

# New Fiction by R.L. Peterson: “Rules of Dying”



Every work day morning at 8 o'clock sharp, me, Juan, Marcus, and Willard stand at attention with hands over our hearts while the national anthem plays on the loud speaker at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California. While the music plays, resident supervisor, Captain C. T. Wallace, in his Navy Reserve uniform, runs the flag up the pole, ties off the rope, salutes, and goes into his office.

I'm Mike. I ride herd on the crew renovating gravesites here at this place of rest for American vets. It ain't easy work. I speak un poco Espanol, and my crew is mostly Mexican. My rule is when they conversate with each other they can talk Swahili for all I care, but they have to speak English to me.

These guys work hard in full sun most every day, at prevailing wage. I really have three crews, the one working today, the

one that leaves every two, three months, and one in training. Something that intrigues almost everyone is the ashes of cremated vets. Yesterday, the whole crew gathered around so I knew something was up.

Marcus said, "Look at this, Boss. Someone forgot to put a body back where it came from." He handed me an pickle jar filled with what I quickly saw was ground up charcoal and crushed pasta shells. That's not what cremains look like, but I kept quiet.

"How can we get this back where it belongs? There's no name on it?"

"Hell, that's no problem." I fished out a piece of broken pasta and popped it my mouth. "We'll just eat it. No one will ever know."

The crew burst out laughing. Marcos grins. "You're un bastardo inteligente." With this bunch, one minute I'm a mean-ass drill instructor, the next a friend.

Every morning, after the Anthem, a gray Kia Rio drives past. The driver, a young blonde wearing a blue pants suit, low-heeled black shoes, and a white blouse, opens the car's trunk, grabs a green and white folding chair, a yellow umbrella, and a flower, and carries these like birthday presents to her usual spot near the rose bushes.

She sets up her chair, opens the umbrella, then goes to the columbarium, where ashes of cremated bodies are kept, unlocks a niche door, takes out an urn, about the size of a half-gallon of milk-remains of the person she's mourning-holds it a minute, puts it back, stretches to remove yesterday's white geranium from its holder, replaces it with the new flower and goes to her chair.

Often, on the blue San Diego bay below like an art gallery painting, a submarine, or aircraft carrier glides out to sea,

past the Point Loma light house, with sea gulls circling and the sun turning the ocean silver and gold.

The young woman fits her i-Phone buds into her ears, opens a book, and reads, wetting her finger with a pink tongue to turn a page. She's still there at noon when we come up to eat lunch in the shade of the coral tree.

Juan says, "She's here every day, for who? Husband? Brother?" He waves a tattooed hand in the air. "Every fuckin' day, rain, or shine."

Willard asks, "How do ya know ever day? Ya work weekends?"

Juan says, "I bet if the park's open, she's here. A husband probably. Not likely her daddy. She needs a man. Like me."

Juan was paroled from Donovan State Pen last January. His first few days he was edgy as hell when the *Star-Spangled Banner* played. "Part of our job is respect for the deceased," I said. That seemed to work. He's first on the truck every morning and follows directions. That's all I can ask from any worker.

Marcus asks, "Think the lady plays music on her phone?"

Marcus and Juan are kin, second cousins, I think, or maybe they married sisters. Anyway, they ride together in Marcus' Ford Bronco and eat the same thing at lunch. Marcus is broad as sliding door, has a shaggy grey moustache and wears the same green pants and long-sleeve blue shirt every day.

Willard says, "Classy girl like her? Probably religious shit."

He's tall with long blonde hair. Always has a red and blue wool beanie pulled low over his blue eyes. He sits on the ground in the shade of the truck to eat lunch and has more 'tats than an NBA player. He's done no hard time if his application is correct.

Marcus says, "Classy? You mean assy? She wants something hard. *Carne dulce*. I'm her man."

I ignore this and spray paint the grass orange where we're to dig.

