

New Fiction by Jesse Neevogelman: Improv



The terrorist sat down at the cafe at a quarter to one. She had always been punctual. Beneath her clothing was a bomb improvised from ammonium nitrate. The bomb was uncomfortable. She kept thinking things that didn't matter, like: ripping off the tape will be painful, or, it's going to leave red marks on my skin. She raised her hand and ordered a cappuccino and a chocolate croissant. Why not a little pleasure? Someone had left a newspaper at the table. She didn't feel the need to read it. She knew all about what was happening now, here and all over. She looked around the cafe at the other people eating and drinking. She didn't feel much of anything. It was difficult to imagine, really, that anything would be different in just a few minutes. She'd been in a hundred cafes just like this. A thousand! Nothing strange had ever happened before.

She looked down at the newspaper on the table. The sports section. How about that? She'd thought it was the news, but it was just sports. She didn't know anything about sports. Everything going on in the world and there was just sports happening and that's what people chose to read about. She looked around the cafe. All these people care about sports! she thought. She picked up the section and flipped through the games, reading the box scores carefully. This is what people care about, she said to herself, as if trying to understand something. She flipped to a page that printed the scores of local high school games. She hadn't known newspapers printed high school games. She found her high school and read through the names of the varsity basketball players and how many points they had scored. She recognized a last name: Ramakrishnan. She had known a Ramakrishnan in high school. It wasn't a very common last name. His son, maybe. She checked

and saw that he had scored twenty-eight points, the most in the game. A surge of pride went through her, so strong and sudden it made her anxious. What did he have to do with her? Nothing.

Her food came. She paid and left a very big tip. Why not? The waitress smiled at her. A lesbian maybe. Go ahead, what did she care? That wasn't the type of thing that mattered to her. She took a bite of the croissant and sipped the cappuccino. Ah. Very good. She would miss this. What a funny thought. She wouldn't be able to miss anything. She laughed to herself. What a funny time to be funny! Her heart was beating very fast. She felt calm, but her heart was beating very fast. As if it were someone else's heart. Wouldn't that be something. The bomb goes off and this old man across the world dies because she'd actually had *his* heart all along. That's who I would apologize to, she thought. I had no idea, she would tell his widow. It wasn't supposed to be him.

She checked the time. There was a clock above the cash register and another by the door. Everyone had their phones out, and their phones were also clocks. There were clocks everywhere. She thought the world had done away with clocks, but she was wrong. There were clocks on the coffee machines. Timers beside the ovens she could see through a glass window into the bakery. Clocks that everyone thought would go on forever, but really they would stop. A clock strapped to her chest. Oh no officer, she thought. I'm sorry for the confusion. As you can see, that's just a clock.

Just a few minutes now. Not one o'clock, actually, but twelve-fifty-nine. A little joke to herself. They would all expect it at one on the dot. But no, it was twelve-fifty-nine. As good a time as any! she wanted to scream. She pictured a hero from a movie, running computer programs in some dark basement, cracking the code. At twelve-fifty-five the program would blink—they've got her. At a cafe just down the street. The hero checks the clock (there's always a clock nearby). We've

got five minutes! he yells and rushes out the door, and as he's running as fast as he can, he knows he has just enough time to stop her. Five minutes, the exact right amount, and he throws open the cafe door, just over a minute to spare, just what he needs, and then, boom. Twelve-fifty-nine. Ha!

The clock above the door crowed. She looked up wildly, heart pounding. Was it time? But the clock was five minutes fast. She let out a breath. She hadn't been scared before, but now she was. Stupid clock. It should be illegal to have the wrong time on a clock. There should be someone whose job it is to go around to all the clocks and arrest the people putting the wrong time on them. She looked at the clock again, and this time she was surprised to find the clock was not just a clock, but was actually the belly of a wooden rooster. Cock clock, she thought, which calmed her. Then she looked around and saw all sorts of other things she hadn't noticed: paintings of cardinals and shakers shaped like crows and napkin holders that looked like hummingbirds. It was a bird cafe! Ten minutes she'd been here, and she hadn't even realized it was bird themed. Some old lady must really love birds, she thought, and for some reason this made her feel very sad. All those goddamn bird decorations that would be broken. That woman's whole life collecting bird decorations and one day she starts this cafe and thinks, these goddamn bird decorations are just too darn special to sit cooped up in my dusty old house. The public needs to see all these freaking birds. So she puts them in the cafe. Bird mugs and bird napkins. Close up photos of beaks in tulips. Signs with bird sayings like, Toucan Do It!, and Flock Off!

Flock off! she wanted to yell, but didn't. All of you, just flock the flock off!

She touched the lump under her shirt. There was no button. Just time. The clock would reach a certain time, and then it would happen. This made it easier. She didn't have to press anything or do anything. It was almost like it was happening

to her. She just showed up at this place and it happened. If you zoomed out far enough, she thought, there was no difference between her and any of them. She had been a normal woman and then, at some point, the circumstances of her life had led her to this particular cafe at this particular time and the bomb had exploded and she had died. Just another victim.

Would anything change? She didn't know. She wasn't really concerned with that part. She was concerned with doing something. She was concerned with being heard. They would hear her, alright, this time. What they did after, well, that was up to them. There was danger, always, in telling people what to do or how to feel. That's how people end up in situations like hers. People always telling them what to do and how to feel until one day they turn around and say, No! This is what I am doing and this is how I feel!

She had always known there were bad things in the world. It seemed to her that all the people who tried the hardest to fix them only made it worse. There was a book she liked that said, All our worst crimes are committed out of enthusiasm. Yes! she had thought. That's exactly it. All these bad things in the world because people think they know the answer and want to get there. She had lived her life with this in mind. Skeptical. Questioning everything. Always knowing everything that was wrong but never knowing anything that was right. Then, years later, she had reread the book and noticed another line: skepticism is the rapture of impasse. And she thought, Yes, that's exactly it. All these years of questioning, she had done nothing. She had been skeptical, so she had done nothing. Then all the things she had been skeptical of just happened. Better, then, to commit a crime with enthusiasm!

So she had made the bomb. Improvised explosive device. That's what they called it in the news. Not that anyone would know that, only reading the sports section. It was an evocative name. It made it sound desperate and spontaneous. It

demonstrated creativity. That's not a very good bomb, a professional bomb maker might say. Well, I had to improvise!

She had taken an improv class in college. She had hated it. She had hated it because the people were awful. The people were awful and they stared at her when she didn't know what to say and they were always saying things like, The first rule of improv is always say, Yes! No one seemed to know any other rules. They just repeated that rule over and over. Once, when it was her turn in class, she got on stage and her partner said, Wow, what a crazy day at the zoo! What a stupid thing to say, she thought. Even if it had been a crazy day at the zoo, she would never have said that. She didn't know how to respond to something so stupid. So she just said, Yes. I can't believe what the chimpanzee did to that tiger! Yes, she said. The zookeeper is going to have some trouble cleaning up! Yes, she said. She said, Yes, over and over until the teacher had said, Alright, that's enough, and she was allowed to sit down again.

She looked around at the cafe and suddenly it felt to her as if she were stuck again in a terrible improv scene. That everyone around her was trying poorly, desperately, to seem natural. Off-the-cuff. She took another bite of croissant and closed her eyes, imagining herself on stage. There's a bomb in the cafe! Yes, she said. Everyone is going to die! Yes, she said. Yes, yes. She squeezed her eyes. Yes, yes, yes. She squeezed as hard as she could. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Even the word eyes was made of yes. Yesses everywhere. Yes, yes, yes. Eyes closed yes. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If her eyes were closed when it happened, it was like she wasn't there. If she closed her eyes when it happened.

Yes.

But she couldn't make it. She peeked. She had always been a peeker. At Christmas, tearing the corners off wrapping paper

to see what was hidden inside. That's how she felt then, in her final seconds, squinting through one eye at the people around her. Sticking her eye to the dark hole she had ripped in the paper and hoping it would let her see some new world that had not yet come to pass. But it was just the same. Just people. Yes. And she realized with a start that each of these people had their own lives, and that those lives were about to end. But that, of course, was the point.

New Fiction from Colin Raunig: “What Happened in Vegas”

Since getting back from deployment, Frank had gone soft. He was still a massive block of muscle, but the edges had rounded. Too much time off. Too much food and booze. He saw it in his reflection of the Vegas penthouse suite window that overlaid the view of the pre-dawn casino lights that blighted out the stars and blazed like a midnight sunrise. Frank had woken up too early and couldn't go back to sleep—he couldn't sleep well after he drank.

On deployment in Iraq, Frank's body had been perfect. The life was perfect for it. Go on patrol, work out, eat, sleep, do it again. Just what the body needed. Out on patrol, while Frank sat in the Humvee or ran through a door or while he stood there and the guys loaded him up with extra ammo belts and gear, a tucked away part of both Frank's body and mind would be waiting for the point when they, together as a pair, would return to the FOB and he would go to the gym. When he would swap cammies for his issued olive green Marine Corps PT gear

and a gallon jug of water and leave the plywood box of his bunk for the one with the stacks of weights.

Frank would slide the weights onto the bar and into each other with a clang, position himself horizontally on the bench and beneath the bar as he readied himself for the energy transfer of metal to muscles. The results spoke for themselves: in the mirror and in the eyes of his fellow Marines, who *oorah'd* his massive frame starting day one of boot camp. The bodies who had observed him, and he them.

So many of those bodies, on deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost. So many minds of those bodies, from deployment, had been hurt, disfigured, lost.

Not Frank, though. No. He was all right, just hung over and tired and not out of shape, but slipping.

If Frank hit the hotel gym now, he could get in a full workout before Cameron woke up. Cameron, whose streak at the craps table the night before had gotten them two nights comped, was sprawled out on the couch—pants on, but no shirt—his half-belly half-hanging over his belt line, the tattoos on his torso like scars across his body.

Frank put on his PT gear, grabbed his room key, and slipped out the door.

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Frank and Cameron walked side-by-side, just narrow enough to manage the busy Vegas sidewalks. The sun baked them. Frank's muscles were alive with a buzzing soreness, but he hadn't done quite enough in the gym to burn off the effects of the night before. As he walked, he stared at his flip-flopped feet through his wraparound sunglasses. He thought of how his toes had their own little toe lives, every one of them.

Frank had met Cameron and his raspy, high-pitched Texas drawl

at boot camp. They had been together ever since—after boot camp, infantry training, all the liberties out town, deployment, and, now, leave, in Vegas. From cradle to grave, literal or figurative—one way or another, everyone, eventually, left the Marines.

It was Saturday and was their second to last day of a long weekend in Vegas. Tomorrow, he and Cameron would drive back to Camp Pendleton, just north of San Diego. After getting back from Iraq, Frank made a quick stop to see his parents and some high school friends in Oklahoma, then went right back to the unit. Back to his routine. But then Cameron cashed in on the promise Frank had made on deployment. Frank wasn't much of a Vegas guy, but he was Cameron's friend, and he kept his promises.

Frank made his Vegas promise the night after a squad from a nearby platoon had been out in a Humvee and hit an IED. In an instant, four died. They were alive and then they weren't. This was halfway into Frank and Cameron's 12-month deployment. The next evening on base, as the sun went down and they waited for their mission, Frank and Cameron smoked cigarettes and drank Rip It, which would get them through the night and were the sole vices that Frank allowed his body—they helped keep him alive.

That night, Cameron, his face and helmet a shadowy blur in the dwindling light, grabbed Frank by his flak jacket.

"I swear to fucking God, when we get back, we're going to Vegas," Cameron, desperation in his voice, had told Frank. "You're coming with me. And don't you die before we make it back. Or I'll kill ya."

"Okay," Frank said.

Doing so, Frank knew, meant that he couldn't die, so, the next morning, when they got back from patrol, Frank hit the gym with a vengeance, pushing weights he had never pushed before,

trying to take not just the energy from the metal, but their very essence, and make it his. An IED could tear through flesh and bone, but not iron.

After a while of making their way down the Vegas strip, Cameron stopped walking and looked out over a small blue man-made lake. On other side of the lake was the Bellagio hotel, a tower of smooth concrete and tinted windows. It was built as if specifically to view from the spot where Frank was standing.

It stood in stark contrast to the charred remains of the buildings in Iraq, the ones militants had burned or bombed or the ones the United States had burned or bombed. When Frank had driven by them in the back of the Humvee, they all looked the same: charred and black. Just as the bodies had been equally burned, so much that it was hard to believe they had once been alive and human. They might have been mothers, fathers, daughter, sons; they might have been Suni or Shiite or American. But to Frank they just were as they looked: charred black over bone.

“What the fuck?” Cameron said.

“What?” Frank replied.

“Where are the fountains?” Cameron asked. “There are supposed to be fountains.”

“Where?” Frank asked.

“Where? Right fucking there. In the lake.”

“All the time?” Frank asked.

“I don’t know,” Cameron said, upset. “I just know they are supposed to be here. And I don’t fucking see any.”

Frank grunted in response to Cameron.

“Hey,” Cameron said.

Frank looked down at Cameron. Most everyone was shorter than Frank, Cameron especially. “What?” Frank replied.

“The *fountains*,” Cameron said, incredulous.

“Must have just missed them,” Frank said.

Cameron reached over the side of the wall and tried to touch the water of the lake. “The fountains restores youth to those who bathe or drink from it,” Cameron said.

“We’re only twenty-two,” Frank said.

Cameron, not able to reach the water, stood back up. “Whatever,” Cameron said. “People pee in there, you know.”

Frank wondered if Cameron was talking about himself. Cameron had built up Vegas over deployment for so long that there was no telling how far he would go to achieve his vision of what it was to be here. There was Cameron’s luck at craps the night before. And the woman whose hotel room he stayed at the night before that. Who knew what tonight would bring.

“Oh, look at the beautiful toes!”

Frank was surprised by a man who was bent over and looking at his feet. All Frank could see of the man was his headful of frizzy hair, like a brown brillo pad.

“They’re wonderful! They are such little treats!”

Frank was confused. Cameron jumped back.

As the man stood up, two people in black came walking towards Frank, one short, one tall. The short one Frank could take. The tall one, too.

As Frank sized up the situation, and looked at the man again, who was standing now, he registered the hair, the bronze skin,

the light in his eyes, a gold silk shirt over white pants, the joyfully high register of his voice, when Frank realized who it was: it was Richard Simmons.

“Is everything ok?” the shorter man whispered into Richard Simmons’ ear, eyeing Frank at the same time.

Richard Simmons looked at Frank while he responded to his body guards. “Oh, I was just saying hi to these boys,” Richard said.

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The Bellagio Baccarat Bar and Lounge was a cool reprieve from the hot strip, though just as bright. The pillars were made of white and gold marble, the chairs red velvet, and there was a glass statue that looked like a blue mix of a bouquet of flowers and jellyfish and gold flames made of glass that shot towards the sky. Richard greeted the hostess by name and kissed her once on each cheek. He was directed towards a set of closed oak sliding doors, which, when opened, revealed a large, circular marble table in the middle of a room. A large blue and purple chandelier hung over it.

Frank, who felt severely underdressed, was the first to sit at the table, which had about twenty chairs surrounding it. He sat in one. Cameron sat on his left, Richard on his right. A woman in a dark blue suit and wearing rectangular glasses sat to Richard’s left. The bodyguards were nowhere to be seen.

Frank couldn’t really believe he and Cameron were here. With Richard Simmons.

A waitress appeared at the table, dressed in black and her thin, blonde ponytail pulled back.

“So, what’ll it be?” Richard asked the table. “It’s on me! It’s the least I can do, for what you did.”

Neither Frank nor Cameron had told Richard they were in the

military, but they looked like they were, and they were.

It had been four years since Frank enlisted, right after high school in central Oklahoma. In high school, Frank had developed a smaller version of his current ox-like breadth as a freshman in high school, and had quickly been recruited by nearly every coach. He had accepted his fate with casual grace, excelling at varsity football, wrestling, and baseball, pleasing his coaches and classmates and teachers, if not himself. The glory of the field was nice, but he wanted something more. When colleges tried to recruit him, he balked at their offers. He wasn't ungrateful, just uninterested.

Frank didn't know what he was interested in—until one fateful school lunch in fall of his senior year. After Frank got his food and as he walked to find his table with his lunch tray, his eyes locked with the Marine Corps recruiter that stood by a table with an olive green drop cloth over it. The recruiter wore his dress uniform was built like a bulldog. His eyes widened at the spectacle of Frank. Frank walked over. As Frank stood there and pawed his two meatball subs off of his lunch tray, the recruiter spoke to Frank, using words like:

Honor

Loyalty

And the phrase the Marine Corps was known for:

Semper Fidelis—always faithful.

These words stuck with Frank. They were the words Frank would use to tell his parents when he told them his plans. Once Frank joined, they were all the words he needed to not quit and stay the course and get ready for war and, by doing so, staying faithful with his fitness. As a Marine, Frank got bigger, faster, fitter. The Marines always use a guy like Frank. And smaller guys like Cameron could use a friend like him, too.

And it had been nearly four years since Frank had enlisted for a four-year contract. In a few months now he would have to decide whether to stay or go. Same with Cameron. Frank didn't know what he would do. He wasn't sure what Cameron would do, either. Cameron was the type to stay in the Marines forever. Or maybe not. Frank had a hard enough time weighing the intentions of himself, let alone others. If he and Cameron went their separate ways, then so be it. Everything eventually ended, one way or another.

But Frank did know what he wanted to drink. "Jack and Coke for me," Frank said to the waitress.

"Make it two," said Cameron.

"Make it four," said Richard.

The waitress disappeared and left the four of them at the table. They all sat there in silence.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Simmons, for having us," Cameron said. Frank was surprised with Cameron's politeness.

"Mr. Simmons!" Richard said, delighted, "Mr. Simmons is my dad's name, and *he* didn't like being called *Mr.* either. I had to call him Sir."

"Really?" asked Cameron.

"Not Dad. *Sir*. The one thing I have in common with the military. Well, one of the things."

"Oh yeah?" said Cameron.

"You both know, like I do, the importance of being fit. I'm fit," he repeated, bringing both his arms so that his biceps were parallel to the floor.

Richard did look fit. His arms were tanned and toned, with a small amount of loose flesh that could be excused given his

age, and the fact that he also seemed to be on vacation. The Jack and Cokes couldn't have helped, but then Frank was having them, too. This was Vegas, after all.

