t want to go to Greece so I torched it. I don’t know. It looks bad.”

He asked for my number. He said he’d call me back. I figured he’d wake up the shepherds, whoever was in charge of the home. They’d pray about it and decide it wasn’t in the Lord’s will for my Dad to care about what happened to me—Story of my life. I wondered if he’d call me back at all.

My phone rang. “Hey, so when is this happening?” he asked. I gave him the dates. He said he was coming. I couldn’t believe it. My dad who hated that I’d even joined the military. Who I hadn’t seen but a couple times since my parents divorced when I was seven. Who stayed in the Family long after we’d left. My dad was coming to my trial. I’d fought against letting myself hope. He said he’d called his brother, a lawyer, who told him I needed a civilian lawyer. Said his mom had left him some money and he’d pay for a lawyer.

And so my Dad gave me a lawyer named Gary Myers who said I could pick an Air Force lawyer from a different base, and should. Gary would run the defense, but an Air Force lawyer was free. I might as well have both. The Air Force gave me a captain from a base in Oklahoma. I named him The Apostle because he asked if I was a Christian. When I said I’m not anymore, he wanted to pray with me. I wanted him to defend me. But if he just wanted to pray, I had Gary Myers who was exactly as big a prick as you want defending you.

I’m serious. He yelled at me on the phone for talking to Sheriff Horton and the investigators on base. I said, “I didn’t know any better. I talked to legal and didn’t talk to him after that.”

He said, “Well maybe you’re not a complete fucking idiot. Alright. Keep your mouth shut.”

My court martial was held in October of 2000. The trial lasted four days. Mom and Dad shared a rental car from the airport and stayed in the same hotel. They showed up every morning and sat outside the courtroom. They couldn't come in, in case they were called as witnesses. And I needed Mom as a witness.

The prosecution started. (All these words—prosecution, jury, trial—are called something different in the military. But we'll skip the lesson in military law.) They said I was a liar, bought a car I couldn't afford. I didn't tell anyone about the death threats.

Sergeant Little said, "Those dogs always bark at anything on the street, even if they're dead asleep." I thought we should all drive over to his house, play a game of touch football on his lawn to prove his dogs wouldn't bark unless someone rang the doorbell.

I wasn't surprised he'd turned on me. You may think you have friends who'll help you bury a body. But when the cops show up and flash their badges, your friends will point to bodies you've never seen to keep the cops from looking their way. There are only two sides, and when it comes down to it, even those with nothing to hide will side with those who have the power.
They put my old roommate, Eric on the stand. He said, "She always locked her car."

If I always locked my car, no one could have filled it full of gas without setting off the alarm. What he didn't mention was that soon after I'd had the alarm installed, I'd regretted the money I'd wasted on it. The fighter jets set off every car alarm on base every time they buzzed over. We'd talked about it. He said I should have the alarm sensor recalibrated. Instead, I stopped locking my car, to keep it from going off.

He said, "Her CDs weren't in the car when it burned."

If my CDs weren't in the car, obviously I'd removed them

before lighting the car on fire. Or I'd brought them into the house to listen to something, or reorganize my CDs, a favorite hobby of anyone with two books full of CDs. Maybe by mood this time. I don't actually remember and I didn't then either. I just remember the exasperation I felt as he said it. "A few days later, I saw her CD case in the house." And the prosecutor looked at the jury like he'd found the smoking match.

Eric said, "She didn't want to go to Greece."

As my dad said, that's just stupid. I hoped my lawyers would have an argument because all I could think of was, that's stupid.

He said, "She borrowed my gas can a few weeks before."

Okay, that did look bad. Really bad. And my explanation after the fact wouldn't help much. The last time I'd driven through Alabama, before borrowing the gas can, I'd been jumped coming out of a gas station bathroom because a high-schooler told her boyfriend and his buddies, "that's the pervert was usin' the ladies'." I was only spared serious injury when a trucker named Jimmy T saw my uniform and stepped in about the time I hit the ground. Jimmy T told me as he helped me back to my car that he didn't much care for my "lifestyle and such. But that uniform means somethin.'" And "you can't come back to Jesus if yer already dead." Guess he wasn't a "once saved, always saved" sort of Christian.

To avoid a repeat of the experience this Thanksgiving, I was planning to only stop at busy truck stops if I could. Just in case, I borrowed Eric's gas can. But on the way back I'd given it to someone who came up to me and said he was out of gas—I figured it'd do him more good than giving him money. And then they'd found the molten remains of a gas can in my car.

This was the prosecution's big moment. And they played it up, and Eric was happy to play along. He wanted to be a state

trooper when he got out and moved home to Ohio. His brother was a trooper and told Eric his association with a known felon wouldn't look good on his application.