\*

One noon, we've finished our tortas. Marcus grabs the weed whacker we use to barber the grass around markers, lopes across the road and begins to edge the sidewalk next to the blonde woman's chair. *What the hell!*

I run up. Her blue eyes go big, her face white.

"Pardon us, Ma'am. My man's trimming grass that maintenance missed."

"Yeah," Marcus says, "Make it perfect. For you." His eyes scorch her from jeans to tennis shoes..

Her voice sweet as a phoebe's call, but a bit shrill, she says. "How nice."

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Back at the truck, me and Marcus have a go. "Dude," I say. "What the hell?"

"Wanted her to see a real man."

"That was pretty stupid."

"Oh, yeah? She was all smiles. Liked it."

"Really? Truth is, you scared her shitless. Pull that trick again, I'll write you up."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. Count on it."

*"Un hombre tiene que hacer lo que un hombre tiene que hacer?"*

"Not on my watch, hombre."

At two o'clock every day, the blonde stows her gear and drives off in her gray Kia, going slow as a hearse.

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Soil contracts at night and expands by day. Rain and irrigation water wash away dirt leaving ruts and holes. Gophers and rats dig tunnels. All this causes head stones to tilt or fall over. Sometimes, a casket splits open, showing rags and brass buttons, bones grey as gun powder, some no longer than a chicken leg.

Often, we have to renovate a whole section. We spread caskets and markers on the grass, name side up so we know what goes where when we're ready to close the graves. When this happens, cemetery visitors swarm like yellow jackets around us, push past our yellow tape, take selfies next to the caskets, kick clods into the trenches, pepper us with questions. "Whatcha doing?"

I answer, "Heroes deserve a beautiful and peaceful resting place. We're repairing their graves."

"Every casket has a body?"

"Absolutely. We're careful to see each grave is correctly marked." That's the company spiel. It's a lie. Stones mark where a body used to be, but tree roots squeeze caskets, they disintegrate and flesh rots. When we work, we dig the markers out by hand before the backhoe rips a trench, then we lower a metal box into the ground and pour in reinforced concrete. When the cement is dry enough you can't write your name in it, we re-set the headstone, a man on each side, careful not to leave any footprints, and sink the marker five inches deep, tamp sand and pea gravel around it and replant the sod. That

sucker will stand straight as a soldier for years.

It takes sweat and know-how to cut away stubble with a sharp shooter and pry out weeds with a rough-neck bar or square up a trench with a spade, but it gives me time to think. I screwed things up with booze so bad that eight years ago, as part of my rehab, the VA sent me to culinary school. I had custody of my kids then. I got a job at a restaurant, doing food prep, but the pay was so lousy, I couldn't pay my rent, much less keep two growing boys and a young lady in clothes, so I hired on here. Me and the kid's momma have joint custody. I make \$12.38 an hour, \$18.56 overtime, with an extra twenty-five a week for being crew supervisor. I try to save a little each time the eagle shits so I can open a restaurant someday. Weekends. Reservations-only seating.

I trim the grass around a stone with the weed whipper while my crew digs on a new section. Saturday night Cinda's coming for dinner. If she can find a sitter. She lives in that double-wide across the street and two trailers down at Clariton Estates Mobile Home Park. She has full, red lips, tons of dark curls and dancing eyes. When she smiles, my throat goes tight.

I'll start with an *amuse-bouche*, say a celery-infused beef puree. For the primo, Bibb lettuce and endive, with a little arugula and radicchio for bitterness, tossed with quinoa and mushrooms, topped off with honey-roasted walnuts and organic plum tomatoes and a nice lemon garlic dressing.

What secondo will she want? Fish or chicken? I'll drop by her trailer tonight after her kids are down, say 8:30 or so, and ask her. If fish, it'll be sea bass grilled in lemon butter and almond paste. If chicken, I'll wrap it in foil and smother it under charcoal with parsley, onions, and green peppers.

The dulce? Double chocolate cake. I'll bake it Friday, after work.