Richard gestured with his hands and scanned the room while he talked. "60 years old and I don't feel a day over 30. I have my gym still. In LA. I can't move like I used to, but I can keep up with most people. And it's fun! I put on some music and we all have a ball. But that's the first thing I noticed about you, how fit you are. But made in the real world, not just the gym."

Frank was suddenly made aware of how much time he had spent in the gym.

Cameron motioned to Frank with his thumb. "Frank's the real fitness freak."

Richard looked at Frank. "The strong, silent type, I can tell," said Richard. "Frank, what's your routine?"

Richard turned towards Frank and looked up to meet his gaze. Frank and Richard were sitting so close to each other that Frank thought he could see himself in the pupils of Richard's eyes, in the black mirrors of his pupils. Frank grew shy under the intensity of Richard's gaze and looked away.

The waitress returned.

"Oh, thank you!" Richard said to the waitress, who put the tray of drinks on top of marble table closest to Richard's assistant, who began passing them around. The drink Frank had thought was for Richard's assistant was also for Richard.

After they all got their drinks, Richard lifted his two glasses in the air. "To the troops!" Richard said. Frank and Cameron lifted their glasses in the air and after they all clanked them together, they drank.

"Bench," said Frank, in response to Richard's previous

question. "Deadlifts, clean, pullups, dips, all that."

Richard was drinking when Frank responded and was initially confused by, then registered, the response, both with deliberate movement of his eyebrows.

Now that he had answered Richard's question, Frank took a sip of his Jack and Coke. It went down smooth. He had drank way too many of these over the past couple of weeks.

"Wow, and all the military training you do, too," Richard said.

Frank nodded. "70 pound rucks, not to mention the gear. Jumping out of trucks, hiking, running, sprinting up stairs, night missions. Really takes its toll on the body. All the stuff in the gym helps with that. But I'm kind of taking a break now. We just got back from deployment two weeks ago."

"Two weeks," Richard said. "So you really just got home, didn't you?"

Richard made eye contact with Frank again, and, as Frank met it, he was suddenly struck with a familiar feeling.

Frank had never particularly followed the career of Richard Simmons, but Richard had been popular enough at the prime TV watching age of Frank's youth that it would have been almost impossible to avoid his presence. Frank remembered the clips of people who were desperate in their situation, those who felt hopeless to make any meaningful change in their lives. Those were exactly the kind of people who Richard had wanted to help, who Richard sought out and went into their homes and sat right next to them and looked right into their eyes with genuine concern—the same genuine concern that he looked into Frank's—and took their hands into his as he told them everything was going to be *all right*. And afterwards, for many people, it was. Their lives became better. Simply because they had met Richard Simmons.

Frank broke Richard's gaze, grabbed his drink with his right hand, and took a long sip.

The waitress soon walked into the room again, holding another tray full of Jack and Cokes. Frank didn't remember anyone ordering another round. Richard flagged her down even though she was already heading to the table. Once the drinks were again passed around, Richard gave the waitress his phone and asked her to take a picture of them.

After she took the picture, and after they finished their second round of drinks, but before they all departed, Richard asked for Frank's and Cameron's number, and he texted the picture to them.

When Frank received the text and looked at the picture, he looked at Richard, whose mouth and eyes were open and joyous as he stared into the camera and now met Frank's gaze. Richard looked happy.

Cameron, who looked as he always did for the pictures they took on deployment, had a blank face, one devoid of emotions, except for the emotion he used to look hard. It was the face that Frank would put on when they were geared up and ready to go out on patrol or when he was at the gym and about to put up serious weights.

But that's not the face that Frank had in the picture. He had the tinge of a smile and his face was relaxed. Frank didn't look as in shape as he would have liked, but, like Richard Simmons, he looked happy, too.

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"Do you think he's gay?" Cameron asked.

Frank and Cameron sat on black leather seats in the back of stretch yellow Humvee that had been promised to Cameron over the phone.

After drinks with Richard Simmons, Frank and Cameron went back to their hotel, but not before Richard asked them to meet up later that night. While Cameron began to shake his head, Frank said they would think about it, and they departed. When they got back to their hotel, Frank watched Cameron lose money at blackjack, then slots, then they went together to the hotel buffet and ate plates of meat and potatoes. When they were done, they went back to the room to freshen up, then Cameron called the number for Larry Flynt's Hustler Strip Club, which sent the stretch yellow Humvee they were now sitting in.

"Who cares?" Frank replied to Cameron's question. "Why does it matter?"

Cameron fiddled with the power windows of the limo.

"It doesn't," Cameron said. "I'm just asking, damn."

"Well, if it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter."

"He did ask us to go dancing with him tonight."

"He was just being nice," Frank said.

"Whatever," Cameron grunted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Frank asked.

"Nothing," Cameron said. He stared out the window.

Frank hadn't been to very many strip clubs. He didn't like to party like Cameron and the guys. They let Frank off easy because he looked like he could beat them up, which he probably could, even though he had never tried.

Most male Marines looked like Cameron, only a little taller, and lived a similar lifestyle. Pudge on top of muscle. They balanced a steady supply of cigarettes, alcohol, dip, energy drinks, burgers and fries, with pull-ups, running, cross fit, the weight room, and protein shakes. They looked like it, with

thick necks and torsos that were tough, meaty, and tattooed.

Not Frank. There was no balance, only exercise. Not a drop of ink to found on him or alcohol in him. The other Marines would make fun of him for it if they weren't so impressed or scared or jealous. The saying was "every Marine a rifleman," the rifle their weapon of choice. Frank was a rifleman, too, but his body was the weapon. And the fortress. An impenetrable shell. But that wasn't why Frank worked out. He did it to feel whole. It didn't quite work, though, so maybe there was something to way Cameron did things. He'd give it a try, at least.

The stretch limo dropped Cameron and Frank off under a giant open rooftop that was held up by green fluorescent pillars. They were ushered through the front door and entered a long, black hallway that lead to a black door. On Cameron's suggestion, they got the VIP pass, which gave them two free drinks and a lap dance, and they went through the door and into the club.

Frank entered the club behind Cameron. As soon as he did, he was overwhelmed by it all: the ivory white bar the sea of white leather chairs to his left, the poles everywhere, the pulsing hip hop.

A hand touched Frank's elbow. He turned and was met with the steady gaze of a blonde woman. Her skin and hair glistened under the light. She gestured to his right ear, which he bent down towards her.

"Vanessa," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

"Do you want a dance?"

"Okay."

She took him by the hand and began leading them up the stairs

to the second floor. Frank looked for Cameron, who stood by the bar sipping his drink and watched as three of Vanessa's coworkers gathered around him and contended for his attention.

When Frank got upstairs he was led to a booth, where Vanessa began to give him his dance. She stood in front of him and danced and then began to straddle him. He was allowed to touch her torso as she danced for him, which he did, with both hands. While she danced, he couldn't help but notice her perfect hair and makeup, her slim and toned muscles and abs. And that look. The perfect combination of seduction and admiration, as if he was perfect.

Frank wondered what she had done to get everything so perfect as she did. And he wondered what she would do when it was no longer perfect anymore, when her body or mind wasn't able to do this anymore, from age or exhaustion. When Vanessa got to that point, would she think that she best used her time now, or that it used her? Will she consider her life over, or that it had just begun?

Toward the end of the latest song, Vanessa leaned over so that her hair draped over him. She again spoke into his right ear.

"You're body's so hot," she said.

Frank was excited despite himself—he liked women, but this was nothing but a transaction, and he knew it.

Out of the corner of Frank's eye, he saw Cameron leading a petite brunette by the hand past Frank and Vanessa and into a back room.

Vanessa stopped dancing. She stood up, flipped her hair, and asked if Frank wanted to continue. Frank said yes. Vanessa said they should go into the back room. When she answered how much it was, Frank said that they should just stay where they were. She walked away and came back with a credit card reader. It was still too much money, but Frank swiped his card, and

she started her routine all over again.

At the end of her next dance, Vanessa again asked Frank if he wanted to go into the back room. Frank said no. She asked if he wanted another dance. Frank said no. She said thanks, smiled, and walked downstairs.

Cameron was still in the back room, so Frank went downstairs and to the bar. Frank didn't want to leave Cameron, but didn't want to spend any more money on dances. He went to the bathroom and checked his phone. He had two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. Frank looked at the time. It was nearly midnight. Frank shot a text to Cameron to ask him where he was. Cameron didn't respond. Frank then thought of calling Richard back, but it was late, and his phone was almost dead.

When Frank got out of the bathroom, he saw a phone charging station next to the bathroom and attached to the wall. He swiped his card in the charging station and hooked up his phone. As he stood there, Vanessa and a co-worker walked by him and down a hallway. Neither of them seemed to notice Frank. In fact, no one did. Frank was in a bubble he could stand in, safe from the obligation of interaction. He would stay here.

From the hallway that Vanessa and her co-worker had walked down, a red head walked towards him. She glanced nervously from one side of the hallway to another. Her hair and makeup was overdone and she walked in heels and a black coat that came down to her knees. She held a sparkling black bag in the crook of her right arm and continued to shift her focus from one point to another as if she was scanning for something she had lost. Then her focus settled on Frank.

Frank looked away, but it was too late. She was headed right for him.

"Hey," she said. She stood right next to Frank.

"Hey," he replied.

"Sandra," she said.

"Frank," Frank replied.

She held out her phone, whose screen was black. "My phone is dead," she said. "Would you be able to call me an Uber? I can pay you." Before Frank had a chance to respond, she opened her bag, stuck her hand inside and pulled out a stack of one-dollar bills that were carefully folded in half. She held them out to Frank. "That should cover it," she said.

Frank took the money, put it into his pocket, and touched the screen of his phone to bring up the Uber app.

"Where are you going?" he asked, and when she told him, he told her how long until the driver would arrive. She thanked him and then they both stood there, both of their bodies facing each other, but neither making eye contact.

Sandra began to shake her head as she looked at the ground. "I just failed my audition," she said. She glanced at Frank then back at the ground as she used her right hand to put her hair behind her ears. "They want me to lose twenty pounds and to get work done. I mean, I could lose some of the weight, but I won't get surgery. I didn't have to do any of this shit in Portland."

"I'm sorry," Frank said.

They both looked at each other now.

"It's different here, in Vegas," she said. "The competition. The standards. Everyone wants you to be something you're not."

"I think you're beautiful," Frank said to her. He meant it.

"Thanks," Sandra said. She said it like she had heard it a thousand times before.

Frank didn't know what to say anymore. "Don't let them change you," he said. He had heard someone say that once.

Sandra touched his arm. "Thank you," she said. She smiled and looked at him sincerely. "What are you in Vegas for?"

"Just got back from Iraq," Frank said. "Here for some R & R with my buddy."

Sandra instantly threw her arms around him. Frank, surprised, kept his arms by his side. Sandra let go and stepped back and looked sheepish, as if she had violated his personal boundaries. "Welcome back," she said.

"Thanks," Frank said.

Frank's phone buzzed in his hand and when he looked at it, he saw that Sandra's ride was here. She hugged him again and thanked him, and this time he hugged her back.

"Thank you for helping me," she said into his ear, as she still embraced him. He inhaled the smell of her hair and perfume. "You're so sweet."

Frank was moved by her comment, and found Sandra attractive. This, whatever it was—he didn't want it to end.

"Can I come with you?" Frank whispered.

Sandra looked neither surprised or offended. She shook her head. "Not tonight," she said.

"Okay," Frank said.

Sandra hugged Frank quickly again and left. Cameron still hadn't come downstairs yet. It was just past midnight. Frank remembered the two missed phone calls from Richard Simmons. He figured it was too late now to call back.

Frank stood at the bottom of the stairs for another twenty minutes or so as he waited for Cameron to come down, and when

he didn't, he ordered an Uber for himself back to the hotel.

After the Uber, arrived, a black Honda Accord, Frank sat in the back. He pulled up the picture that Richard had texted him. Frank looked at Richard's face again, the one where he had thought Richard looked so happy.

But when Frank looked at the picture now, he looked into Richard's eyes as they looked back at him and saw the sadness that no amount of acting happy could hide.

As the Uber driver drove and talked to Frank about NBA basketball, Frank tried calling Richard Simmons. The phone rang and rang and then went to voicemail.

*

Frank woke up early the next morning, hung over. He walked to the windows and looked out as the rays of the sun took over duties from the lights of the strip. Cameron was passed out on the sofa, shirt on, but no pants. Frank hadn't heard him come back last night.

Frank put on some clothes, grabbed his room key and phone, and slipped out the door. He was on the Vegas strip in minutes.

At this hour, the streets were deserted, except for the occasional pairs of older couples or friends who walked with purpose. Frank took his time— check out time wasn't for hours. His muscles were calling for the workout he was sure to miss that day, but he tried to ignore their signals and the ones that called for food and water. He kept walking. He had spent too much time in his life sealed off, untouched by the secrets the wide world had to offer.

Frank took in the sights. The tall hotels. The fake pyramid and fake Eiffel tower. The people. He tried to think of the contrast between this and the streets of Iraq, but nothing came to him. When he thought of Iraq, he thought of working out, or of waiting to work out. Sometimes of bodies and the

minds of bodies. Of the charred and black. But when his mind went to that, he thought of working out again.

Frank's phone buzzed. He took it out of his pocket and saw that it was Richard Simmons. He answered.

"Hello, Frank," Richard said to him. He sounded disappointed. Frank and Cameron had blown off Richard's invitation last night. Frank didn't want Richard to be upset.

"Hi," Frank said.

"I know it's early, but I woke up early. I had trouble sleeping."

"I'm up early, too," Frank said. "I'm sorry about last night. We did appreciate your invitation."

"What are you up to?" Richard asked.

"I'm out walking the strip."

"Oh, you are?" Richard asked. He sounded less disappointed now. "Where?"

Frank looked around him as he held the phone to his ear. "I don't know. By some hotels."

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Come to the Bellagio. They'll send you to my room. How does that sound?"

"Okay," Frank said.

When Frank got to the lobby of the Bellagio, an open expanse of marble ceilings and floors, and rainbow colored decoration, he looked for a hotel clerk to speak to. Frank realized he didn't know where Richard's room was. Someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see a man in a burgundy coat

and white gloves.

“Are you here for Richard Simmons?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Frank said.

“Right this way,” the man said. He stepped backwards and to the side and extended his right arm in the direction of where he wanted Frank to walk.

When Frank got to Richard’s room, the door was slightly ajar. Frank walked in. Richard sat alone with his back to the window, facing the door, and at the head of a glass dining room table in a yellow chair. When Richard saw Frank, he gave a tired smile. He wore a red sequin tank top and white pants.



“Frank. Come in.”

The place setting for Frank was at the head of the table opposite Richard. In the middle of the table, there was enough food for a platoon: French Toast, muffins, eggs, bacon, potatoes, prime New York steak, smoked salmon on bagels, carafes of coffee and orange juice. Richard hadn’t touched the food yet. Frank took his seat.

“I got a little of everything,” Richard said.

“I can see that,” Frank replied.

“Shall we?” Richard asked, and gestured towards the food. A genuine glow lifted his face and body.

Frank dug in. He put enough on his plate for at least two. Richard then got some food for himself, a small portion of eggs and potatoes and bacon. While Frank ate, he poured rounds of coffee and juice and water for himself.

Frank was done almost as soon as he began. Frank then looked

at Richard, who ate his food gently and took his time. This was in sharp contrast to Frank, who, now aware of that fact, was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. Richard didn't seem to notice, and was focused on the simple act of eating. Frank got some more food and ate it slowly enough that he wouldn't finish before Richard did.

"How was it?" Richard asked. Frank was in the last chews of his second round of food.

Frank wiped his face with his napkin. "Really good," Frank said. "Thank you."

"Of course," Richard said. He cupped his coffee cup with two hands, brought it to his face for a sip, then put it down. "Did you have a nice night?"

"We went to a strip club, actually," Frank said, who wanted the words back as soon as he said them.

Richard must have sensed Frank's embarrassment and waved away his concern. "It's *Vegas*. I'd be worried if you *didn't* go to a strip club."

"I was worried to tell you, actually," Frank said.

"There's nothing you've seen that I haven't. And I've seen *everything*. Did you have a good time?"

Frank thought about it.

"I don't know," Frank said. "Maybe not."

Richard gave a slight nod and a little shrug of his shoulders. He understood.

"What about you?" Frank asked.

Richard rolled his eyes and smiled as if he had already explained it to Frank. "Oh, I found the party, but the party didn't find me, if that makes sense."

It didn't, really, to Frank, but he nodded anyways. Frank was deeply aware of the bounty of food he currently held in his stomach. He wasn't going to throw up, but he was worried he might burst.

"Do you ever get tired of it all?" Frank asked Richard.

Richard put down his coffee cup. He was curious about Frank's question. He put both of his elbows on the table in front of him and gestured with his hands to the majesty of the room around him. "Of this?" Richard asked. He meant it sincerely.

Frank felt bad, that he had overstepped. "No, sorry," Frank said.

"Oh, I can get tired of this," Richard said. "It's marvelous at first—and it is marvelous—but after a while it just becomes normal. So then you look for something new to give you the feeling that the first marvelous thing did. After a while, when you get tired of all that, you just want what was normal to begin with."

"And are you tired of it now?" Frank asked.

Slowly, Richard swiveled around in his chair and looked out the penthouse window. Down below was the small, blue man-made lake. "Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Sometimes yes, but then I take a break, and then I'm good again. But the breaks have gotten longer over the years."

"I think I'm getting to that point," Frank said. "Of being done."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two."

"Ha!" Richard's laugh rang out like a shot. He continued to laugh as he swung around in his chair. When he faced Frank, he covered his mouth with one hand and waved towards Frank with

the other, as if trying to apologize for his behavior. Frank couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed. Richard's laugh trickled down into a snuffle.

"I'm sorry," Richard said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Frank said.

"I wasn't laughing at you," Richard said. "I just —"

"It's okay."

Richard stood up, walked over to Frank, and sat in the chair that was to Frank's immediate left. He looked in Frank's eyes, with the same gaze that had cast Frank into a spell the day before.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you?" Richard asked.

Frank looked at Richard and nodded. "And so have you," Frank said.

Richard was surprised by Frank's comment. He looked away from Frank and furrowed his eyebrows, not in disapproval of Frank, but in reaction something that only he could see. Richard stood up, walked over to the window, and looked out it. He stood there for a while.