He said, "She joked about the whole thing. She didn't seem scared at all." We'll ignore that assessment of my fear level because he didn't know. I did joke about it. That's true. And that, my outward reaction to the entire affair didn't fit what everyone seemed to think should have been my reaction. Seemed like they'd have believed me if I'd cried in front of them. But they didn't grow up the Family. They didn't grow up in constant fear. They hadn't learned sometimes all you can do is fucking laugh.

Sheriff Horton took the stand, after a small commotion caused when he walked into the courtroom wearing his gun, and the Air Force police had to take it from him. He corroborated Eric's opinion of my unlikely affect. He said I was too calm when I talked to him. Most people, he said, "They're crying or foaming a the mouth to kill the bastard who did it. She laughed about it." See what I mean?

Gary asked him if he'd tried to find the white car the neighbor had seen speeding away, if he'd looked at anyone else.

Horton shifted in his seat and said, "Well, no. But she wouldn't take the polygraph." (If you're shouting "inadmissible," Gary said you're wrong. "Damage done," he said. "No reason to put a neon light around it.")

"It's all circumstantial," Gary said. "This is what happens. You'll even start to believe you're guilty. Just hang tough until it's our turn." He didn't seem the type to play cheerleader. Leading up to the trial, he'd been all business. How I was holding up wasn't any of his concern. Now he was trying to comfort me and that scared me. I knew I wasn't guilty. But guilt or innocence had never mattered all that

much in my experience. And I was learning my experience in the Family wasn't as unique as I'd believed it to be when we left. I was sure I was going to prison.

In between testimony, Gary paced the hall and talked to himself. The Apostle prayed with Mom—turns out he was useful after all. Dad sat in a chair and looked dazed. I stood outside and smoked. And I thought about going to prison.

I knew I couldn't do it again. I'd been locked in rooms before. The last time, when I was fourteen, I broke down after only two days. The walls closed in and I couldn't breathe and the world got dark. It changes you each time. You go through the first few hours in silence. Then you start talking to yourself. You time your pulse. You pick at split ends, scabs, and ingrown hairs. You sleep. And when you wake up, the room is smaller. You have to get out. Your chest tightens. You need space. Just a little breeze. You have to see the sky. One star. You tell yourself it'll be okay, they'll let you out. But you don't believe your own words. The harder you try to control your breath, the worse it gets. You start to really panic then, and you've lost. Once the panic starts, it doesn't end. You can learn to ride the waves, but every single wave is a fight for survival. And you don't come out stronger. You lose something each time. You lose faith in yourself. I wasn't doing it again.

The prosecution rested and my lawyer, Gary took over. My new sergeant, the guy who replaced Little, said, "Every airman on base is driving a car they can't afford. That's what idiot kids who've never had any money do."

A couple airmen from my squadron said, "Everyone knows she's gay and some people have a big problem with it." They'd seen the first message in Egypt, the one in the dust on my car. Shouldn't have been a surprise. The car had been parked right where everyone smoked outside the operations center. But I'd been too busy hoping no one had seen the writing to ask if

anyone had.

My friend who'd given me a ride when my tires were slashed told them all about that morning. Another roommate said, "She never always locked anything. She's a slob. Sometimes her CDs are in the house because she never sleeps and she listens to music late at night. All she ever talked about was leaving this base. Do you know how much it sucks here?"

The lab guy said, "The DNA test on the hair they found on the rag was inconclusive."

Gary said, "The results I have here say it's not a match."

"Well, yeah," the guy said. "That's what I said."

Mom took the stand and told them how many countries I'd lived in and maybe I wasn't a liar when I said I've been there. She said, "When things go really wrong, Lauren gets quiet or tries to make it a joke. If she needed money, she would've asked me. She knows she can."

It was strange watching my mom on the witness stand. She didn't look at me. But she was defending me. And I wondered then why she hadn't before, when I was younger, when I needed her to protect me. I flashed through all the times I'd been in trouble, with Gabe, with the shepherds. And I couldn't remember a single time she'd spoken up, told them to stop. But mostly, she wasn't even there. And I wanted to know why. But I'd been asking for years. I was starting to wonder if she even knew.

I liked that Mom and Dad were going to dinner together every night during the trial. They weren't fighting.

I've never seen Parent Trap but I think most kids nurse a fantasy their parents will get back together. I was no different. After Dad, Mom had married my stepdad and my stepdad was an asshole. My dad was nice. Seemed like Mom would

realize that, as though maybe she hadn't known, and they'd realize with all this time spent together they were still in love. And I was glad they'd have each other because I wasn't going to prison.

The military makes you shop for prison, even before you get the verdict. You have to box up your belongings for storage. You're given a list of what you're required to take: five white t-shirts, five black t-shirts, one white towel, five pairs of socks, five white sports bras, one bar of soap, and so on. So after I packed up my room, I borrowed Dad's rental car and drove to Walmart where I bought what I needed off the list. I stopped in sporting goods and looked at the knives. That wouldn't work—too slow. The base hospital was a five minute walk from the courtroom.