This week, my mind wonders from Cinda and Saturday night's

plans. *The blonde in the beach chair by the columbarium? Who's she thinking about?*

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Willard and Marcus are having a lover's spat. They team up on most projects. If Marcus made a sharp turn, Willard would break his nose.

"What 'ya mean, rules for dying? Silliest thing I ever heard." Willard tosses his shovel away and picks up a hoe.

Marcus says, "There's five of 'em, man. When my nephew was offed, the social worker told us about 'em." He grabs a hoe, too.

Willard doesn't go for this. "*Tonterias.*"

"No bullshit. She named 'em. One by one." Marcus turns to me. "Tell him, Boss."

"You mean the stages of grief? Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance?" Marcus nods. Surprised I guess. I learned these when my AA sponsor's Dad died last year. He made certain he touched every base, but other sober drunks told me you'll live with those five mind states forever.

"Yeah. That's what I meant."

Willard still has doubts. "When my Old Man took out that eucalyptus with his motorcycle, we knew he was dead. There was nothing to deny. Tore his bike all to shit. Him, too." His face is red, and not just from work. This is the most I've ever heard him talk.

I nod. "Ever play over and over in your head how you could have kept the accident from happening? Feel sad when you think about it?"

"Everybody does, right? That's normal, ain't it."

"I think Marcus' point is our mind goes through various stages when someone close to us kicks off. Thinking how you could have changed things? That's bargaining. Feeling shitty. That's depression."

Willard slices a lizard in half with his shovel. "Hell, I don't drive the street where he bought it anymore. Ain't that the shits?" He shakes his head as if to change the memory..

Juan says, "What *staget*, how you say, stage, is our Little Darlin' goin' through?"

"The blonde? Beats me."

"Is there a dickin' stage? That's what she needs. A good *jugando*."

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A week or so later we're waiting for the backhoe to trench a site. Marcus says, "Boss, I dropped my gloves at lunch. I'll go get 'em."

"Like hell you will. The other crew sees you, they'll say you're diddling around, and I'll have paper work to complete for weeks. I get the big bucks. I'll go."

Marcus clenches and un-clenches his fist.

I ignore this. "Double check our measurements before the 'hoe starts, okay? I won't be long."

Me and the crew eat lunch across from the columbarium because the benches there are in the shade, the rest rooms clean and easy to get to. I go to where Marcus sat. No gloves. Where they on the ground and someone tossed 'em in the trash? Negative. I stoop to look under the bench.

A girl's voice interrupts. "Looking for these?"

It's the blonde in the Kia. She's not blonde any more. Her

hair is pink and blue. She different somehow. She waves Marcus' gloves.

"That wild-eyed guy. The grass trimmer. He dropped 'em. I was taking 'em to Lost and Found. You're the boss, right?"

I nod. "Thanks."

The small gold necklace around her throat says Misty.

"Misty, you're here every day. What do you read?"

"Stuff Tate liked." She holds up a book. "This is *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*." She smiles. "I finished Harry Potter. The whole series." She waves her red and gold phone. "I'm getting damn good at Grand Theft Auto, too."

"I'm impressed. Tate was your husband?"

Her face pales. "Yeah. He was Army. An IED exploded near him in Afghanistan. They shipped his body home. I never saw it. We were married one year, eight months and four days. At his funeral, as a testimony to his service, I vowed to visit his grave 609 days straight." She smiles. "Seventy-three more to go. You familiar with the Five Stages of Grief?"

The second time in two days this has come up. "Some. Why?"

She takes off her sun glasses. Big blue eyes. "I'm past denial but I'm still angry. If I could, I'd kill every fucking politician in D.C." Black streaks run down her cheeks. "My support group says we never fully recover, just learn to survive." She tries to smile through the tears.