Frank thought of when he had typed "Richard Simmons" into YouTube last night, when Cameron was in the shower, getting ready for the strip club. The first YouTube result was an hour long video of Richard dancing with a roomful of people, titled, "Sweatin' to the Oldies." Frank clicked on it and it was what he had expected: Richard and a roomful of his followers, all in leotards, dancing to the oldies. Frank exited the video and clicked on the second result, which was one of Richard's David Letterman's appearances.

In the video, Richard wore a turkey costume made of red and yellow feathers. The audience howled their approval of his

costume, and Richard basked in their approval. Letterman smirked. Richard seemed to purposely annoy Letterman and Letterman responded by making fun of Richard—this was their routine. Richard then wanted Letterman to give him a kiss on the cheek, then he stood up in his red and yellow feather outfit and walked over to Letterman to try, and Letterman stood up carrying a fire extinguisher and sprayed Richard with it. Richard yelled at Letterman to stop but Letterman continued spraying him. The audience went wild. The video ended.

Frank felt conflicted by the video. Fitness wasn't about celebrity. It was about fitness. Frank worked out to get strong and to look strong.

But then that wasn't fully true. He worked out to kill. He worked out to distract himself from killing and dying and death and the charred and the black. Frank worked out to save himself. And while it was true he would eventually leave the Marines, one way or another, it wasn't true that the Marines would leave him. Once a Marine, always one.

Maybe it was similar for Richard. His body would only allow him to work out for so long. But whatever happened, he would always be Richard Simmons.

Richard continued to stare out the window. Down below, Frank knew, were the fountains that he hadn't seen.

Frank's phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out. Cameron was calling him. Frank let it go to voicemail.

Frank looked at Richard. "Hey, what's up with those fountains?" Frank asked.

"What do you mean?" Richard asked.

"Do they work?"

"Yes," Richard said.

"Yesterday when Cameron and I went by they weren't on. And they're not on now, too."

"Well, they start only after a certain time. Four o'clock, something like that. What time is it now?"

Frank looked at his watch. "Nine A.M.," he said.

"We'd have to wait for a while then."

"I'll be gone by then," Frank said.

Richard, still looking out the window, nodded.

"I've never seen them," Frank said. "In person, I mean. I've seen them on YouTube or whatever."

Richard whirled around on his heels. "You've never seen them?!"

"No."

Richard walked quickly past Frank and in the direction of his bedroom. "Frank, what are we going to do with you? Hold, please."

Richard slammed the bedroom doors shut behind him. Frank heard Richard's muffled talking. After a few minutes, Richard opened both doors at the same time. He was glowing. "I've got good news!" Richard said. He started walking.

"They're going to turn on the fountains?" Frank asked.

Richard pointed at Frank. "Bingo," Richard said. Richard walked past Frank towards the window. Frank followed.

"How'd you do that?" Frank asked.

Richard put out both his arms and shrugged his shoulders like *aw shucks*. "One of the perks."

Frank walked to the window and stood next to Richard so that

they were shoulder to shoulder. They both stared out the window and onto the lake below.

“Any second now,” Richard said.

“Okay,” Frank said.

“What about your friend?” Richard asked. “Should we stop the parade and invite him?”

Frank stayed silent for a few moments as he thought of his response.

“Cameron doesn’t like fountains,” Frank replied finally.

“Oh,” Richard replied. “Oh, okay.”

As Frank and Richard waited for the fountains to come, Frank could see both of their reflections in the mirror.

Richard, who looked through the window with anticipation, seemed tired, but content. Compared to the one Frank had seen in the YouTube video on Letterman, his face was older, obviously, not quite as full of youth and vigor. But it was Richard’s.

Frank then looked at himself and his rounded edges. He didn’t look like he used to. But he looked like who he was. He looked like Frank.

Suddenly, from the blue lake below, two circles of fountains of water shot up from the lake, then, in the middle of both those circles, two towers of water shot up into the sky, so high up, that they seemed like they would never come down again.

Richard gasped.

Frank looked at his own reflection. “Don’t be scared,” he said.

New Fiction from Benjamin Inks: “Jack Fleming Lives!”

Okay—let me set the record straight. It started as a bunch of rumors first, before we lost control of it. But it really started as a stupid word game at a mission briefing.

“Your porn name!” LT began. “Pet’s name and the street you grew up on.”

He was keen on figuring out everyone’s combination. Mine was Bella Tulane. Not bad if I was a chick. We got some other good ones: Snickers Calhoun, Georgie Wilder, Sherry Potts. Then this quiet, young private comes in and LT demands his info.

“Uh. Jack Fleming,” the kid says, and our jaws drop.

There is a moment of silence before LT says, “My God, that’s a handsome name,” bringing fingertips to temples like it’s too much for his brain to process.

“*Jaaack Flemmming*,” Sergeant Kim tries it out, and sure enough, it’s as smooth on the lips as it sounds in the ears. A phonetic Adonis.



Jack Fleming Lives! A modern Adonis

Rivera starts slow clapping like this kid just did something Silver-Star worthy. And it wasn’t just Rivera; we were all possessed by the garish weight this name carried.

“Jack Fleming could be an American James Bond,” I say.

“Very classy, indeed,” LT agrees. “The type of name that’ll

wine and dine you—before taking you back to its apartment for a tender pounding.”

This poor kid spoils our fun by telling us that Jack is a fluffy white Maltese, and Fleming is a residential byway in meth-town USA. We get a few more jokes out of it and then stop laughing when the captain comes in so we can all shout “at ease” at the top of our lungs. Captain throws a pen at Rivera, who’s the loudest, and we’re once again reminded that people will most likely try to kill us on our next mission passing out rice and beans.

*

We go about our business the next few days with no mention of Jack Fleming, that glorious gem we’d tripped over only to neatly rebury in the dirt for being too beautiful for any one man to possess. Like any good improv joke, it was kind of a one-time deal. Outside of that briefing room it wouldn’t have made much sense.

Then the Battle of Jowgi River happens. You might have heard of this one: Taliban down a Black Hawk and decide to ambush the rescue party. You haven’t? Well, we get out there; it’s outside our A0, but we’re available so we go. These pararescue guys are dug in on the wrong side of the river. They had already recovered the pilot’s remains and incinerated the bird, and they’re taking heavy fire by the time we arrive, trying to decide if they should risk getting wet running or just fight their asses off. And Rivera—crazy sonofabitch—starts laying down 240, and he is just on-point, I mean—we’re watching bodies drop while these PJs are stringing a rope across the river to exfil. I’m surprised Rivera didn’t burn the barrel off—he was just rolling in brass by the end. So, the PJ guys get away, and they come up on our net flabbergasted.

“Who’s the maverick on the 240?” they ask. “We want to know

the name of the man who saved our lives.”

Rivera is just all pink. I mean, we respect the hell out of these guys, shit—most of us wanna *be* these guys, or Rangers or SF or what have you.

“Aw, geez,” Rivera says, twisting his foot like a schoolgirl. “Tell ‘em . . . tell ‘em Jack Fleming did it. Yeah, *Jack Fleming* is a machine-gun Mozart.”

It made us laugh pretty good.

And that was just about the birth of it. We can blame it all on Rivera. If he wasn’t such a humble prick . . . You see, he set the precedent. Anyone did anything cool afterwards—Jack Fleming got the credit.

—Jack Fleming shot and stopped a VBIED, though it was really Kim

—he CPR-revived a choking baby; LT did that one

—unearthed and snipped an IED

—rendered aid to an Afghan cop with a sucking chest wound

—befriended a pugnacious village elder

—attended Mosque with a terp and locals

—found multiple weapons caches

—got all our confirmed kills

The list goes on. Anything even remotely noteworthy, we all just said Jack Fleming did it. Why? Fuck, I don’t know. We were bored, I guess. Even I caught two dudes at 0300 pushing an IED in a wheelbarrow and said Jack Fleming spotted them. Saw them clean and green through an LRAZ atop a cliffside OP. Called it in; got put in for a medal. Though back at the FOB and outside of official paperwork, me getting these guys was a

rumor added to the growing list of miracles performed by one Jack Fleming. For some reason this felt more meaningful than another stupid ribbon for my Class A's.

*

Now I first started to suspect we had opened Pandora's gossip-box when my little cousin serving in Iraq's drawdown messages me on Facebook. My deployment had ended, and I was back in Fayetteville being pulled around the mall by my preggers wife Christmas shopping. So, I check my phone while she's checking juicers or salad spinners or some such nonsense, and there it is.

[Hey Cuz! You ever serve with a Jack Fleming? Might have been around during your rotation?]

My first instinct—apart from laughing my ass off—is to push this farce as far as I can before coming clean with the truth.

[Fuck yes, I did! Jack Fleming is the goddamn patron saint of mayhem! You know how many lives he saved by being so deadly? No one wanted to do shit for ops without Jack Fleming covering our six!]

Now, what he says next causes me to pause. Maybe I feel chills, too.

[Well, he's here in Iraq! Must have volunteered for another deployment. I haven't met him, but it gives me peace of mind knowing he's out there.]

So, once we get home from x-mas shopping, I call up LT, Kim and Rivera and tell them we might have a little problem on our hands.

*

We figure it's highly improbable that our collective imagination gave birth to some sort of phantom Fleming—if

that's what you're thinking. More likely there's some poor bastard in Iraq who just so happens to be named Jack Fleming. Some unwitting private who we just turned into a wartime legend. You hear our rumors, then you pass a fit-looking kid at the FOB rockin' *Fleming* nametape, and you think: *could it be?*

We figure it's probably best just to let this one run its course. We've seen a few shenanigans in our time. For a hot minute, after this one episode of *Family Guy*, everyone was shouting *Roadhouse!* at anything requiring the least amount of physical effort. Well, we stopped saying roadhouse after so long, so we figure we'd all stop with the Jack Fleming bullshit, too.

But uh. . . man. Was I ever wrong on that account.

*

We get sent out to endure us some more freedom, this is over a year later, mind you. Different crew, but still got Rivera, Kim, and LT is now a captain.

We land in country eager to meet our ANA counterparts and quickly realize the whole Jack Fleming thing has turned somewhat cultish. Beyond your desert-variety war stories. I'm talking mythic proportions. You can't so much as take a shit without seeing graffiti about an impossible sniper shot made by Jack Fleming. You hear people in the chow hall chatting about orphans he carried out of a fire or the high-risk livestock he helped birth. Stranger stuff than that, stuff people have no right believing in. How he shot an RPG out of the sky. That there's really three Jack Flemings, triplets who enlisted at the same time. One Jack Fleming donated a kidney to another Jack Fleming who got shot—I mean, it's just getting bizarre. Kim comes up and swears he saw a Jack Fleming morale patch worn by some Navy Seal types. Apparently, it's a cartoon face of a sly 1950s-era alpha male: Ray-Ban sunglasses, a

dimpled chin and slicked-back hair. An acronym in gold underneath: *WWJFD?*

Even the ANA are hip to the Fleming mania. We'll be sitting before heading out on a patrol, and they're rattling off Pashto: "*Something, something, something—Jack Fleming!—something-something-something,*" and they all start laughing.

The more this goes on, the more I rue the day we ever discovered the name.

*

It's worse for Rivera. While it annoys me, it terrifies him. Maybe it's his strong catholic morals, prohibitions against lying and all that, or maybe he feels more responsibility because—as I said—he started all this.

"I'm freaking out, man," he says. "I can't eat. I can't sleep. I'm not worried about getting schwacked by the Taliban, I'm worried about what people are going to do when they find out we've been stealing our own fucking valor."

"Wait now," I say. "Do you really think people believe in Jack Fleming?"

"The other day I saw two local national kids huddled over a drawing book. I approached with a smile expecting to see Ninja Turtles or some shit, but—*no*—it's a custom-made Jack Fleming coloring book. Someone designed it and ordered up a plethora online. They're all over Afghanistan, man!"

"Okay," I say. "But what can we do? This is bigger than us now."

"We have to put Jack Fleming to bed."

"Yes, but how?"

"I don't know. But it has to be huge . . .

"We're going to have to kill Jack Fleming."

*

So, we put on our murdering-hats and spend an inordinate amount of free time scheming how to pull it off. It sort of feels like trying to kill King Arthur. You can't just make up lore; these things unfold organically.

And then OP Tiger Eye gets overrun. Now, I know you've heard of this one. It had been hit once or twice before, yet from what I gather it was a fairly chill place to kick back and survey the land. Well, the boys up there at the time get ejected, practically tumble down the mountain. A Taliban flag flies up the pole. Prudent thing to do would be to send out a drone, forget we were ever up there. Well, when QRF responds they light up the mountain with indiscriminate 50-cal, just as an f-you on their way out. This starts up a damn-near four-hour firefight neither side wants to break from. OP Tiger Eye is a landfill by the end of it. We take some casualties, and there's even an MIA who never made it off the mountain. Real *fog of war* shit. It's the perfect opportunity we need to kill Jack Fleming.

*

We spread the seeds of hearsay far at first, and it's amazing how quickly it doubles back to us. Any FOB we visit outside of our AO we circle up and gab about Jack Fleming's untimely demise. We write in Sharpie on DFAC tables:

Jack Fleming, KIA OP Tiger Eye.

God rest his beautiful soul

And you know what? It takes. Better than we could have hoped. A little too well. People go into public mourning. FOB Fleming gets erected. I'm seeing little candle-lit vigils outside of

MWR hooches. It seems the only thing we did by killing Jack Fleming was to further cement his legacy. Looking back, I'm not sure why we expected a different outcome. Course, everyone present at OP Tiger Eye claims "It's not true. Jack Fleming wasn't even there. Which means . . . he's still alive!" This—I guess—is how a series of counter-rumors gets started. Kim tells us that he heard from a Marine out in Helmond that his terp heard from a jingle truck driver that Jack Fleming secretly married a war widow and now lives peacefully with the local population out in Mazār-i-Sharīf. Luckily, these marriage rumors are branded conspiracy and most go on believing Jack Fleming perished.

*

We edge closer to heading home and it becomes increasingly clear we must do the right thing and shatter the Jack Fleming mythos. People can't go on believing something that doesn't rightly exist. Also, Rivera will probably need psychological counseling. Not for PTSD, but he can't live with these lies any longer. They're corroding his insides.

A soft-spoken ANA sergeant approaches and asks if we know Jack Fleming's wife and children back in the States, and Rivera starts trembling like he's about to spontaneously combust.

"Please tell his family," this sergeant says to me, "that we are praying for God's peace to surround them during this sorrow."

"That's such a kind sentiment, Hakim. I'll make sure they know!"

And Rivera stares me down with the look a man makes right before he stabs you in the fucking face. I tell him it just wasn't the right time or person.

We decide the "right time" is conveniently our last day in country. Captain—formerly LT—holds an emergency formation, a

“family meeting” as he calls it. The ANA form up, too, and Rivera, Kim and I march out, somewhat informally.

Kim starts us off. “We wanted to say a few words about . . . Jack Fleming.”

Heads lower in reverence.

Kim looks at me, looks at Rivera. No one wants to be the one to squeeze the trigger. Rivera stands in awe before this humble formation of both Afghan and American soldiers. Hard-working people, a little rough around the edges, who believe in a better world so much that they’re willing to die for it.

“Fuck it,” I say, using aggression to hype me up. “Listen here, men. You people need to know that Jack Fleming is nothing but a big, fat—”

“American hero!” Rivera practically pushes me over shouting this. He looks left, he looks right. “And Afghan hero,” he says. “A hero to two nations. And I’m proud to have served with such a man. But he wasn’t extraordinary. He was just like you and just like me. Having Jack Fleming on our side didn’t give us a superhuman advantage out there. He was a simple man who only wanted to do his best. And his best was pretty damn good. *He* wanted to be good. As we all aspire to be. And I think you know that deep down we all have the capacity to be our own Jack Fleming.”

The formation ends in mass applause. We’re clapping, some are crying. As this goes on, Kim leans into Rivera and says, “So, I’m pumped and all, but what happens when we get back and the president wants to award nine posthumous Medals of Honor to Jack fucking Fleming?”

Rivera bites his lip. “We’ll cross that landmine when we come to it.”

New Nonfiction from Rob Bokkon: “The Last of the Gonzo Boys: P.J. O’Rourke, War, and the Evolution of a Political Mind”



“We hear the Iraqi army is systematically blowing up buildings in downtown Kuwait City. If the architecture in Kuwait resembles the architecture in Saudi Arabia, the Iraqi army will have done one good deed, anyway. As soon as the Iraqis have all surrendered, let’s send them to New York and let them take a whack at Trump Tower.”—P. J. O’Rourke, February 25, 1991

On February 15, 2022, Patrick Jake O’Rourke shuffled off this mortal coil owing to lung cancer. If P.J.’s general demeanor was any indication, this probably left him pissed off and in need of a drink. It certainly did me.

Who was P.J. O’Rourke?

P.J. O’Rourke was a dick.

“Gadfly” isn’t really evocative enough. He fulfilled that function, but it wasn’t his only schtick. “Curmudgeon” isn’t right either, even though he tried a little too hard to be one, especially as he got older. But curmudgeons don’t like anybody or anything, and P.J. had more than his share of joie

de vivre. "Dick" pretty much sums it up—that one guy with an attitude problem and a drinking problem and possibly a coke problem, who says outrageous shit after his second bourbon that pisses off the whole room, and after the third one has everybody roaring with laughter.

He was a dick. But he was *our* dick, goddamnit.

And he was one hell of a writer.

At the risk of showing my age:

Back in the Grand Old Days of Print Media—in the misty, forgotten, sepia-toned era that is the late '80s and early '90s—everybody, and I mean everybody, read *Rolling Stone*. If you had the least pretension to musical hipness, you read *RS*. Your ex-hippie parents read *RS*. Your Atari-generation older siblings grew up on it, so there were always copies lying around the house. If your high school library was hip enough, they had it; college libraries *always* did, and so did record stores. We read it, we talked about what we read, we argued over the music reviews, we cut pics out to hang on our dorm room walls. It piled up under the coffee table, it stacked on the backs of toilets. It was everywhere.

Rolling Stone was fucking cool back then, too. They reviewed shit you'd never, ever have heard of otherwise, especially if like me you grew up in a rural coal-mining area of the Upland South. My friends and I pestered the poor long-suffering employees at Disc Jockey in the one tiny mall in Owensboro with increasingly strange requests for shit we'd heard of but couldn't find in the bins, we kept lists of shit we wanted to hear in our pockets to offset the dread phenomenon known as Record Store Amnesia. Buying music was a big deal back then and we spent enormous amounts of the disposable income that we used to have so much more of on it. It was a feedback loop; read *Rolling Stone*, go to record store for shit you'd read about in *Rolling Stone*, buy the new *Rolling Stone* while you're

there, repeat. And it wasn't just the music. They had great pieces on the entertainment industry, politics, global affairs.