I dropped the car at the base hotel, gave Dad the keys and a hug. He wanted me to stay there. Just have a beer at least, he said. "Your mom wants you to call her." I didn't stay for a beer and I didn't call. I knew she'd convince me to sleep in her room.

Back in my dorm room, I wrote them each a note. I didn't say much. Just told them not to blame themselves. Told them I was sorry. I hid the note behind a painting I left on the wall because my brother painted that and I wanted to look at it some more. Everything else I owned was boxed and labeled for storage. I put on my blues, made sure my ribbon rack was straight, and shoved the gun under my service jacket, under my belt at the small of my back. I checked the mirror. You couldn't tell. I took it out again and sat down to wait for the morning.

I sat there on my bare mattress all night, and all night, I tried to talk myself out of it. It was only ten years. Maybe I wouldn't get the full ten. They'd offered me two but I would've had to say I did it. I couldn't do it in front of Mom, how do you make your mom watch you die? But what if they

cuffed me right away? Dad would be there and maybe he or someone else would know and cover her eyes. I'd have to be fast. The sentence was only ten years, and I could take ten years. I'd be thirty-three when I got out. That wasn't so old. I stared at the painting and wanted to call my brother who I knew wouldn't try to talk me out of it. He'd know what to say without trying, and I wouldn't want to die more than I wanted to live in a cell.

When they said not guilty and Mom started crying, I cried too. And then I started laughing. I knew people were looking at me, the jurors were questioning their verdict. Who laughs? Who goes through a trial and then fucking laughs. Cult babies laugh. Of course, they didn't know that. But I laughed. Maybe it was just how the tension fell out of me, maybe because I'd get to live, because that one time, maybe the only time in my life, my parents stood up for me, and I won.

The finest restaurant in Sumter, the town near the base, was Outback Steakhouse. So that's where we went to celebrate. I sat across from my parents. We placed our drink orders and Dad looked around the room. He said, "You know, there are a lot of black people here. I'll bet we could find some good barbecue."

Mom, said, "Jesus. Ethan. You can't say things like that. Lauren, do you have a cigarette?" I passed her one and held out the lighter. She looked around, "How long does it take to pour a glass of wine?"

Dad said, "Why can't you say that?" He left the States when he was nineteen and hasn't spent more than six months here since. "Do you both have to smoke?"

"Yes," we answered in unison and Mom caught my eye and winked at me. The waiter came back for our orders Dad forgot what he'd wanted so Mom and I ordered while Dad searched the menu again. We finished and the waiter looked impatient so Mom ordered Dad a steak.

“Shit,” he said. And scooted out of the booth, nearly ran out of the restaurant.

I looked at Mom. “Probably left the lights on,” she said. “Sorry we were late. He left his wallet, went back in for his wallet, and then left his phone. Did you know he left Valerie behind in Berlin when we moved? I took the train the day before with you and Ann. You were only one, and I was still pregnant with Mikey.”

The wine arrived. Still no sign of Dad but Mom said, “We’ll just toast when he gets back.” We clinked glasses. “Anyway,” she said. “He was driving the car, it was a little Mini, no room for all of us and our stuff. He just had Valerie. And he left her at the flat. He didn’t realize it until he got to the checkpoint to leave West Berlin and saw he had both passports. Valerie was just sitting there at the door to the flat waiting for him for nearly an hour. She was only four.”

Dad scooted back into the booth. “What are you laughing about?” he asked.

I said, “Nothing, Dad. Taken care of?”

“What? Oh yes. So. We should toast, yes?” Sometimes he doesn’t sound American anymore. I watched them together. Dad changed subjects mid-sentence. Mom grew impatient and snapped at him. Dad tried to tell jokes to cut the tension but the jokes fell flat.

The fun thing about being a child of divorce is, you’re half of both parents. And both sides of you are tired of the other’s shit. And I watched them then and saw it. Dad needed an adult in his life to make sure he left the house wearing clothes. Mom wanted him to be an adult, back when she wanted anything from him at all.

I didn’t want to let go of the fantasy they’d get back together but at this point it would’ve been as silly as

believing the Antichrist was on his way over to join us for dinner. The older you get, the easier it is to burn chapters in the book of fairytales in your head. I ordered another beer.

Once I let go, dropped the childish idea, it was easier then. I saw them then as separate people and I could laugh when Dad changed subjects mid-sentence. And I was glad I'd gotten my sense of humor from my mom because there are only so many variations of "A rabbi and a priest walk into a bar…" and none of them are funny. But I was glad my dad was that nice guy, who can't remember his wallet but remembers every detail about you, every word you've ever said. And he helped my mom into her jacket, and turned up the radio in the car when Bruce Springsteen came on, because she loves Bruce.