"Got a job. Waitress at a bowling alley café. To pass the time. Part of survival my group says." She smiles. "I'm nuts, I guess. I talk with my dead husband. And he answers." A half smile. "He says it's okay to date. But I can't. Not yet." She puts a finger to her lips. "Quiet, Misty. Tate says these grounds are sacred. Respect the dead. Don't talk so much."

She smiles. "You agree?"

I nod.

She turns and walks to her chair, without looking back. A small blonde woman living a tortured life.

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I'm Navy, myself. The only one in my crew who served, but my bunch turns over so often, next week I might have four. I was stationed at Subic Bay in the Philippines for 2 years. Me and this Filipino girl, Baby Ruth, shacked up. I fell in love. Not with her, but the sex. I was raised Southern Baptist, taught to love Jesus more than life. My first liberty I had a Manhattan. After that, there was little room for Jesus. An old salt said church is good place to find women. I went with him. Met Baby Ruth. She was short and pretty, with skin the color of coffee with cream. Sex came natural to her. When my tour ended I felt guilty leaving her there. Stateside, my pastor said I could send for her. I did. We got married. She was a real Jesus freak. I was mostly just confused. I didn't love her, but loved our sex. I hated our kids, but loved being a dad. Booze and nose candy made everything better.

Four years later, two squalling kids running around, my wife preaching Jesus to me, my head splitting, hands shaking, desperate as a convict on death row, I'd swear every morning I'd had my last drink. One night wasted on booze and drugs, I wrecked my truck on the 805. It took the doctors at the Veteran's Affairs hospital 42 days to put me back together again. I joined AA. Three years later I got straight. Lost my job as a heavy equipment mechanic and tried small engine repairs but the drugs made my hands shake and the detail work gave me a head ache. The VA said they'd send me to culinary school. They did. I finished a 3-month course.

I visit AA rooms most weekends. Last night, the speaker talked about the 3rd Step, where you make a decision to turn your

will and your life over to God. Six years ago, I told my sponsor I'd like to do that. He asked, "If two bull frogs sit on a lily pad and one of them decides to jump, how many bull frogs are on the lily pad?"

"One," I answered.

"No, dummy. Two. Decidin' to jump ain't the same as jumpin'."

So, I jumped. Did all the fuckin' steps. The whole nine yards. That's why I'm sober today.

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Getting ready for Cinda's visit tonight, I clean the kitchen, wash my DAV Thrift Shop dishware, shine both settings of silverware, spread a red and yellow beach towel on the table and put Martinelli's in the frig. I'll buy a cake since I didn't bake last night. I clean the bathroom and change sheets. Mrs. Chase from the single-wide next door- I call her Mrs. Scuttlebutt-bangs on my door.

"Isn't it romantic? Cinda's husband brought her the prettiest bouquet. Spend the night. He wants them to try and make a go of their marriage again."

Suddenly I'm tired, really tired. It'll be chicken for lunch this week.

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Sunday morning. I wake up empty. *Haven't seen Misty or her Kia this week. What gives?* I slam a Nine Inch Nails CD into my truck's player, grab a 5-Hour Energy and drive to Fort Rosecrans.

*What the fuck? Willard's beat up pickup's in the parking lot. Why? Not what I expected. Misty's next to the roses as usual. Williard's headed toward her. I run across the grass toward him.*

He sees me. "Stay out of this, Boss!"

"Where ya goin'?"

"Juan says she wants a man. That's me."

I feel his body heat. The smell of bourbon. Sweat. He needs a shave. His beanie hides blood shot eyes.

"You can't just grab her."

"You didn't say shit when Marcus bragged what he'd like to do to her."

"No, but I should have. Think it through, man. Don't do something today you'll regret tomorrow." Talking Program to adrunK is a waste of time, I know. *Get 'em when they're sober. And shaky, the Big Book says.*

Willard's breathing hard. Sweat glues his shirt to his back.

"I could take ya," he says, squaring up in front of me, fists doubled.

"I know." He's one tall dude.