But the really, really good times came when there was a P.J. O'Rourke article gracing the issue.

I've lost count of how many people have stared me down and said "YOU like P.J. O'Rourke? You, Rob BOKKON, Marxist and identity politics asshole and general leftist menace, actively buy his books?" Yeah, I do like P.J. O'Rourke. He's a great writer, he's funny as fuck, and he's also wrong about almost everything and often heinously offensive. Do yourself a favor and don't look up anything he ever wrote for *National Lampoon*. In fact, most of what was in *National Lampoon* is virtually unreadable to modern audiences and that's probably a good thing—they were never as funny as they thought they were, and that whole "shock comedy" thing is mad lame anyway. That's not to denigrate their impact culturally or whatever, but a bunch of white boys yelling the n-word because they can is not revolutionary and it wasn't then either. I dislike all of PJ's views on Marxism, not least because they're facile and, well, silly; I dislike his views on American imperialism; I especially dislike his defenses of capitalism, which are based on a grade-school understanding of economics and amount to not much more than the "get rich while you can" ethos of Gordon Gekko or Patrick Bateman. There's also the casual racism and sexism, which is to be expected from a Boomer white male straight Republican.

With that all said: I have rarely laughed harder than when reading P.J. go off on one of his tangents, especially when the target is his own party (which is frequent) or matters of foreign policy, with which he was well acquainted as an on-the-ground reporter, for ABC Radio, *RS*, and the egregious *American Spectator*. And his writing is valuable as historical

documentation, of a particular political attitude that has vanished from the American intellectual landscape. Much, I would argue, to the detriment of that landscape.

I'm no big fan of "the discourse." I don't really regard engagement with today's right-wingers as a useful or healthy activity. We have nothing in common other than citizenship, and I know that no amount of pleading on my part can convince anyone to stop being a terrible person. That falls firmly under the category of "personal development", and people who think the government shouldn't provide us with clean water but should have the authority to arrest LGBT+ people for existing are not, generally speaking, capable of much in the way of soul-searching. (You're free to disagree with any of these statements as long as you know that you're wrong.) I could give less of a shit what some KKK member in Indiana thinks of the economy or Black Lives Matter or socialism, because A: I already know what he thinks and B: what he thinks is shitty, so having a "dialogue" is going to benefit no one at all.

P.J. O'Rourke, of all the Republicans in the world, really just wasn't like that. Sure, he was a plutocrat-fellating asshole and a warmonger and an apologist for the worst economic system the world ever created, but he would flat-out tell you that he was all those things and then smoke a joint with you. Hunter Thompson didn't suffer fools gladly. Hunter Thompson liked P.J. So did Jann Wenner, the publisher of *Rolling Stone* for many decades, who's hardly what you'd call a right-wing ideologue. And so did a lot of (in those days) liberal kids like me who found reading P.J. a delicious sort of crime, the thrill of the forbidden making the humor even more sharp.

We saw ourselves in P.J., even if we didn't like what he had to say. He was a pure Boomer, but his attitude was so much more like that of Gen X: question everything, have an attitude about it, say what's on your mind. Be bold. Be very wrong, if you have to be, and then take the time to examine what you

were wrong about. But above all, *say something*. If something annoys you, bring it up. Be the squeaky wheel. Be the gadfly. Stir some shit up.

And stir shit he did. Liberals hated him (probably because he turned that laser gaze onto the silliest aspects of American pseudo-leftism and proclaimed them to be exactly what they were); conservatives hated him too. He thought Reagan was a dunce and Bush Sr. an affable goofball who stumbled into all his political successes (both of these facts are categorically correct); he hated, but *hated*, the Drug War and called it out for its waste of public dollars and its human consequence, to say nothing of its impact on our civil liberties. As P.J. saw it, no strict constructionist could defend the unlawful search and seizure that was drug testing, nor the Fifth Amendment violation of self-incrimination it virtually guarantees. "Jail will screw up your life worse than a whole Glad bag full of daffy dust," he wrote, acknowledging something we're just now starting to talk about, the failure of the punitive system to address *anything* meaningful about drug use in America.

Imagine a Republican saying THAT now. Imagine a Republican questioning the importance of the prison-industrial complex. Fuck, imagine a Republican questioning anything his own party did.

And that is why P.J. was the last Republican on this planet with whom I would have, willingly, shared a whiskey. Because he didn't think the government needed to fuck with your private life. He didn't think there was anything particularly noble in politics or politicians in general, and regarded the cultish worship of people in the public sphere of government as both perverse and un-American; he didn't think people in a democracy were obliged to bow to anybody in particular, regardless of whether that somebody was JFK or Reagan. Plus, he is, to date, the only person to describe a landscape using the words "blood and diarrhea" in an article on American foreign policy, and that takes a certain amount of style.

Audacity, anyway.

And nothing in this world succeeds like audacity. As P.J. himself might say, just look at Congress; right there you've got 535 people who work six months out of the year (maybe) for six-figure salaries, and the chief qualification for their job is saying things very loudly. Not only when they're right, but *especially* when they're wrong. Even the reasonably good ones have a huge dash of chutzpah, or they wouldn't be in politics. P.J. famously called Congress a "Parliament of whores" in the early '90s. I would argue that this situation, post-*Citizens United*, has only gotten worse.

The current debate on members of Congress and their ability to trade stocks is also extremely germane to his basic point: public servants enriching themselves at the public trough at public expense are not good for the Republic. He was right about that. He was often right. He was more often wrong. But somewhere in all this, there's a grain of something gone; that center we all hear about, the "core values" we're all supposed to share, the general idea that maybe, just maybe, we could in fact all get along again if we just sat down and talked. But that was before QAnon, and anti-vaxx nonsense, and people who think the Earth is flat actually being elected to Congress (something P.J. used to joke about a lot). It may sound like I'm spreading the blame around equally here, and to some degree I am; the Democrats are largely useless. But they're not the ones who got us to this point, and the liberal silliness P.J. so often derides ain't got a patch on the festering pile of batshit crazy that is the modern Republican Party. P.J. thought book burnings were bad and wanted you to be able to snort all the coke you want. Marjorie Taylor Greene he wasn't.

"She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters."—P.J. on why he voted for Hillary

over Trump



Original artwork for this essay by artist Tom Law at moreorlesanimation@gmail.com

Speaking of coke: If you like Dr Hunter S. Thompson, you'll like P.J. It's the same basic thing; gonzo journalism, the writing of a serious piece as though it's a work of fiction, Truman Capote's nonfiction novel concept writ large (writ small?), the whole world filtered through *style*. A rejection of bland reportage in favor of commentary, a flat exposure of the lie of objectivity, an embrace of the good things about writing in English. Just because it's news doesn't mean it can't be fun. There would never have been a Jon Stewart without gonzo journalism, nor a Colbert, nor a Jon Oliver, nor an Anthony Bourdain. There's something very true about it. Something honest. No bullshit other than the author's bullshit, which is a given when you write anything; when the reader *knows*, intimately, that what they're reading is opinion, they're much more likely to pay some attention to the content of what you say.

This is why smart people like shit like *The Daily Show* and stupid people watch Fox News. If you *know* you're consuming biased content, and act accordingly, at least you're thinking. If you consume biased content, and either don't know it's biased or, worse, defend it as unbiased, then you're doing the opposite of thinking. P.J. hated stupidity. He hated Trump. He held his nose and voted for Hillary Clinton because, as he said, "She's wrong about absolutely everything, but she's wrong within normal parameters." This would have made sense to Dr Thompson. It was, for a Republican, a very gonzo thing to do. It was...well, it was honest. And it added to the rich narrative thread that was P.J.'s life. At this point, he was a darling of NPR, a regular on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*, every Democrat's favorite Republican, the snide funny dude on your

radio while you made lunch on Saturdays, if that's your sort of thing. His previous persona must have been shocked, but his capitalist soul liked the checks, so I guess it worked out, even if his bread and butter came from publicly-funded liberal media.

Imagine Lauren Boebert being on *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me*. Imagine Lauren Boebert on any quiz show at all. Fuck, imagine Lauren Boebert in high school academic team. Actually, don't do that, because that exact scenario is coming soon to a dank conference room near you, now that the GOP has discovered books exist and are doing their level best to do something about that.

P.J. at War

✘ *"Wherever there's injustice, oppression, and suffering, America will show up six months late and bomb the country next to where it's happening."*

P.J. was no stranger to world conflict. He'd been in Lebanon in 1984, in Seoul for the 1987 election of Roh Tae Woo that ended decades of authoritarianism. In '89 and '90, P.J. was assigned to cover the (often premature) collapse of various Communist regimes in Central America and Europe for both *Rolling Stone* and *American Spectator*, along with a few other global hot spots that were in turmoil outside of the realm of Marxism. There's a lot to like here, a lot to laugh at, and a lot of head-shaking. He advances the cause of the modern conservative narrative "liberals = socialists = supporters of totalitarianism", which is both silly and contains one small element of truth: the liberal-to-socialist pipeline is a thing, as anybody who started out as a James Carville Democrat and wound up a red-flag-waving socialist can tell you. (Author waves enthusiastically at the audience.)

Regardless of his silliness and eventually incorrect predictions about the "death of Communism", the articles were

good. They took us to places that, as P.J. said, "the United States only cared about if we got our dope from them." The crowing over the defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 is amusing in hindsight, given how long Danny Ortega has now been President of Nicaragua and also given the continuing Pink Tide in South and Central America. But the piece on Paraguay was particularly good, acknowledging as it did that U.S. allies in the Dirty War were also super-comfortable with Nazi expatriates and connections with apartheid South Africa, and flatly stating that our Cold War ally had tortured its own citizens. P.J. said that was a bad thing. He acknowledged U.S. complicity in bullshit, which wasn't even the focus of the article. He just said it and moved on. At the time of publication, it was barely noteworthy. Now it's revolutionary. P.J. wasn't always right, but he was consistent. He hated what he hated and he liked what he liked, and he didn't approve of torture. He didn't like it when Stroessner did it in Paraguay and he didn't like it when Saddam did it in Kuwait and he didn't like it when we did it in black sites. Conservatism once had limits.

Imagine, if you will, those days. Imagine conservatism with self-examination. Imagine conservatism being, well, conservatism.

The way I see it, it's a pretty philosophy on paper, but it never works in the real world.

"H00000-AH!!!", as the Gulf troops say."

In 1990, Saddam Hussein, perpetual ally/enemy/focus of American Middle East foreign policy, invaded Kuwait, and very shortly the United States wound up in its first proper shooting war since Vietnam, since everyone knows Grenada and Panama don't officially count. Whatever, this was big, and more importantly it was on TV, and a bunch of people I know

and you know were fucked up by it. It led directly to our continuing policy of interventionism in a region that was better left alone or influenced by diplomacy. It led to Bush Jr. and Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib and twenty fucking years in Afghanistan and more dead civilians than anyone knows how to count properly, and a bunch of American kids with lifelong PTSD and wounds that won't heal. It led to Bill Clinton bombing Iraq, on average, every two weeks of the eight years he was in the White House. It led to the attitude that perpetual war was the norm, not the exception.

Maybe it is. Maybe we can't function without it now. But in 1990, it was a fun new conceit and it didn't involve the Soviet Union, so we were fairly convinced it was an adventure that wouldn't precipitate The Big One. I guess it depends on what your definition of The Big One is. Regardless, ABC Radio (of all people) sent P.J. to the Middle East as a war correspondent on the strength of his global reporting of the last couple of years, and *Rolling Stone* decided to get in on the action too with print columns, and thus we got a *Rolling Stone* view of American foreign policy in the Bush years. Which is a weird sentence, no matter how you parse it.

P.J. was on the ground for most of the war, and his writings on the subject are still poignant, still relevant as a document of a time when the USA was in its ascendancy and the Soviet Union descending into chaos. We were flexing our global muscle against someone who'd been an ally as recently as two years ago; we were enforcing the Carter Doctrine; we were giving the finger to the planet, and weirdest of all—*almost no one objected*.


As P.J. said, "There don't seem to be a lot of celebrities protesting against this war. New Kid On the Block Donnie Wahlberg did wear a 'War Sucks' T-shirt at the Grammy awards, but that's about it. In fact, I've heard that Jane Fonda has decided to maintain public silence on the subject of Desert Storm. Getting Jane Fonda to be quiet—this alone makes

fighting Iraq worthwhile. " It's a cheap shot for P.J., an easy, misogynistic swing at a conservative target of ire so predictable that it should be beneath his notice, but it's worth mentioning for a reason. The complete defeat of anti-war ideology in the US in those days was a very real thing, replaced by what P.J. called "kick-ass patriotism" and a general belief that what we were doing was just. P.J. certainly believed in the cause, but he also thought the whole thing was absurd and was happy to point out exactly how:

"You may wonder what the job of a Gulf War journalist is like. Well, we spend all day broadcasting on the radio and TV telling people back home what's happening over here. And we learn what's happening over here by spending all day monitoring the radio and TV broadcasts from back home. You may also wonder how any actual information ever gets into this loop. If you find out, please call."

P.J. traveled through Jordan, Syria, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and wound up in Kuwait City just before US and coalition forces arrived, but after the Iraqis had trashed the place and headed for home. He embedded with troops (another first for that war) and got shot at, nearly arrested more than once, had Scuds lobbed at him and very nearly blew himself up when he, lit cigar firmly screwed in the side of his mouth, opened up an Iraqi demolition booby trap consisting of a pile of RPGs and a grenade with the pin out. Although he later said the most dangerous thing he did throughout the whole war was cook spaghetti sauce on a camp stove on the Hilton roof with his flak jacket off, because the Kuwaitis took that opportunity to celebrate the US victory by firing "every available weapon in the air, including the .50 caliber dual-mount machine guns on the Saudi and Qatari APCs...Finally, a Brit and a veteran of the Special Air Services could stand it no more and leaned over the roof parapet and bellowed at the trigger-crazed Kuwaiti merrymakers 'STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT! PUT THOSE FUCKING GUNS AWAY AND GO GET A MOP AND A BROOM AND *CLEAN THIS COUNTRY UP!*'"

“Peacenik types say there would be no war if people truly understood how horrible war is. They’re wrong. People don’t mind a little horror...but everybody hates to be bored and uncomfortable. If people truly understood how much sleeping on rocks, how much eating things rejected by high school cafeterias, how much washing small parts of the body in cold water and how much sheer sitting around in the dirt war entails, we might have world peace after all.”

 *Kuwait City after the Iraqi withdrawal. “It looked like all the worst rock bands in the world had stayed there at the same time.”*

Here’s the thing about P.J.

P.J. opened your mind to the possibility that ideologies could be fluid. That you could believe a thing and maybe later change your mind. That you could evolve. He had.

A self-confessed “peace weenie” and “liberal goofball” in the ‘60s, P.J., like so many others of his generation, made the rightward swing in the late ‘70s and landed, not so much in the Reagan camp, but at some outpost of his own building, an ideological stronghold somewhere between classical liberalism and drug-legalization libertarianism, with a hearty dash of that countercultural anti-authoritarianism (and of course the dope) still firmly in the mix. He wasn’t tidy, in fact he could be absolutely all over the place and even self-contradictory. Good thinkers often are. Great writers usually are, because they say what they’re thinking when they’re thinking it and often live to regret it later.

Here’s why that’s important, at least to me: P.J., in his rejection of his former principles, gave me the courage to take the step away from moderate centrism and to embrace the leftist principles that truly evoke my core beliefs. I stopped

caring about where people wanted me to be and reached out for the things I thought were right. It's messy here sometimes, and it pisses people off. (Lord knows P.J. would think I was a weenie or worse. He would also be pleased that I don't care.) But it's mine. I thought it through, I stood up, I said something.

As I write this, Russia has invaded Ukraine. The world situation is dire in a way it hasn't been in decades. Putin is rattling the nuclear saber, Zelenskyy is making himself into a world media icon, Ukrainian grandmas are becoming social media darlings by cussing out 18-year-old conscripts on video, there may or may not be thermobaric bombs dropping on civilians and nobody knows if the Ghost of Kyiv is real or not, but damn, it's a story of kick-ass patriotism. And all over the world, people are standing up, people are saying something, people are trying to make a difference.

I just wish P.J. were here to give us his take. I wish Anthony Bourdain was here too. The world needs cynicism and humor, but also basic decency and compassion, when the shit gets too real. Oh, they'd probably hate each other, but I'd pay real money to see the two of them shout at each other over whiskey and cigars on CNN. Wherever you are, Gonzo Boys, we could use a dose of your realness right about now.

—

O'Rourke, P.J. *Give War a Chance*. Grove Press, 1992.

O'Rourke, P.J. *Holidays In Hell*. Grove Press, 1988.