The next week, I didn't expect to go right back to my desk. I had "won," but I knew I'd lost even the small place I'd carved out for myself at Shaw. They'd already replaced me since I was supposed to be in Greece. Besides, there was the issue of my security clearance. They gave me a new job that still wasn't my old job, but at least I wasn't handing out towels at the gym. My new job was supervising the new airmen, just out of training, who'd been assigned to maintain the dorms—changing lightbulbs, cleaning day rooms, mowing lawns. At first it was fine. I drove around in a golf cart and made sure everything got done. But soon it became apparent how much damage the OSI had done with their little investigation—Do you know Hough's gay?

Everyone on base knew who I was, and what I was, and it didn't take long for word to spread to the baby airmen I was supervising. Mostly it was just jokes. Where've you guys been? You're two hours late. Hey, don't ask, don't tell, right? But a few of them stopped listening to me altogether. I'd assign them to clean a dayroom, they'd tell me I shouldn't be wearing a uniform much less stripes and there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do about it.

A month passed and orders came again, to Greece again. But I only got a day to celebrate before the orders were cancelled. The Greece assignment required something like an add-on security clearance called the Personnel Reliability Program. The PRP is supposed to ensure only qualified people have access to nuclear weapons. Mine was denied because I had a food allergy. I guess you never know when someone will bring guacamole into the office and bam, my avocado allergy sends me into a gauc-fueled rage and I hit the launch button. You just can't take that sort of risk. I knew then they were never going to welcome me back. My career was over. And that's when I heard from Mikey.

Because we couldn't talk on the phone much, this was long before everyone had a cell phone, we used to send books. I sent him "The Fountainhead" because I thought Rand had some great ideas. (I was nineteen.) He responded with "Of Human Bondage." I sent "Slaughterhouse Five." Mikey sent "Catch 22." I sent "Trainspotting." A few months later, he sent me "Fight Club." We'd underline passages we liked, sometimes write notes in the margins. And we'd been doing this ever since I left home. So when I opened my mailbox and saw his blocky handwriting on a package, I didn't open it in the mailroom. I waited until the end of the day, and all day, tried to guess what he'd sent me. When I got back to my dorm room and tore open the brown paper, I sat down and laughed—Oscar Wilde. I flipped through the book and found the passage he'd circled.

Society, as we have constituted it, will have no place for me, has none to offer; but Nature, whose sweet rains fall on unjust and just alike, will have clefts in the rocks where I may hide, and secret valleys in whose silence I may weep undisturbed. She will hang the night with stars so that I may walk abroad in the darkness without stumbling, and send the wind over my footprints so that none may track me to my hurt: she will cleanse me in great waters, and with bitter herbs make me whole.

My little brother had been with me through it all. We grew up together in the Family, slept in the same bed for years, had the same stepdad who would never think we were good enough to love. Mikey had seen the worst in me and still loved me because it was never a question—He was my brother. And he knew what I wanted, maybe understood more than I did why I joined the Air Force. I thought I'd find something in the military. I'd wear the same uniform as everyone else. They'd have to accept me because I was one of them. I'd find what every book I read, every movie I watched told me I'd find, friends and maybe even a sort of family, a place where I belonged.

But all I'd done was join another cult. And they didn't want me any more than the last one had. And there was my brother, telling me what I knew but hadn't been able to admit. I'd never belong. But maybe that was okay. I stayed up all night reading. And I knew what I had to do. I wrote a letter.

A few days later, I walked into my commander, Colonel Young's, office. I handed him the letter I wrote. I didn't trust myself to speak. The letter said, "I'm gay. Please process my discharge." And on January 12th, 2001, I was given an honorable discharge, and forty-eight hours to leave the base. My discharge papers say, "homosexual admission." They don't say the other part, that the Air Force was never going to let me leave Shaw Air Force Base, that they didn't care who'd been threatening me, who'd torched my car, or what that person might do next. The paperwork doesn't say that they would never accept me, that they gave me no choice.

I'd thought of exactly one way out of Amarillo, one thing I could do with my life. I didn't have a backup plan. So I did what I'd been trained to do my entire childhood when we could fit everything we owned in a suitcase, ready to leave at a moment's notice. I packed what I needed, and tossed what I could do without. A yard sale might've helped with the gas money. But they only gave me forty-eight hours. And no one had heard of craigslist in Sumter, in early 2001. I drove the

little Ford Aspire my mom paid for with her credit card to Washington, DC, the farthest north I could reach on a couple tanks of gas.

I lived in my car a couple months. Some things are easier for cult babies who've practiced showering in a cup of water. I sold my car and rented a room not much bigger, and got a job as a bouncer at a gay bar. And I tried to come up with a new plan for my life.

Read Part I here.