I'm breathing fast. I don't want to fight. "Walk away, my friend, and it's over."

He sways like a weeds in the wind. "Fuck you."

He steps toward me. I don't move. "We gonna fight?"

"If we have to."

"What if I walk?"

"That's the smart thing."

"You gonna fire me?"

"I have to. Don't come in Monday. HR will send what you're

owed.”

“Fuck.” He doubles his fists again. “I could beat the shit out of you.”

“I know. All that would prove is you’re tough. You’re a smart guy. Go sleep it off. You’ll be glad you did tomorrow.”

He glares at me, takes a deep breath, turns, and weaves off toward his pickup.

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“That looked pretty intense.”

It’s Misty.

“Nah. Work stuff. No big deal.” I force a smile. “Didn’t see you this last week. Where you been?”

“I won’t be here as often as before.” It’s her turn to force a smile. “I met someone. It’s not serious, but my support group says it’s time I moved on. I’ll try.” The smile works this time.

I nod. “ I understand.” Maybe it’s time I move on, too.

Misty sticks out her hand. “Thanks for being my friend.”

“My pleasure, ma’am.” I come to attention and salute. She laughs and walks toward her car, ready to meet life on life’s terms.

Monday morning after the Anthem, a black Nissan drives slowly by and parks. A man in a dark suit takes two chairs from the trunk and carries them to a fresh-dug grave under a tarp. He goes back to the car and escorts a small lady wearing a black hijab to the chairs. They sit.

On the San Diego bay below, sea gulls circle and the sun turns the ocean silver and gold, like an art gallery painting. An

aircraft carrier glides past Point Loma Light House, going off to war.

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# New Nonfiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: "Othello Avenue"



In the cold autumn dawn shadows blanket Othello Avenue, the parked cars and vans little more than gauzy, damp lumps, like furniture hidden beneath old sheets in a darkened room. The rising sun reveals a towering red sign with white lettering

promoting, Wentworth Automotives, like some sort of beacon to the new day, and the increasing light penetrates the San Diego fog until it offers a display of dewy windshields and the dented metal of damaged bumpers and wet, warped cardboard in place of broken windows. In a 2003 VW station wagon, Robin sleeps on her right side, mouth open, the back of the front seat pushed down so that her body can conform to this rough and barely endurable estimate of a bed, and in a white Chrysler Town and Country behind her, Michael lies prone where there once had been a passenger seat. Out of the open passenger window of an RV rise the sounds of sleep from another man, Steve, snoring amid a disaster of discard-castoff shirts, pants, cereal cartons, plastic bottles, generator cords, pop cans, stained styrofoam plates, magazines and mountains of crumpled paper.

Across the street behind a Target two cats, a Siamese and an orange tabby, stare out the windshield of a 1982 Chevrolet P30 Winnebago. Its owner, Katrina, rouses herself from a bed in the back, stretches, yawns and presses the heels of her palms against her eyes.

She found the Siamese cat tied up in a plastic bag in bushes behind Target. She can't believe what some people do. Her boyfriend, Teddy, still asleep, rolls onto his side. He manages a gas station and gets off at six in the morning. Husband, Katrina calls him. Marriage a ceremony neither can afford and perhaps the fragility of their lives warns them against. Tweakers both of them but clean now. She looks out a window at the cracked street still wet from the calm night. A block away, the silence is being nibbled away by cars on Interstate 805, soon to be a madness of rush-hour traffic. Not long from now Katrina will awaken to other noises. She wonders what those will be. Some traffic, sure, this is San Diego.

Every city has traffic but maybe she'll hear birdsong, too. Waking up to birds as she did as a child. Imagine. She and Teddy recently found an apartment through the housing authority. Of the nearly 8,500 homeless people in San Diego County, more than 700 live in vehicles. Almost 500 emergency housing vouchers became available in 2021 to address housing insecurity worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Katrina and Teddy got one of the vouchers, but it took them nearly a year to find a place. One landlord told her, All people on Section 8 have bedbugs. She felt he was just lumping her into a stereotype. In her opinion, there're the bums who are content being homeless, and then there are people like her and Teddy who are working but don't have a place to live.