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Forgive Me



I have confused
the bombs
that were in
the desert

with those
birth control devices
implanted
in the uterus

Forgive me,
war and women,
I know nothing of either

New Poetry from Michael Chang



Friedrich Wilhelm Karl Kuhnert (1865-1926), "Bowhead whale."

the secret life of simon & the whale

the boy inches close to the water
barefoot backpack slung over one

shoulder

he plays with the sand

dips his toes in

his name is simon

simon is my human

i quote mean girls: "get in loser, we're going shopping"

he giggles

he likes ranch dressing but sometimes the buttermilk is too much for his stomach

he enjoys wong kar-wai's movies

but would rather talk

about steven universe

when we play hide-and-seek he wants to be found because he loves me

i take him to school

he hums along to my songs but prefers

katy perry

we watch tv

i tell him how unrealistic the show shark tank is

he looks at me quizzically

we change channels

then go to dairy queen

he doesn't say things like white whale because that is derogatory

just like how we don't talk about sushi or climate change

he shoos screaming babies and barking dogs away from me

when we go to coney island we speak in russian accents and fall over laughing

i ask if he has been following the news

he says someone is being mean to him at school

wants to know what to do

i quote kate moss: "looking good is the best revenge"

he shows up the next day looking spiffy

he has a slick yellow raincoat

so i won't get wet when we hang out! he says

i smile

he offers me half of his sandwich and i am happy

i tell him about my creative writing class

he teaches me how to tell a joke

he is a

master of comedic timing

i am no slouch

i tell a joke about hiding the minibar keys from lindsay lohan

in the movie of my life

i would like to be played

by emmy-winning actor

james spader

although i am not white

as they remind me

at every turn

statement of evil corp

for immediate release

press contact :: lucifer morningstar

(666) 666-6666

new york, ny :: we do not comment on personnel matters : but
we will train our gaydar on you : hands steady like a
surgeon's : locked and loaded : prickly pear margaritas : we
are certified analytical geniuses : with an absolute pitch for
fine poetry : objects in the mirror are closer than they
appear : due to a lack of evil representation in the media :
we have no equivalent : who the hell is from chambersburg, pa
: we guess someone must be : thank god it's not us : haha god
: we will make you famous like rodney king : a splash of the
coffee : grey flannel by geoffrey beene for men : when we
think of our life together : we imagine you in a suburban
parking lot : loading seltzer into the trunk : looking fresh
to death : you have to buy our product to know what's in it :
we won't get into specifics : we don't want to set a timeline
on this : who gave you that information : we'll have to refer
you back to them : it's early days : this is going to be a
process that takes place over time : we were for it before we
were against it : there have been discussions : we will not
entertain hypotheticals : we are not going into tactics
techniques or procedures : this may be an iterative process :
that is above our pay grade : we want to stress that this is
pre-decisional : there is a plan but plans have to be flexible

enough to survive first contact : it may be OBE (overcome by events) : we have not been given release authority : it is not yet approved for action : we are on a conditions-based schedule : all options are on the table : we will continue to engage with alliance partners on a range of activities that will ensure maximum lethality : please only quote us as senior evil corp officials or persons close to senior evil corp leadership : 9 out of 10 dentists choose evil corp : we are your anger managers : very legal and very good : our revenge makes us wise : let us look at you through our designer shades : our product has been endorsed by kate bush : no, she is a freshman at kennesaw state university : a real georgia peach : we find your () faith disturbing : your lack of taste does violence to our senses : your very being is inimical to our existence : go somewhere else for that washer and dryer set : bitch : we will take you to the cleaners : what do you love : what do you hate : if you could live inside a tv show which one and why is it lucifer on fox : who are you : what do you want : we are on pace to find cadence : the quiet you hear is progress : thank you for shopping at evil corp

october 6, 2019, remarks as prepared for delivery

i informed mister river barkley last night that his services are no longer needed in my life. i disagreed strongly with many of his suggestions, as did others in the administration, and therefore i asked mister river barkley for his resignation, which was given to me this morning.

although i appreciated his jfk jr vibes and his assertion that his dick is his biggest muscle, he never did my laundry. he failed to deliver to me macaroons in every imaginable color or call me his pocahontas and he my settler.

he cast serious doubt on his intelligence by detailing the depth of his feelings in support of the vietnam war and the draft. the public was regularly informed of this.

his choice of veal over fish was totally inexcusable. i was equally appalled when i encountered tickets to mariah carey in his diary stained with sperm and electric blue ink.

he never recovered from the unusually loud guttural noises he made during sex. he was unconvincing when he said he loved me, often in a voice that suggested he was far away or underwater. his declaration that tulsì gabbard should win the democratic nomination was similarly off-putting.

he was unable to tell me how many planes are in the sky or if it is true there are more people alive now than have ever lived. he declined to feed me more jello shots despite our school motto *possunt quia posse videntur* (they can because they think they can).

he embarrassed me by getting into that fight with his truck and losing. subsequently he had his arm in a cast which stank to high heaven.

admittedly i will miss the firm underside of his thighs and the steady scaffolding of his sex. i am however comforted by the truth that nothing is better than breadsticks with the menendez brothers.

i thank mister river barkley very much for his service to our country and my happiness. i will be naming a new mister river barkley next week.

thank you!

(don't pretend you're sorry□□)

acid taste like

He started seeing Sam everywhere.

Sam, who called him 'beautiful,' eyes like liquid smoke.

Sam, who stood perilously close as they poured the wine.

Strong yet gentle, blond-dusted hands.

Sam, who wore the plaid shirt, frayed khaki shorts, and beat-up loafers on their bodega run.
Chestnut-brown bedhead, cheeks rosy on their porcelain face.
The one he wanted to hold him, the one he hoped to make less lonely, the one he followed home.



Life was hard enough without a Greek chorus of Sams second-guessing his every move.
Haunted by his exes, he wanted significance.
He cried into his champagne, tired of questioning, tired of pushing back.
Acceptance sounded so good, like a drug.

Boy was with Girl.
Kind, inquisitive eyes the color of concrete.
Brown hair (of course) slicked back, shoulders firm, torso wide.
Girl freaking out, some low-rate drama.
Boy's body, a boar ready to charge.
Girl in the bathroom, Boy's expression softened—
Freed,
Granted a reprieve,
From performing masculinity.
Boy looked over, smiling as if he understood.
So tantalizingly close,
All he had to do was reach over,
Before Boy slipped back into character.

He imagined bringing Boy dinner, roast chicken and potatoes.
They would eat in silence, as if any stray sound might tip her off.
Bellies full, side-by-side on the bed—
Striped pajamas,
Sheets that smelled like her,
Growing braver in the dark, bodies ablaze with feeling.
Skin, lips, tongue, there for the taking.

He raised a finger to Boy's lips and gently pried his mouth open, inserting his finger.

Play it safe or swing for the fences?

Snatching Boy's receipt off the table, he felt a sickening swirl of desire—

Like standing in the eye of a hurricane.

This little victory made him happier than he'd felt in a long time.

Throwing up in that Waffle House, acid stinging his throat.

Outside for a smoke, his socks mismatched and his hair wild.

GO BACK TO CHINA, someone yelled, speeding past.

Possessed by cultural restlessness,

Always searching for a way in, a way out.

He decided that his favorite word was 'possibility.'

Even hope doesn't seem as surefire a thing.

Possibility is hope plus.

Nothing out of reach.

Maybe.

He unfolded the receipt, admired it.

CUSTOMER: SAM ____, it read.

He noticed the digits, the urgent scrawl.

Penmanship tight, compact, economical.

CALL ME, it said.

New Fiction from Brian Barry Turner

"So, you feel the earth rotating under your feet?"

As Specialist Torres grasped tightly to the doorframe of the

CO's office, a litany of questions flashed before Captain Savalas' mind, least of which involved the earth's gravitational pull.

"Yes, sir."

"That's why you're holding onto my doorframe?"

Torres struggled to keep his feet from slipping out from under him, "It's gravity, sir. I think I'm losing touch with it."



"Levitating Man," Andrew Spencer, <https://unsplash.com/photos/eY7ioRbk2sY>. Image at the Wayback Machine (archived on 24 April 2017)

Torres's gravitational issues manifested shortly after the Fiasco at Bunker Hill. Squad Leader Vogel opted to destroy the pillars holding up the roof of a bunker filled from floor to ceiling with artillery shells and propellant, effectively walling up the munitions in a concrete sarcophagus.

"Losing touch with gravity?"

"It's causing me balance issues, sir."

"Try adding weight to your IBA," Savalas said as he pointed at Torres's ballistic vest. "Increase your mass and you increase the force of gravity."

As fate would have it, Torres had been selected to pop the five-minute time fuse on the bunker. Perhaps because of a faulty initiator, static electricity, even operator error, the charges detonated early, hurling Torres twenty feet into the air. Within seconds dozens of 122 mm rockets—initiated by the heat of the artillery propellant—soared through the sky, garnering the Fiasco title. His ears still ringing from the blast wave, Torres lay prone as the Grad's high explosive warheads pulverized the earth around him. Blaming himself,

Vogel threw Torres over his back and ran half a Klick through hell, carrying him to safety.

Once back at Charlie Base the medics checked out Torres, confused about his inability to stand upright. With no visible injuries present, they recommended he inform the Company CO of his bizarre ailment.

After Savalas informed Sergeant Vogel of Torres's strained relationship with gravity, he radioed the combat stress team, requesting that an Army psychiatrist be sent out to Charlie Base. In the meantime, Vogel took preventative measures, adding as much weight as possible to increase his mass.

Vogel double checked Torres's IBA as he held fast to the bumper of a Humvee, "Two drums of 7.62 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Two drums of 5.56 ammunition?"

"Check."

"Eight M-16 magazines of twenty rounds?"

"Check."

With over one hundred pounds of weight added to his vest, Torres was little more than anthropomorphic armory. After taking a deep breath, Torres let go of the bumper and cautiously stepped toward Vogel. Unencumbered by a vest that would cause even an airborne ranger to stoop, Torres's steps slowly turned into leaps. Then the leaps turned into jumps. Within moments Torres was bounding around the motor pool, mimicking the movements of a lunar spacewalk. Vogel's jaw dropped. He couldn't believe his eyes.

*

The psychiatrist arrived the next day. He took a seat across

from Torres who clung tightly to the chair's arm rests. The psychiatrist stared at his laptop computer screen and ruled out every known ailment: post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, schizo-affective, obsessive compulsive disorder, even gender dysphoria. Torres was perfectly sane.

"Perfectly sane?" said a perplexed Savalas.

"That's right, Captain, but I'll need a second opinion."

"You declared him perfectly sane. Why do you need a second opinion?"

"Good question," the psychiatrist said, zipping up his laptop. "In the meantime, I'm requesting a physiatrist check for brain or spinal injuries."

The physiatrist was stationed miles away in the Green Zone. He informed Savalas that he'd arrive in two days. In the interim, Torres's gravitational condition took a turn for the worse. His bounds became increasingly difficult to control, and he was often seen jumping over the TOC and the derelict two-story building they slept in. Vogel added even more weight to his vest: two 50 Cal barrels, a pouch of satchel charges, and several bandoliers of 7.62 ammunition.

*

The physiatrist arrived as scheduled. He checked for everything: traumatic brain injury, herniated disks, stroke, muscle and joint pain, even Skier's thumb. After a lengthy examination, the physiatrist informed Savalas that Torres's body was completely normal.

"Completely normal?" Savalas said, his brow furrowed into a perfect v.

"That's correct, Captain. However, I'll need a second opinion."

“You said his body is normal. Why do you need a second opinion?”

“Good question,” said the psychiatrist as he flipped through Torres’s file. “In the meantime, I’ve requested that a physicist investigate his gravitational issues.”

The Air Force physicist was stationed miles away in Doha. He stressed that the earliest he could fly out to Charlie Base was the following week. This minor detail troubled Savalas; he’d noticed a decline not only in Torres’s gravitational issues, but in his mental health as well. After tying sandbags to his feet to keep him grounded—Torres became increasingly manic. He spent hours on the internet studying gravitational lensing, observational reference frames, and inertia. His mania became singularly focused on a planet named Gliese 876 d, a mere fifteen light years away.

Torres turned to Vogel as he escorted him out of the internet café. “Do you know that there are no wars on Gliese 876 d?”

The day before the physicist was due to arrive, Vogel burst into the CO’s office. “Sir, it’s Torres!” he said, struggling to catch his breath. “His gravitational condition is getting worse!”

Savalas followed Vogel to the motor pool where he was rendered speechless. Torres – with his four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, four bandoliers, and several sand bags attached to his feet – was *bounding* across Charlie Base at a height of 200 meters.

“Get a rope,” Savalas said pointing to a nearby post. “We’ll tie his feet to the ground to keep him from floating away!”

*

With Torres’s feet firmly secured to a post, the physicist arrived a day later. Standing beside a white board in

Savalas's office, he derived all of Newton's Laws, including Lorentz transformations. With a board full of subscripts, superscripts, letters, brackets, parenthesis, and commas he concluded that Torres's condition was mathematically unworkable, and therefore, impossible.

"Impossible?" Savalas said as he stared at the board full of equations. "Lemme guess, you need a second opinion?"

"Not at all," said the physicist as he erased the white board. "Newton's Laws are infallible."

"So how you do explain him bounding 200 feet in the air?"

"Parlor tricks. But I must admit, his skills as an illusionist are superlative."

Prior to leaving, the physicist agreed to ask an astronomer about Torres's obsession with Gliese 876 d, a planet that – as far as the astrophysics were concerned–didn't exist.

Vogel escorted Torres out of the TOC, his eyes focused on a large question mark Torres had shaved onto the top of his head.

"Why'd you shave a question mark onto your head?"

"Because I've found the answer to the greatest question of them all."

"And that is?"

"Are we alone in the universe," Torres said with a placid smile.

*

The following morning Savalas received a radio call from the psychiatrist informing him he had overlooked Torres's flat affect–unusual given his gravitation condition. His conclusion was that Torres was suffering from schizophrenia.

"Schizophrenia?" Savalas said into the phone. "You said he was sane!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion Captain."

Immediately after hanging up with the psychiatrist the psychiatrist called him on the radio. Struggling to form a coherent sentence, the psychiatrist briefed Savalas that he had misread his brain injury examination

"Traumatic brain injury!" said a frustrated Savalas. "You said his body was normal!"

"That's why I asked for a second opinion, Captain."

After hanging up on the psychiatrist, Savalas received a call from the physicist. Unlike the previous two conversations, the physicist reiterated that Torres's gravitation condition was mathematically impossible. But his obsession with Gliese 876 d was most confounding.

"There is in fact a planet that goes by that name in the Aquarius constellation, but..."

"But what?"

"It was discovered less than ten hours ago."

Savalas dropped the hand mic as the color drained from his face. He ran out of the TOC and noticed that Torres's rope, previously taut, was lying slack.

Standing motionless at the end of the rope, Savalas stopped beside Vogel. Both men stared at the four drums of ammunition, eight magazines, two 50 Cal barrels, satchel charges, bandoliers, and four sand bags lying on the ground. Torres had cut the rope fasted around his ankle.

Vogel stared upward, straining his eyes. "Torres... he's gone, sir."

"Gone? Where?"

"Space, I guess. Gliese 876 d."

Savalas sighed as he ran his hand over his closely cropped hair, "You think he's coming back?"

"Coming back?" said a bewildered Vogel. "Why?"

"If he's coming back I can write him up AWOL. Otherwise, it's desertion."

Brian Barry Turner's short story, "Gravity of War" originally appeared in [So It Goes: The Literary Journal of the Kurt Vonnegut Museum and Library](#) (Issue No. 7) and appears here with the writer's permission.

New Fiction from Daniel Ford: BLACK COFFEE

Excerpted from the collection [Black Coffee](#) by Daniel Ford, September Sky Press, June 2019.



"Are we ever going to leave this bed?"

"God, I hope not."

"We have to at least attempt to do something today."

"I'd argue that we've done plenty already."

"I mean real things."

"That all seemed pretty real to me. Seriously, what could you possibly want to do out there when you could keep making love to me in here?"

"You're insatiable. Aren't you hungry? I'm hungry."

"One of us can go get food and the other could stay here and hold down the love fort."

"Don't say 'love fort' ever again."

"Roger that."

"Trying to get used to the lingo already? Can you believe the draft went that high?"

"With our luck, yes."

"The news says things are improving, but now we need more muscle over there?"

"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."

"I prefer you give it to me right now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Ugh. 'Ma'am' doesn't sound good on me."

"Everything sounds good on you."

"He bedded the girl and is still in hot pursuit. You're not going to use those lines on other women over there are you?"

"Come on, give me some credit. I'd never reuse old material."

"Bastard."

"We're not going anywhere, so get back under the covers."

"Fine, but only because I'm chilly."

"Pretty sure all my heat is gravitating to one place at the moment."

"Well, I'll just have to go where the heat is, I guess. Consider this your incentive to come home."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Now I'm using teeth."

*

Mike's fifth therapy session didn't go well.

He didn't mind talking about things, which made his panic attacks even more arbitrary. If he were anyone else, every session would feature a breakthrough. For him, it was chatting with a therapist who seemed just as disappointed that they hadn't found anything close to a root cause.

Damn my parents for being loving and supportive, Mike thought. Would have been easy to pin all this on an abusive mother or absent father.

"Are the attacks happening more or less frequently?" Ernest asked.

"Same amount. More powerful."

"Takes time."

"I've been back a while."

This room reminded Mike of most of the accommodations over there—federally mandated gray walls and IKEA-like furniture built by the lowest bidder. Ernest didn't have a beard, which unnerved him a little bit. The guy could probably go a month or two without shaving.

How much knowledge and life experience could he actually have without the ability to grow facial hair? Mike thought.

Ernest paused his questioning to write a few more illegible lines in his notebook. He did a lot of writing during these sessions, which also caused Mike anxiety. His pen movements were swift, especially when he was crossing out full paragraphs. Mike was impressed that someone could think out loud and on the page simultaneously—even if that person was wrong most of the time.

“Do you feel like killing anyone during these episodes?”

“No. Feels more like high school heartbreak.”

“Did someone break your heart in high school?”

“Of course. Feels like we’re fishing here.”

“We are. Could you possibly have anything else to reveal?”

“I was an altar boy as a kid.”

“Did you get molested?”

“No.”

“Too bad. You’d be rich.”

Mike had told him about the killing. The fear, the sweating, the loneliness, the firefights, the bullets he took, the blood, her death, the crying. The ability to open up about it all only provided more questions.

Ernest rubbed his cheek where his therapist beard should have been.

“Can you still get it up?” he asked.

“You’re pretty old. Can you get it up?”

“Nothing wrong with your sense of humor. So you didn’t think

of any fresh ideas?"

"It's pretty random."

"Like the duck?"

"Like the duck."

"Thinking about her doesn't necessarily trigger an episode then?"

"If it did, I'd be in an asylum by now."

"You think about the good and the bad?"

"Everything. I cry about it. I have a drink. I usually don't have to flee the premises or check myself into the emergency room."

"You don't remember going?"

"Not until I regained consciousness. Woke up to a pretty hot nurse. Wish I hadn't soiled myself when I walked in."

"What were you doing before?"

"Can't remember. In line for a movie maybe? I vaguely remember a woman screaming into a phone."

"How many of your buddies died over there?"

"We lost guys too fast. I didn't have time to make friends. I can't picture faces. I only have snippets of a couple of guys. How he was shot. What info was on his dog tags. A hometown or two."

"Ever feel guilty you survived?"

More old territory, Mike thought. Spinning in circles.

"Yeah, but I've always had bad luck. I guess I was saving up all my good luck to make it back. Living and carrying on

seemed the best way to honor those guys who didn't make it. Certainly better than being angry all the time."

"Damn."

"What?"

"You're well-adjusted."

"I know. Pisses me off, too."

New Poetry from Abby E. Murray

Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get Everything I Want

It takes a misdelivered *Cosmo*
to finally understand what I want
and how to get it. Gwen Stefani
tells the truth on page 89.
We believe in Gwen because
her apron of chainlink stars
sparkles over a black bustier;
star-spangled bondage, says an editor.
She slouches, holds the heel
of her right white Louboutin
in one hand as if to say Congress
respects my body, as if to say
rifles aren't worth shooting.
This is what I want and Gwen
is here to deliver. When she slips
into a red sport coat and jeans

she comes in loud and clear:
grant proposals that write themselves,
cartons of baby formula
sold from unlocked shelves at CVS,
eight days of rain over California.
Because Gwen knows how to get
everything I want, she can afford
to be an optimist. Pharrell is rad,
her mom is rad, the whole world
is rad. I agree, Gwen, I do!
And I'd be giddy too in that baby blue
jacket, its faux-bullet spikes screaming
peace talks and pacifism,
bubblegum fingernails that tell me
soldiers who drop my writing class
are only on vacation. She pulls
her Union Jack sunglasses down
with one finger. This means Ruth Stone
never died but went into hiding,
it means the grocery store lobsters
have escaped, it means I can refinance.
Gwen steps into a pair of fishnets
as if to say the 2nd Infantry Division
won't return to Iraq, as if to say minke whales
are singing on the Japanese coast.

Notification

This is how I imagine it.

A black Durango follows me to work,
then home, tracks me to King Soopers
where I buy peppermint tea and milk.

It idles in the parking lot,
the driver obscured by clouds

of bitter exhaust. I know it is a man
by his shoulders, his grinding jaw.

I know he has drawn the short stick.

He tracks me home and waits
until the faint clicking of our luck
slows and stops. He steps outside
on a current of aftershave
and starched polyester,
pulls another man in uniform
from the backseat: he will stay
to help me make arrangements.

They use the handrail on the wooden porch.
They expect to be wounded.

Happy Birthday, Army

I'm wearing lace this time,
gold trim over a black slip because
Happy Birthday, Army.
I offer you these blisters
in my black leather stilettos
with mock-lace cut-outs.
Tom says it's a short ceremony,
we'll be done by nine
but he tells the sitter eleven
and I wedge a book into my purse.
In seeing nothing I've read too much:
the empty-bellied howitzer
kicked up in the corner of the ballroom
points me toward the cash bar,
casts a shadow over the cream
in my Kahlua and turns the milk grey.
I drink it. I order a second
before the emcee tells the men

to seat their ladies.

Uniforms droop by the exits
on velvet hangers, gas masks
sag on wooden dowels.
Quick, boys! Post the colors!
The lights drop and the general
mounts the stage in a shimmer
of green and yellow spotlights,
tells us to enjoy ourselves for once—
but first these messages:
thank you to our guest speaker,
the anchor from ESPN,
thank you to our sponsors,
thank you to the sergeant major
here to recite “Old Glory”
in the center of the room:
I am arrogant.
I am proud.
I bow to no one.
I am worshipped.
We are dumbstruck,
his recitation flung toward us
like an axe through paper.
Tom finds him later
and pays for his beer.



Johann Wilhelm Preyer, “Still Life with Champagne Flute,”
1859, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, MD.

The chandeliers are champagne,
crystal brims sloshing with bubbles.
Someone’s wife wins a kayak
and just when I think
a lieutenant nearby will surely jump
from his table to shake

a bag of limbs from his eye sockets,
a truckload of body parts
grey with longing for the soul,
a woman's voice whispers
from beneath the howitzer,
the rented microphone
on fire with song:
happy birrrrthday, dear arrrrmy
a la Marilyn Monroe,
and we are all a bunch of JFKs
in our lace and heels
and cummerbunds and cords,
watching a five-tiered cake
piped in black and gold buttercream
being pulled between our tables
by a silver robot
and shrug into the silk of knowing
we could end all this
with the flick of a finger
if we wanted.

Majors' Mafia

They want us to call ourselves
the *Majors' Mafia* and by They
I mean We because the Majors
are our husbands and they say
very little about what is discussed
during cocktail hour
at the Commander's house
as if our words sound friendly
but are muffled by a closed door
and the Wives giggle as if to say
we are not exactly *thugs*
as if to say they would *never!*
and a knot of words loosens

at the bottom of my throat
like a paper lantern released
as if to say *get out*, as if to say
I am on fire, and I have a problem
with the gang metaphor
but also the possessive *Majors'*—
that bitch of an apostrophe
at the end of my husband's rank
like I am, we are, owned
the way farmers own turkeys
and we are just as articulate,
just as grand, just as preoccupied,
because farmers are in the business
of keeping turkeys alive until they aren't,
farmers don't keep turkeys warm
because turkeys have rights
and these women can't possibly
be standing in a half circle
around a stack of spangled cupcakes
generating ideas like these,
like names, like possessives,
like we aren't making ourselves
more palatable by forming a flock
and nibbling sweet things,
and the sugar stars in the frosting
remind me how one can trick
a headstrong bird into eating
by leaving shiny marbles in its dish,
like the bird will think *marbles!*
I love marbles! then forget to fast,
and these women can't possibly
be women, they must be birds,
they sound like a lullaby
when they say we need a group name
because we need a Facebook page
in order to *express solidarity*
and they say solidarity is a survival skill

for all Army Wives,
and the paper lanterns are rising
again up my neck toward the brain stem
and my spine is burning
and I'm thinking about the tomahawks
and sabers and rifles and hunting knives
on the walls here in this lovely home
and I'm thinking survival
is a bread that I can't eat here,
and I ask them to excuse me
for a moment so I can check
my face in the bathroom mirror
where I find a sugar star wedged
in my teeth and I'm thinking
I could use an ax to fix that.

When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major's Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion

Hi is this Becky this is Abby Murray my husband
(different last name) is the S-3
in the battalion where your husband is being sent I
don't know what S stands for or
why 3 anyway Tom's leaving this position and your
husband will replace him soon
you sound nice anyway welcome do you
know if there's something I'm
supposed to say or help you with Tom just said
welcome her and I guess I have
I don't know what does it mean to feel welcome
as a woman I really can't say
every week I feel more at home in a compact mirror I
think I was asked to call you
because we are both women my dog doesn't even speak
when I tell her to but
she does bark a lot she likes to speak on her terms

anyway the
battalion mascot is a buffalo so people are really into
buffalos here buffalo hats
sweaters earrings umbrellas leggings there's a big dead
buffalo in the entryway to
battalion headquarters it was donated by a museum in
Alaska the taxidermist
even glazed his nose to make it appear wet like he
was snuffling the prairie just
seconds before a glass case sprang up around him and BAM he
had a few minutes to breathe
his last bits of air while the herd backed away my
daughter loves the buffalo but is
concerned about his lack of oxygen he's not the only
symbol of death in that hallway
there are rifles and sabers as well I'm sorry
I hope you like it here the
winters are mild and there's cedar everywhere it smells
good on the coast Tom
says you're from Texas that's nice I was in
Texas once it was Texasy
I should warn you your husband might ask you to do strange
things for reasons he can't
articulate like calling women because you are a
woman and we should all be welcomed
to the jobs we don't have if there's anything you need
try Google or maybe call
someone who knows your voice I'm sure you'll be great
you sound happy



Philippe de Champaigne, "Still Life with a Skull," 1671, Musee de Tesse, Le Mans, France.

*"Notification" was originally published in Ragazine.
"Happy Birthday Army," "Gwen Stefani Knows How to Get
Everything I Want," and "Notification" appear in [Hail and](#)*

[Farewell](#). Hail and Farewell was [winner of the 2019 Perugia Press prize](#).

“Majors’ Mafia” and “When Tom Asks Me to Call the Incoming Major’s Wife and Welcome Her to the Battalion” are previously unpublished.

New Fiction from Mike Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton seceded further from the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of September 2014. As Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend schedule to pencil in sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid eyes on breached the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish, sun-cooked man appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out

in every
direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-
the-rack, navy
double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral
at a regatta that
Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams.
It was the sort
of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families
would ever
breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a
comic eagle nose
that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him
up in return,
Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too
absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him
to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the
window, Wharton
twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the
downtown skyline
was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that
he had been
tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around
in his chair to
regain the initiative. "Who—"

"You're the man to beat?" A smile the size of the intruder's
face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of
swollen red gums
congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth,
which, if not
fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining
of the other
teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man's
mouth. A muddy five
o'clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon

closer inspection
of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not
shaving than some
celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton's
office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his
desk toward
Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the
mask of imperturbability
he wished to project, "Who are you and what is the nature of
your business in
my office?"

"I'm Mike Fink," the man said in a mysterious
dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could
only place as from
the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by
Fink. His flagrant
confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew
the name, if not
the reputation. "I'm here for the leadership position."

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see
to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no
analysis. Wharton
pulled his hand from Fink's clasp and came around from his
desk. "Be that as it
may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this
misunderstanding
in no time if you would please . . ." But Wharton trailed off,
watching in
horror as Fink plopped down unmasked in the chair across from
Wharton's desk and
wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This
creature's
cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself
slightly behind

Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview.

Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to the savage’s tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine’s Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it

possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

“Oh, Brock, I’m so sorry. I guess you hadn’t been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn’t able to make it for the morning block of interviews.”

She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. “Here’s a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are.”

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, “He’s a Green Beret.”



“I don’t care if he’s the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview,” Wharton said truthfully, for despite his

conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane rah-rah yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace between the jingoes, Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good about their participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink character was granted a CCG interview.

"Well," Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on Carissa, "it appears I am to interview you. I'm going to take

a minute to scan
through your résumé.”

“Take your time,” the applicant advised the interviewer. “There’s a lot there.”

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience (unless ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor of arts in English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane University (a bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review applications from) the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink’s résumé was actually a mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact opposite looked back at you.

“An English literature major?” Wharton murmured, bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

“With a minor in theater. I read somewhere that English majors make the best consultants. Stands to reason.”

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview? Special Forces could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to apprehend that he did not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper squandering his time, was offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life cultivating a résumé. Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched

CCG; how had he passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it to be the most heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the oversized font or alignment from section to section was consistent in what amounted to only a stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high school senior class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see him fondling his Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the ball upside down on its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last” to describe the still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn’t forgotten was the chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and boosters who had once ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. “Were you

drafted as well after graduating college?"

"Drafted by our country," Fink said, startling Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high suicide rates.

"Thank you for your service. Now why don't you walk me through your academic accomplishments?" Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. "I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane."

"Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you're

really telling a tale,
you could round that to a three point zero.”

“CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?”

“The Special Forces Qualification Course.”

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. “I don’t think I follow,” Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton’s plan of wrestling back control of the interview. “Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?”

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning for a small part in a play?

“*De Oppresso Liber*,” Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton’s appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he

knew full well what was expected of him in life's starring role. Finally, Wharton asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting, it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that—"

“Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement... A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent and promise.”

– Kirkus, Starred Review

“I didn’t ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree.”

“I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up,” Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

“Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—”

“Influence,” Wharton repeated. “You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?” Here was a hick who could not influence the next banjo number at a hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because they’re all related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought himself up to CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military applicants not being that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how everyone else was

afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office and shooting up the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military candidates, but rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct them to their intellectual rung below dieticians. He did not doubt that they probably thought his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as such was part of the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In Wharton's CCG class, there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had lasted a year out of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his pervasive logical staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around. He'd even had a gut.

"May I please just be allowed an opportunity—" But a knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network around town at all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday school, stepped inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He apologized to Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a real pressure cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew backbone into an

erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to Wharton. "Yet." Their hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in the kind of kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace coup plots. They smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he were a naked man changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great, Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name, paraded as it was by Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the noxious fumes that he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's bird-of-prey profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of the hawk-nosed dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high on hash and his mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on the balls of his feet. "Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were sparring about the value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought"—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—"regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your

meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part.”

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American

exuberance."

—Ha Jin, National Book Award winning author of Waiting and The Banished Immortal

"I like to win . . . in . . . life."

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. "How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?"

"Forty thousand."

"Come again?"

"Forty thousand."

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand after factoring in the four thousand meals for the international flights. Wharton attempted to salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate that had always stumped even the smartest business school students by an incorrect margin of at least ten thousand. "Would you care to illustrate how you arrived at that number?"

"For the reason that around forty thousand is the

right answer," Fink charitably clarified.

"I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten minutes and watched two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to calculate how many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three runways total and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five passengers. Which you multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from midnight to four in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And that, of those domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a meal service."

"Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I had one shot, one kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don't mean at an investment banking desk job playing with myself and numbers."

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink's wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton's mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter's rights to Wharton's office? After Fink's barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza

was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity.

"You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad minute of firing.

"Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible for fifteen percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours, enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five

percent per meal.

The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen million dollars over five years.” Fink’s pen lay untouched atop the paper.

“What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a minute to structure your—”

“I’d pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client’s only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You’ve got to roll the dice to make money.”



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

“Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment.”

Fink held up his index finger to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index finger reappeared two more times separated by three-minute intervals between flashes. It took all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its third appearance and break it.

“What do your numbers say?”

Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute silence of his life.

“Profits of almost six million dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan.

That's before I
shave their fixed costs to trim them down."

"I think you mean variable
costs," Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such
amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top
piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the
illegible writing,

indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

"God only knows

where, but I'm afraid you have an extra zero or two in there
somewhere. I don't

know where to begin helping you because I can't make out a
single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this
as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation;
that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your
calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate
of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a
year over the next

five years, and that it would take almost six years just to
break even after

the investment if they could withstand the initial losses."

"I was shooting for long term,
the big picture."

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated
this

rationalization before he fired. "If you were thinking 'long
term' and the 'big

picture,' you would have noted they needed to increase their

market share by marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would last longer and save the airlines money compared to the other products being offered by competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs. And that's only after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would have recommended that they diversify with other products or at least expand their current market into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And that is exactly what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though the real company was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where's your outline or structured strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom, the outline. “There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use,” he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper: $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$, and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

“ ‘Always look at the revenue.’ I don't even know what this means,” Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to

his desk. "This is your foundation?"

"Winning," Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. "Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wildcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—"

"I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting," Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink's clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton's hometown.

"Do you have any questions for me?"

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. "I've got nothing for you."

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

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New Fiction from Steven Kiernan: "All Your Base Are Belong to Us"



"Exposition La Commune de Paris à l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris,"

1871. Photographer unknown.

For the amputees of Walter Reed Army Hospital, Segways were the new fad. It had become common to see roving gangs of them, upright and speeding across campus and through the hospital, riding in elevators and waiting in line at the cafeteria or pharmacy, causing a flurry of complaints from doctors and staff. And when Doc Rodriguez looked up from his physical therapy mat and saw Anthony cruising down the hall on one, a public affairs officer plastered against the wall as he sped by, Rodriguez couldn't help but smile.



Rodriguez had been feeling sluggish, unmotivated. Kristen, his therapist, had tried getting him to do some core work with a medicine ball, but he stopped as soon as her attention moved on to another patient. He was about to leave when, through the glass windows that made up the room's far wall, he saw Anthony. Anthony had gotten his Segway a few weeks prior from an organization that was donating them to wounded vets, and he hadn't gone anywhere without it since. Rodriguez had tried riding one, but it bucked him off like a horse when he awkwardly attempted to step up with his prosthetics, and that was enough for him. Anthony parked the Segway against a wall and then joined Rodriguez on the stretching mat.

"What's up, Rod?" Anthony asked.

Rodriguez shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, we gotta hit up some Halo later. Gotta practice for the tourney next week. Can't let Jeff and those army assholes beat us again."

"For sure. Talk to Juan and the guys lately?"

"Nah, haven't seen them online for like a week. Wonder what they're up to?"

“Getting ready for another deployment, probably.”

Anthony paused.

“Miss those guys.”

They were silent for a while; Rodriguez picking at an ingrown hair on the stump of his left leg, Anthony brushing dandruff off his shoulder. There was a commotion in the hallway and Rodriguez looked up to see some officer striding towards the entrance with a gaggle of aides scurrying around him, one of whom broke off ahead and opened the door shouting, “Officer on deck!” to everyone in the PT room. When the officer, a colonel, entered he waved his hands saying, “At ease, at ease,” despite no one having gotten up to begin with.

“Must be the new base commander,” Anthony whispered. “Looks like an asshole.”

“That’s just how officers look,” Rodriguez said.

The colonel was now walking towards the center of the room, “Don’t mind me, gents. I’m Colonel Darby, new Commanding Officer of Walter Reed. I’m here to introduce myself and get the lay of the land, to see how the sausage is made, if you will.”

His aides, a group of lieutenants and captains, stood behind him, their hands on their hips.

“Definitely an asshole,” Anthony said.

The room then shifted back to its normal atmosphere. Patients returned to their workouts and conversations, therapists moved from mat to mat, treadmill to treadmill. Colonel Darby stalked around the room, asking questions about exercise machines and what unit people had served with, which they grudgingly put up with. His jovial attitude wore off slightly with each conversation. When he moved on, a captain appeared and handed the patients a heavy challenge coin with the

Colonel's name on it. Eventually, he made his way to Rodriguez and Anthony.

"So, what are your names?" Darby asked, arms crossed tightly.

Time for another life story, Rodriguez thought. They had all been through these conversations before with every fucking VIP that came by. He was about to speak, but Anthony beat him to it.

"I'm Anthony and this here is Rod," Anthony cracked his knuckles, causing Darby to flinch. "We got blown up together, which is pretty cool. I think. We were both—"

"Do you have a rank?"

Rodriguez and Anthony exchanged glances. "Well, I'm a lance corporal."

"And you?" Darby nodded.

"HM2 Rodriguez."

"HM2? I'm not familiar with Navy ranks."

"It means I'm a petty officer, an E-5."

"Sir," Darby said.

"Hm?"

"You will address me as Sir, HM2 Rodriguez," Darby said, drawing out the syllables in Rodriguez's name and rank and jabbing his finger into Rodriguez's shoulder.

The room was quiet again and he could feel a dozen pairs of eyes on him.

"I'm an E-5," Rodriguez repeated. He lowered his eyes to the floor, deflating his previous confidence, before adding, "Sir."

Darby smiled and leaned back.

"E-5. An NCO. Tell me, *petty* officer, how is it everyone here is so undisciplined? Going by first names, not respecting rank. Have you forgotten you're all still soldiers? Why are you not ordering them to wear authorized PT gear? Why do half the soldiers in here not have proper haircuts? I didn't want to believe the reports of poor morale around here, but now I completely understand." He was no longer speaking to Rodriguez but addressing the whole room. "There are going to be some changes around here. It's time you all started looking and acting like soldiers again instead of a bunch of moping civilians. You've lost your pride."

"Actually, some of us are Marines, sir," Anthony said.

Darby glared at him and then stormed out of the room, followed by his aides.

*

Every now and again, despite not having feet, Doc Rodriguez took the bus up Georgia Avenue to the Wheaton Mall and bought a pair of shoes. These were the only trips he took outside of Walter Reed since arriving from Iraq eight months ago, and so he liked to make the most of them. Months in a wheelchair had taught him how people tip-toed around him, afraid to make the slightest insult. It amused him to watch them squirm.

Col. Darby had been in command for over a week now and the hospital was beginning to feel even more suffocating than usual. Every wounded warrior (a term Darby had grown fond of repeating) living in the barracks now had to attend 0700 accountability formations. Authorized PT gear was made the uniform of the day, no longer could they wear what they wanted or what was most comfortable. Wounded warriors had to check-in and out with the SNCOIC every time they went to an appointment, which was often multiple times per day. There was even talk of a curfew being put into effect. Rodriguez needed

some kind of escape. So he went to the mall.

When he reached the shoe store, Rodriguez rolled straight to the athletic section. Two salesmen behind the counter exchanged looks of confusion with each other before pretending to be busy on the computer. No doubt hoping he would leave, Rodriguez thought. After a few minutes picking up shoes, checking the flexibility of the toes, comparing their weight, the younger of the sales reps, a lanky teen who hadn't yet filled out his overgrown frame, cautiously approached.

"Looking for a gift for someone?"

"Nope," Rodriguez inspected the tread of a running shoe.

"Well, that's a great runner right there," the rep said, rubbing his hands together and looking back at his comrade, who was still feigning interest in the computer screen.

"It's got great tread for cross-country and is very light weight. And the sides here allow your feet—" he paused, a hint of panic in his eyes. Rodriguez said nothing and waited for him to continue— "um, they allow your feet to breathe."

Rodriguez raised an eyebrow, wondering how long the kid could last before bursting into a frantic apology. But he'd had his fun, and instead asked if they had them in size ten; a good, solid size, he thought.

The sales rep made a quick glance towards Rodriguez's nonexistent feet. "Let me go check." He disappeared into the back of the store, the other rep following close behind.

Rodriguez knew he was being an asshole. It made him feel good, normal, like he still had some control over his life. If that meant some ableds had to feel uncomfortable for a minute or two, then so be it, they could walk it off.

The lanky rep came back out, alone this time, and Rodriguez met him at the cash register. The rep removed the security

tag and boxed up the shoes, asking Rodriguez how he would like to pay. He was relaxed now that he was making a sale. Rodriguez was about to respond when he was grasped around the neck. Whoever it was squeezed tightly. Rodriguez could feel their body pressing against his back and shoulders.

"Excuse me," Rodriguez said.

The arms gently released and he turned to see an old woman. She was somewhere in her sixties, seventies maybe, judging by her gray, dry hair and purple fanny pack. He could see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry I just couldn't help myself. I saw you and just had to come over and hug that poor soldier. I just can't imagine what you've been through."

"Sailor."

"What was that?"

"I'm a sailor," he said, pointing to his shirt which read "NAVY" in big block letters across his chest. "A Navy Corpsman."

"Oh, I apologize, I just assumed. What's a corpsman?"

Rodriguez sighed. Nobody ever knows what the fuck a corpsman is.

"A medic for Marines."

"That sounds wonderful, sweetie. A real hero! Please, let me buy these shoes for you."

She had already pulled out her card from the fanny pack and was handing it over the counter before Rodriguez knew what was happening.

"No, ma'am, it's really all right. I can—"

“Oh no, don’t you worry. It’s the least I could do to thank you for your service. You boys really have done so much for this country.”

“Thanks, but—”

She pulled him in for another hug, nearly yanking him out of his chair. When she was done, she kissed the top of his head, signed her receipt and left. What the fuck? The sales kid was stifling a laugh.

He sat at the bus stop, waiting to return to the hospital and hoping no one else would talk to him. Other than a few confused glances at his shoebox and the empty space where his legs used to be, no one bothered him. He wanted to shrink into his chair and disappear. When the bus arrived, he waited for everyone to board before moving to the door and asking the driver to lower the lift in the back.

“Didn’t notice you there,” the bus driver said. He was a big man and had to rock himself forward a few times to build enough momentum to get out of his chair, but once he was up the bus driver was surprisingly quick. “My apologies, folks. Gotta help get this young man get loaded up.”

He met Rodriguez at the back of the bus. “This’ll take no time,” he said, reaching for the lift controls, as if Rodriguez hadn’t done this a hundred times before, and didn’t in fact know that the lift was slow as hell. Rodriguez could see the other passengers watching through the windows, visibly annoyed that their ride was being delayed. When the lift was finally lowered, he reached for his wheels, but the bus driver beat him to it, grabbing onto his chair and pushing and guiding him onto the ramp.

“Hey,” Rodriguez said, “I got it.”

“I just want to make sure you get on nice and straight. See?”

"Fine, whatever." He just wanted to get on board.

"Make sure you lock your wheels, I'd be all shook up if you rolled off backwards once this thing is up in the air."

"I'm good. I'm holding on to the rails."

The bus driver ignored him and locked the wheels himself.

Rodriguez wanted to scream at the man but didn't want to make this already ridiculous scene any bigger, and so he bit his lower lip instead. The other passengers were huffing and sighing, checking their watches and phones with annoyance. It was embarrassing to be such an inconvenience. When Rodriguez was finally aboard, the bus driver pulled out some hooks and straps, and used them to anchor the chair to the floor. Rodriguez again tried to protest, he hated the idea of being locked in place, unable to move until someone came and untied him, but the bus driver, all smiles and stupid jokes, ignored him again.

*

Back in his room, Rodriguez tossed the shoebox on top of the dresser and transferred from his chair to the bed, shoving a pile of clothes out of the way. He was tired, mentally drained. No, it went deeper than that, he thought. Spiritually drained, that was a better word for it, but not in the religious sense. Mentally, he could take anything, had taken everything, but this place was wearing him down in other ways. And now Darby. Rodriguez was still pissed about their first encounter. *Address me as Sir*, he thought. *Act like soldiers*. Where the fuck did he think he was? Like we don't have more important shit to worry about than getting a fucking haircut every week. And that dumb grin. He should have just stuck to his guns.

He couldn't dwell on it, he thought. Negative emotions will just demoralize the patient, making their survival less

certain. Always direct their attention elsewhere. He began to run through the procedure for bandaging a sucking chest wound: stop the bleeding, seal the wound with plastic, you don't want any air entering the chest cavity, place a bandage on top of the plastic and tie it around the chest for good pressure, roll the victim onto their injured side while awaiting evacuation, monitor for shock. When he was done with that, Rodriguez moved on to treating immersion foot, pitted keratolysis, where to place a tourniquet and for how long.

After several minutes his phone chirped with a text message: *get online bitch*. It was Juan, one of his old squad mates still down at Camp Lejeune. Rodriguez reached over to the nightstand for an Xbox controller and microphone and logged on.

"Hey, Doc, how's it goin, dude?"

"Same old shit, man," Rodriguez said, "It's good to hear from ya."

"Fuck yeah, man. Ain't nothin new here, just playing some Call of Duty while the boots do working parties."

"Ha ha, just like the old days."

Rodriguez wished he could be back there, dealing with all the bullshit, but these game sessions went a long way to make him still feel connected, still part of a unit. When he first arrived at Walter Reed, the doctors and therapists kept going on and on about his "new normal" and how once he got adjusted he wouldn't feel different at all. A life of adventure awaited; wheelchair basketball, handcycling across the country, sit-skiing down Breckenridge, fucking hiking up Kilimanjaro, and all that other inspirational horseshit everyone expected them to be doing. *New normal*, he scoffed. Fuck all that. He just wanted to feel normal normal.

"Aint the same without you, Doc. These new corpsmen we got are

boot as fuck. Could use you down here training 'em up." There was a commotion on the other end and Rodriguez had to pull the headphones off when the sound started banging around and scraping in his ear.

"Yo, Doc, you legless asshole." It was his old roommate, Benjamin, clearly drunk.

Rodriguez laughed. "Benji, what's up, brother?"

"Corporal Benji to you, you fucking squid."

They continued like that for a couple hours, shit talking back and forth, Rodriguez asking what training they were up to, if they got their next deployment orders yet. Afghanistan, Juan said, though he didn't know where exactly. They were heading out next week for mountain warfare training in California, they'd be gone for a few weeks. Even though he had hated combat, hated how afraid it made him, hated bandaging up his friends, had felt relief when he woke up in Germany with no legs, knowing he'd never have to do it again, Rodriguez had a sudden, deep longing to go with them, and when he logged off and turned out the light, he fell asleep fantasizing about not having been blown up, about getting drunk in the barracks, about training in California, about the mountains of Afghanistan.

*

The next day, after physical therapy, Anthony came over to Rodriguez's room to play some Halo. It was a usual routine for them after PT and helped them relax after working out for two or three hours. Though Rodriguez would never admit it out loud, playing video games made him feel like his old self, back when he didn't need any kind of handicap or special equipment to play sports or any other activity. They were the one thing that made him feel like he was still equal and whole.

There was a knock at the door and Anthony got up to open it. It was Jeff, their Halo tourney rival. He pushed past Anthony and walked in.

“Yo, you trying to steal our strats or what?” Anthony said.

“Like I need to. You noobs can practice all you want but you’ll never beat me and the LAN Warriors.”

Rodriguez rolled his eyes. “You idiots still using that dumbass name?”

Jeff waved him off, “I’m not here to talk about that. Colonel Darby is doing room inspections. Just finished with the second floor.”

“What, here?” Anthony said. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah I’m fucking serious. Asshole just burst into my room and chewed my ass out for leaving one of my arms on the bed and clothes on the floor.”

The three of them surveyed the room. The “barracks” they lived in was actually a former hotel, converted for use as overflow patient housing when amputees began coming home in unexpectedly large numbers, and like most hotels was not an ideal long-term living solution. Every inch of floor space not necessary for wheelchair traffic was covered in luggage bags and spare limbs, a collection of t-shirts and knitted blankets lay in the corner, growing with every new tour of American Legion and VFW groups to come through. Clothes were haphazardly piled on the guest bed and the small garbage can was overflowing with empty Red Bull cans and soda bottles. The bed sheets were open and scrunched to the side. A collection of magazines, pizza boxes, and orange pill bottles lay across the desk.

“Well, it smells all right,” Anthony said.

The door swung open and in walked Col. Darby, who gave the

room a quick once over and then stood in front of the TV.

"HM2 Rodriguez, why am I not surprised?"

"You tell m—"

"I'll tell you why, HM2 Rodriguez. I'm not surprised by the state of this," Darby scanned the space again, "*room* because every gosh darn room so far has looked exactly the same. Clothes every which way. Pizza boxes, spit bottles, pop cans," he hesitated, "pornography."

"And I'll tell you something else, HM2..."

Rodriguez could have sat there silently and taken the ass-chewing like he did earlier. Just stare and say a couple of "Yessirs," maybe squeeze in an "Aye Aye, sir" just to throw Darby off a bit, a slight stick of the needle so he could feel smug about it later. Then toss him some platitude like "I'll get right on it, sir" with no intention of actually following through, but offering just enough to make Darby feel like he had accomplished something so he could leave.

And that's exactly what Rodriguez did, Anthony and Jeff following his lead. But when Darby finally reached the end of his self-indulgent tirade he said something that caught Rodriguez off guard.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, HM2, that I'm tired of seeing all of these Nintendos. I don't believe in coincidences and I believe there is a direct correlation to the lack of discipline around here and those darn machines."

Nintendos? he thought. "Do you mean video games, sir?"

"Don't correct me, HM2. Give me anymore attitude and I'll be speaking with...whoever it is in charge of you."

"Aren't you in charge of me, sir?" Rodriguez allowed himself a slight grin.

"You find this amusing, do you? Well, I think I've seen enough here. It's obvious what the problem is. Captain!" An aide appeared at Darby's side as if she had been there the whole time. "I want you to call IT and instruct them to shut off network access for all...video games." She nodded and pulled out a Blackberry.

"You can't do that," Anthony nearly shouted.

Darby regarded him, "It's my base, son."

"You can't mess with our personal time like that," Rodriguez countered. "We're," he searched for the right word, something Darby would understand, "off-duty!"

"You're never off-duty when you live on base."

"But, we're fucking hospital patients!"

"And that's exactly my point. You all need to get back in the right mindset. You're not hospital patients, you're soldiers! And soldiers don't play video games, they train. You should be working on PME's for promotion boards or taking online college courses. There are plenty of more productive activities you could be doing. Believe me, I'm doing you a favor."

"But, sir," Rodriguez pleaded, all the resistance in him from a moment before had drained out, "I know it's hard to understand, but this is important for us. All of us. It's how I keep in touch with the guys in my unit." He hoped that would be enough, that Darby could at least sympathize with that.

"You have a cell phone, don't you? Shut it down, captain."

She was still holding the phone to her ear but gave a thumbs up.

“Why don’t you three spread the word.”

*

They gathered at the smoke pit in the courtyard. A few dozen soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in wheelchairs and on crutches. Some listened from their windows, their heads and arms dotting the walls of the hotel which surrounded the courtyard on three sides. They were angry. They were powerless. Who do we blame? The colonel? For most of them he only existed in the abstract; some liminal force both real and unreal, capable of controlling their lives, their actions, manipulating their fears and desires towards his own ends. Another authority free of accountability. And so they blamed each other. Arguments spread over who hadn’t been keeping their room clean, who spent more time playing Xbox or Playstation, who didn’t cut their hair, shave, bathe, didn’t render a proper salute, act professionally, ate too much pizza or Chinese takeout—

“Enough!” Rodriguez shouted.

He made his way to the front of the group, wheelchairs parting to let him through. All eyes reluctantly turning to him.

“Are we really going to turn on each other? Over one asshole’s stupidity?” That got him a few laughs. “An asshole who’s been here all of a few days and already thinks he knows how to the run the place, who thinks he can barge into *our* rooms, *our* PT building whenever he pleases? Humiliate us?” Hell no, someone shouted. Rodriguez pointed at Jeff, “How long have you been here?” Thirteen months, Jeff replied. He pointed at someone else, “How long have you been here?” Ten months. “And you,” he pointed to his left, “how long have you been here?” Two years, was the answer. Rodriguez paused and let that sink in.

“Walter Reed exists for us. *We* are the reason for that state-of-the-art PT building. *We* are the reason celebrities and politicians come here, supplying *them*,” he pointed towards the

administrative buildings, "with good PR and propaganda. We are the reason their budget has been doubled." Hell yeah! Damn straight! The crowd was nodding and clapping in agreement. "I don't know about you all, but I'm tired." Real fuckin tired! A shout from the middle of the crowd. "Tired of people grabbing my chair without permission." Yeah! "Tired of having my therapy interrupted by some chicken hawk senator or b-list actor offering to take a picture with me." Fuck those douchebags! "Tired of being told about my 'new normal.'" Hear, hear! Hell, yeah! Speakin truth! "Tired of being forced to live up to everyone else's expectations of how we should think and act!" Furious applause. "And I'm fucking tired of thinking we have no control around here!" The crowd was wild, clapping and waving canes in the air, surging towards him. "WE run this place!" Rodriguez shouted over the noise. A chant began seemingly from everyone all at once, "No play, no work! No play, no work! No play, no work!"

Back inside the group gathered around Rodriguez. It had grown larger as more people came down from their rooms and into the open lobby.

"What are your orders, Doc?" Anthony asked.

"I'm not giving any orders. But we do need to organize. We'll need volunteers." Everyone raised their hand. "Good, strength in numbers. First off, we'll need some counter-intel. People who can make some posters for propaganda and psy ops."

"I can do that," Anna said. She was an air force staff sergeant who had lost her left arm in a rocket attack. She was fairly new, having only been here a few months. Normally, she kept to herself in her room, went to PT in the afternoon when fewer people were there. She wasn't timid, Rodriguez thought, just quiet. He nodded to her and she raised her one fist in acknowledgement and then left to gather more members for her team.

“Okay, hopefully we won’t need it, but a direct-action team would be nice.”

“That’s got my name all over it, Doc,” Jeff said.

“Focus on gathering stuff to use as barricades, we’ll need to be ready to block the entrances and stairwells in case they try to force us out.”

“Roger that.” Jeff raised his fist.

“Everyone else should help out where needed. Prepare some defenses or gather up enough food and meds to last us a few days. We’re not going to ANY appointments until we get our video games back. They can’t punish us all if we stick together!”

Rodriguez turned to Anthony. “I’ve got a special mission for you.”

Two days later they were still holding strong. That first night, Rodriguez had called Darby’s office and stated their demands. He hung up before the colonel’s aide could respond. Soon after, all internet access in their rooms was shut off. They’d heard nothing since. But morale among them had never been higher. With no instruction they had eagerly organized themselves into four-man fireteams, each responsible for a set of windows or hallways. A rotating guard shift was set up at every entrance and a direct-action team waited in the lobby ready for anything. The building custodial staff had given them the keys to the building, raising their fists to Rodriguez when they handed them over, and now they had unlimited access to the cafeteria as well as the roof, where they posted lookouts. The staff had also donated a few sets of walkie talkies, which were distributed throughout the building. If Darby thought he could wait them out, Anna had said, he was mistaken.

“Man, we shoulda done this sooner,” Jeff said. “I’m fuckin’

pumped.”

“It’s nice to feel useful again,” Anna replied.

“I’m just glad to be a burden on my own terms for once,” Rodriguez said. The others nodded.

OP1 to HQ, movement on the northwest of the courtyard. Coming down the path, looks like Darby and some aides, over.

Anna clicked on her radio, *Roger that, OP1, out.* “Looks like he finally wants to talk.”

“We’ll see,” Rodriguez said.

They waited for Darby to come closer, so he could see what they had left for him. All along the building, along all three sides of the courtyard, the windows were plastered with posters. NO PLAY, NO WORK was the most predominant, with others like FUCK THE POLICE and ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US interspersed throughout. A large pirate flag hung from a window. From behind the glass doors Rodriguez could see Darby carefully scanning each sign, his disgust evident by the ever-growing scowl on his face. His aides stood nervously behind him. Rodriguez instructed the guard to unlock the door and then rolled out to meet him.

“This little insurrection of yours ends right now!” Darby said as soon as Rodriguez was out of the building. “If it doesn’t, I’ll have every last one of you charged and court martialed!”

Rodriguez snorted, “Good luck with that.”

“Listen here, Aitch. Em. Two, this facility will not be held hostage and I will not negotiate with insurrectionists. This insubordination will end—”

“I’m sorry but we don’t really care what you *think* is going to happen.”

“How dare you, you—”

“And we don’t much care for your indignant attitude.” A round of banging echoed across the courtyard as those watching from the windows drummed their canes on the window frames. “It’s time you recognized who holds the power around here. Us. You’re here to serve us, to make sure we’re getting the proper care we need. We’re through with being treated as if we were children on timeout. Now, turn the internet back on and restore our video game access and we’ll gladly return to our duties.” More drumming. The aides took cautious steps back.

“I will not be ordered around by some enlisted man, a petty officer! I’m in command here and you will shut this, this, this charade down!”

“I think we’d prefer not to.” Rodriguez smiled and crossed his arms.

“Fine. Seize him!”

Darby’s aides hesitated a moment, and then rushed forward. A lieutenant grabbed his left arm and Rodriguez punched him in face. The lieutenant let out a sharp squeal that even had Rodriguez feeling embarrassed for him and crumpled to the ground. Before Rodriguez could reposition himself two captains clutched his arms from behind and tried to pull him out his chair.

“CHARGE!”

The captains paused and turned back to the building entrance. Out from the building burst Anthony on his Segway wearing a Che Guevara shirt followed by two others on Segways. They were wearing helmets and elbow pads, and wielding canes. Anthony pointed his cane forward like he was Patton galloping towards the enemy upon his steed.

“Go for their legs!” He shouted and soon they were upon the

aides and slashing down on them. They rode circles around them, smacking and beating their thighs and calves. Projectiles were now reigning down from the windows; shoes, challenge coins, tomatoes; someone was firing BBs from a slingshot.

“Retreat!” Darby ordered. “Fall back!” The officers, laying in the fetal position, scrambled and stumbled to their feet. They sprinted shamelessly, trying to catch up with the colonel.

“NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK.” The chant grew louder as they shouted from their windows. The officers ran faster. Anthony and his team escorted Rodriguez back inside where the direct-action team prepared for a possible counterattack.

“Lock it down!” Rodriguez shouted.

Jeff reached for his radio and gave the signal, *Turtle up! Turtle up!*

A flurry of activity ensued as they locked the doors. Empty wheelchairs and spare limbs and unused furniture that had been kept off to the side were now piled against the entrances. Fireteams on each floor pushed more wheelchairs down the stairwells. Every lookout and post were doubled up as they went to 100% security. Food and water were evenly distributed. Their time had come.

*

Over the next thirty-six hours, the base MPs made several probing attacks. The colonel’s goons first tried to get in through the front entrance, rather than attempt another courtyard gauntlet, but found the way blocked by a lifted, yellow H2 Hummer and a black Mercedes Benz AMG (both courtesy of the government’s tax-free \$50k/per limb compensation to each amputee). They then attempted a night raid through the courtyard, thinking the resistance would be asleep. They were beaten back by a combination of million-candle-power

flashlights and water balloons filled with urine. Jeff was particularly proud of that idea. Then, on the fifth day, the real assault began.

They heard it first. The unmistakable sound of boots on pavement, marching. The lookouts on the roof confirmed what the others already knew, this was no probe. *I count at least 50 headed towards the courtyard, over.* It took ten minutes for the MPs to file in, riot shields over their heads, boots clomping in a methodical rhythm, but the resistance held their fire. They formed up five troops wide, all that could fit through the doors at one time. Rodriguez, Anthony, Jeff, Anna and two dozen of Jeff's direct-action team stood ready to face them at ground level, a mountain of twisting metal and rubber separating the two sides.

Panic seized Rodriguez for a moment as he considered what was about to happen and all he had done to bring it about. He may not have forced his comrades into mutiny, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for the real danger they all now faced. Had he been right? Were these actions justified? Was their cause doomed? He began to cycle through a dozen similar questions he hadn't contemplated before and the weight of it all nearly sent him to grab the nearest white flag, until Anthony placed an arm around his shoulders.

"If we could only see us now," Anthony said, smiling.

Rodriguez looked up and down the line and saw the same determination in every face. His panic passed. Doomed or not. Right or wrong. They were together.

It happened all at once. The MPs rushed forward, quickly smashing through the glass doors. The window teams opened fire with an assortment of heavy and disgusting objects. The MPs responded with pepper spray, but their range was limited and could only reach up to the second floor. Both sides dragged away their wounded. The front rows of MPs were grabbing and

tossing all the debris in the blockade aside, passing it over their heads to be carried back and out of the way. "Hit em with the balloons!" Jeff barked. They crashed and broke against the barricade, spraying the MPs with all their contents. The front row disappeared as they retreated out of the line of fire but were quickly replaced by those behind them. The two sides repeated the cycle for several minutes, but the MPs were removing the debris far quicker than the resistance could deplete their ranks, and eventually the MPs broke through.

"LAN Warriors, charge!" Jeff sprinted towards the breach. Rodriguez nearly choked laughing, but he and the others followed right behind. The next moments were a blur of canes and batons being swung back and forth. Two men, one in a chair, the other on crutches, fell to the floor, blood spilling down their faces. They were quickly dragged off. Rodriguez and the others were slowly being pushed back by the MPs, lacking the leg power needed to hold their ground. The MPs had given up on pepper spray now that they were in close quarters, switching to their tasers instead. Two more amputees on the left flank went down, bloodied, forcing the remaining men on that side to fall back and cede ground. The MPs quickly took advantage and Rodriguez and Jeff found themselves surrounded, batons coming in from all sides. Rodriguez fought back with all he had, swinging his cane like a baseball bat, chopping down like an axe. He smashed one MP in the nose, sending a gush of blood spraying out. Jeff knocked another out cold, he had lost his cane and was now punching any uniform he could reach. An intense pain surged through Rodriguez and he lost control of himself as his body seized up. He fell out of his chair and was convulsing on the ground as two MPs tried to drag him off.

He heard a scream from somewhere in the mass of bodies and he couldn't tell if it was one of his or one theirs, but then Anna burst from the crowd and threw herself at the MPs

dragging him. "Get Doc outta here!" There were new hands on him now, dragging him away from the fight, further inside the building. Anthony screeched by on his Segway and drove straight into the mass of uniforms, disappearing as he flew over the handle bars. The last glimpse he got of Anna before the MPs surrounded her was of her swinging her prosthetic arm like a club.

*

Now in the casualty collection point, Rodriguez had time to think again. He was badly bruised and sore from where his muscles had tensed themselves up into knots after being electrocuted but looking around it was clear he had gotten off easy. Nearly two dozen people lay about the floor in different states of shock and injury. Most had blood leaking from gashes in their heads, some lay unconscious, others had their arms in slings. A group in the far corner were busy pouring milk over their faces and sitting in front of large fans. A man Rodriguez didn't recognize lay next to him, struggling to wipe the blood from his eyes with the stubs of his arms. Rodriguez leaned over and pulled a bandage from his pocket. He did his best to wipe the blood from the man's face and then applied the bandage to the wound on his forehead.

"Thanks, Doc," the man said before groggily closing his eyes.

It was all too much for him now as the panic crept its way back into his chest. How many had new concussions? Rodriguez thought. How many broken bones? How long would their recovery now be delayed because of these new injuries? He began to shake and he lost the strength in his arms, and fell back against the wall. He took another look around the room and nearly burst into tears. "I thought I was done with this," he said to himself. He could still hear the sounds of battle going on in the lobby. The banging, the shouting. He tried to cover his ears but the sounds were too loud and slipped past his fingers. There was only one thing he could do. He pushed

himself back up and crawled from patient to patient, tending to their wounds.

The fight went on for thirty more minutes until the MPs retreated. A second direct-action team had arrived as Rodriguez was being pulled away and managed to hold the lobby. Jeff found Rodriguez and gave him the quick AAR: half of their resistance was injured, and of those, half could still fight. Several members were missing, including Anna and Anthony, and were presumed captured. They'd depleted all their water balloons and most of the projectiles. But, Jeff said, we still own this place. No MPs got past the lobby.

Rodriguez was quiet. Anna. Anthony. Everybody. They sacrificed themselves, for me, for my dumb plan, he finally said.

"No. They did it for themselves," Jeff answered. "Look around, man. Even with blood and pepper spray in their faces, they're laughing."

Word had spread of the MP's retreat and the mood in the room had shifted to an exhilaration not unlike that after a firefight. The exhilaration of fear and of being alive. Of having fought and won. It became clear to Rodriguez that the outcome of this mutiny no longer mattered, had probably never mattered. He climbed back into his chair and he and Jeff headed to the lobby.

A voice from a bullhorn echoed in the courtyard.

"HM2 Rodriguez. I think we've all had enough of this and are ready to come to an agreement." It was Darby. "Unless you'd rather I throw your friends in the brig."

Rodriguez and Jeff approached the window. Darby stood in the courtyard with a team of MPs in SWAT gear. Anna and Anthony sat handcuffed and bandaged at his feet.

"That motherfucker," Jeff said.

"I'm willing to restore full internet access and grant everyone immunity if you end this rebellion now," Darby continued, "Well, not everyone. HM2 Rodriguez will have to face punishment. Someone has to, after all this destruction."

"Fuck that, Doc. If anyone needs to be punished it's that asshole."

"No. We've won," Rodriguez said. "We did it."

"But you can't just turn yourself—"

"I don't want anyone else hurt over this." Rodriguez looked over his shoulder at the guards by the doors, still defiant despite bandages on their heads and torn shirts, one of them raised his fist. "We got what we needed."

Jeff nodded reluctantly and clapped his hand on Rodriguez's shoulder.

*

It was silent when he rolled out to Darby. The grin and arrogance from Darby's face was gone. It was clear he hadn't slept at all for the past five days and looked as though he had lost twenty pounds, his uniform hanging off his shoulders and arms. Rodriguez raised his fist at Anna and Anthony and they both smiled in return. Darby said nothing to him, didn't even look at him, just signaled for the MPs who came and handcuffed Rodriguez's arms behind his back. They took hold of his chair and began pushing him towards a patrol car on the far side of the courtyard.

They were halfway down the courtyard when a single voice shouted from the windows, "NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Others joined in and the chant quickly spread around the courtyard.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK."

A prosthetic leg came sailing out from a third-floor window. Another came from the second floor across the way. Then an arm, a foot. More and more came tumbling out of the windows in a cascade of limbs all around the courtyard. The chant got louder and built up to a thunderous echo, bouncing off the walls and the trees, rising, rising, rising above the buildings and out across the street and into Rock Creek Park, down Georgia Ave and downtown and into the Capitol, the National Mall, the White House.

“NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK.”

Rodriguez laughed and laughed, tears streaming from his eyes, as he was wheeled down the path and out of sight.

New Poetry from John Milas



Ford Ice Cream Truck

Parade the Beef

“I declare this meat tasty and fit for human consumption.”
– President of the Mess,
CLR-27, Landing Support Company,
Camp Lejeune, 2009

we charge our wineglasses to toast the dead
marines of the eighteenth century the nineteenth twentieth
twenty-first century their immaculate ghosts seated in
the empty chair at the tiny table draped in
black cloth in a candlelit corner of the ballroom they fork
ghoststeak through their lips it piles

on paisley carpet centuries of steak piling
while I can't figure out how to light a cigar
the smoking lamp is lit the floor open for fines
Sergeant Steele wears the wrong colored shirt

beneath his midnight blue coat Sergeant Steele
say it ain't so that's erroneous drink from the grog
we're too young to drink the spiked grog but
the staff NCOs don't stop us Lance Corporal
Butler's gold PFC chevrons gleam without crossed rifles

say it ain't so Lance Corporal Stapleton
passes out in the woodchips under the playground
swings before we march back in after
shedding a tear for Lord Admiral Nelson Sergeant
Newman grips my white belt to balance drunk

we drop back in our chairs before
Sergeant Newman falls out slobbering
in my face saying he'll fight anyone for me he's
got my back forever he's always
had my back because he says I'll always have

his even though that motherfucker put me on
an extra hour of barracks duty he's right then
his fingers slip off the edge of my shoulder

Saltpeter

Our Kill Hat shreds his vocal cords while
we wait outside the chow hall for dinner,
his sweat-soaked charlies a shade darker
now than when he first suited up in the
DI hut. He screams *□Chain of Command*
and we scream into the San Diego sky:
The President of the United States, the

Honorable Mr. Bush! Vice President of the United States, the Honorable Mr. Cheney! Secretary of Defense, the Honorable Mr. Rumsfeld! □And so on and so forth. On November 5, the Kill Hat wakes us up to tell us what happened the night before: □*Obama is our president now, you understand me?* We understand because we will be punished for not understanding a single thing he says□. The Kill Hat screams to repeat the chain of command with these new changes before breakfast. Simple enough, because nothing has changed. We are still the rejects of America, as he reminds us. We shit across from each other in doorless bathroom stalls and piss three bodies to a single urinal, sometimes four. None of us have had an erection in weeks. Rumor has it they put something in the eggs.

Episode of Hate Channeled Near Ice Cream Truck at Mojave Viper

Donatello's green head severed at the neck on a wooden stick, two white orbs embedded in that purple mask, eyes they've trained us to gouge, to tear out with our fingers, bloody. I let my rifle hang by the sling and hold the face in front of me, jamming my free fingers into the turtle face. In my head, □Execute. □From my mouth, Kill.□ □Kill. The gumball eye pops free, cords of rectus and oblique muscle pouring from its ragged orbit. Frozen

gunk drips from my nailbeds, ants trailing to the sugar
at my boots. I gouge out the other eye and suck frozen brains
from his skull, as they've trained us. Then I drop
what's left on the ground and scream my throat raw at
it and smash it with my M16 buttstock and roll around in
ants and dust and if there weren't more
marines waiting behind me the terrified
ice cream man would probably slam
his window shut.

New Poetry from Liam Corley

In Which I Serve as Outside Reader on General Petraeus's Dissertation

[The current version of the Army's Field Manual on
Counterinsurgency, FM 3-24, originated as a doctoral
dissertation written by David Petraeus at Princeton.]



Premise flows from premise like water over the edge
of a waterfall, entrancing those not caught
in the turbid spray, those not lingering in the limestone
chutes that channel the first descent. *Dulce et decorum*,
those molecules in free fall, powerless to reverse
dictates of gravity, whether they be composed
of dollars or bodies. A theorist must maintain sense of scale,
must view war at an appropriate distance, so that its beauty
may emerge like a cold, perfect moon that draws the restless
from their beds with dreams of space flight. The best way to
lie
is to get one big whopper on the table and move on quick
to crystalline truth after truth in a train of plausibility

so compelling we don't see how down becomes
up, so convinced are we by the quality of our reasoning
that he leads to see and eventually to eff and tee, and the
best
first lie aligns with ones we've already bought, like how we
cheer
Frost's traveler in the yellow woods longing for the road
not taken, nodding along with his glib boast that non-
conformity explains contingency because we can accept
failures chosen on noble grounds more than unforeseen
leaf-covered ways that erupt when footfalls complete
the circuit of pressure plate IEDs. Mr. Petraeus, your
counterinsurgency
tools could only work in countries we didn't create, republics
not birthed
by death from above, and so I regretfully conclude
this dissertation presents the naked assertion of imperial
power
as the contribution of a helpful guest, final proof that
intelligence and gulled innocence, in general, betray us.

Double Rainbow at Dawn, 15 North at the 10

The rubberneckers slow down
as they do for other hazards,
brake lights merging into
the penumbra of a double rainbow
due west of the traffic lanes,
while in the East the rising sun
irradiates vapor-soaked air.

We are all late, looking askance
at the fireworks of nature,
wondering how our priorities
match up with this display.

Double, not just one: two arcs
of vibrant color proclaiming

peace on earth if we
don't kill each other
trying to take it in.

New Poetry from Randy Brown

victory conditions

My father taught me
to say *I love you*
every time
you stood in the door

left for school
went to work
flew off to war

it became a habit
a good one
like checking the tires
or clicking your seat belt

but now
every conversation feels
like a movement to contact

we took the same vows
we swore the same oaths
we wore the same uniform
we see the same news

I raise my kids
like he did his
and have the same hopes for them

How is it that we now live
in two countries?

three more tanka from Des Moines, Iowa

1.

The leafblower drone
buzzes into consciousness—
fast cicada hum.
I wave to the new police,
before I close the window.

2.

Yellow Little Bird
hovers near high-voltage lines
conducting repairs
outside my bedroom window,
but I am miles away.

3.

Thunder and popcorn;
a remembered joke about
the “sound of freedom.”
In rain, I stand listening
as rifles prepare for war.

a future space force marine writes haiku

1.

This drop won't kill you—
terminal velocity
varies by planet.

2.

We spiral dirt-ward,
samaras in early fall,
sowing destruction.

3.

Reconnaissance drones
orbit our squad's position:
Expanding beachhead.

4.

"Almost" only counts
in horseshoes and hand grenades.
Go toss them a nuke.

5.

If war is still hell,
at least my bounding mech suit
is air-conditioned.



"An American pineapple, of the kind the Axis finds hard to digest, is ready to leave the hand of an infantryman in training at Fort Belvoir, Va, 1944. American soldiers make good grenade throwers."

This is just to Say All Again After ...

after William Carlos Williams' "This is Just to Say"

I have expended
the "pineapples"
that were in
the ammo box

and which

you were probably
saving
for final protective fires

Forgive me
they were explosive
so frag
and so bold

**Most Likely /
Most Dangerous Enemy Courses of Action**

what most
threatens my children

social media /
unending war

the rat race /
the daily grind

half-baked policies /
global warming

a lack of hope /
a lack of justice

my constant distraction /
my constant distraction

the stand

if you can't stand injustice
take a knee

if you pray for others
take a knee

if you believe in freedom, not fabric
let others see

you practice
what you preach