The landlord who finally accepted their application rents apartments on Loma Way. She offered Katrina and Teddy a two bedroom with brown linoleum floors. Much better than that cheap brown carpet so many apartments have, especially with cats. Katrina checked it out on Google Maps and thought it looked like crap. But the photo she saw was old. When she and Teddy met with the landlord they found that all of the apartments had been recently remodeled and freshly painted. Nine hundred and fifty square feet. Beats the thirty-two square feet of the Winnebago and the leaky roof. When it rains, water pours into the bedroom and kitchenette. Teddy will shove her to one side of the bed so he can stay dry, her body pressed against the frayed particleboard of a cabinet. The other day, her mother called from Utah and said a foot of snow had fallen. Tell her we got a foot of rain inside, Teddy said. When they were using drugs they draped tarps over their tent to keep out the rain. One night, Katrina had to be life-flighted out of a riverbed near the golf course behind Fashion Valley Mall because of flooding. She was detoxing from speed and shaking so bad she couldn't climb out ahead of the rising waters.

The landlord did not hold the history of drug arrests and

convictions against them. As long as you tell me the truth before I do a background check, you'll be fine, she had told them. They can move in two weeks. Hard to imagine having a place after living in the Winnebago for a year. No, eighteen months. A year and a fucking half. She and Teddy didn't sleep much when they lived on the street before the Winnebago. Afraid who might walk up on them. Katrina knows three people who died, one stabbed, two OD'd. Bad stuff. If you make someone mad they can hide anywhere and come for you about just stupid stuff. Could be a guy touched someone's backpack. People are nuts about their packs. This one dude took a guy's pack because he owed him money. The pack had his heart meds and he died that night of a stroke. At least that's what the paramedics said. Scary out there.

Robin stirs, opens one eye and watches a man walk past her car wheeling a garbage can. He picks up pieces of paper with a trash picker, peers at her, glances away and moves on in a desultory fashion suggesting that the sight of her provided only a temporary diversion from the mindless tedium of his task. She sits up, opens both of her eyes wide, squints, opens them again allowing the morning to sift around in her head until it settles into the beginning of yet another day, then she pulls the door handle, gets out and stretches. She wears a faded, green sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Short, stocky. A wrestler's build. Her brown hair falls around her cheeks. She holds a hand over her eyes against the sun. No clouds. Down the street toward The 805, a sign promoting Hawthorne Crossings shopping center shines in the sun as do the names of stores listed beneath it: Staples, Cycle Gear, Ross, Book Off, Dollar Tree.

The staff at Cycle Gear throw away bike helmets like confetti. The slightest dent and scratch and they're tossed into a

dumpster. Robin has seen Teddy collect them to recycle. Teddy's out there, a hustler. He says he even finds Rolex watches but he's got to be bragging or lying or both, right? C'mon, Robin tells herself, selling just one Rolex would get him off Othello. But he and Mike keep the tweakers away. Othello Avenue is quiet for the most part but if someone parks here to get high, those two are on them and get them gone, they sure do. Robin doesn't know Katrina and Teddy well, or Mike for that matter. Talks to them but not all the time. What's the point? Get to know people and then they leave. Katrina and Teddy aren't staying. If all goes well, she won't be far behind them.

Robin has lived in her VW for about a year. Stick shift. Saving for a new clutch. She has a clutch kit but needs someone to install it. The car is her everything. It's a mess of Burger King wrappers and coffee cups but it ain't horrible. She's not a packrat like Steve. When it becomes a mess, she cleans it and when it turns into a mess again, she cleans it again. Like her life. She works as a caregiver for a grandmother and her two-year-old granddaughter. The child's mother lives on the street turning tricks for crack, a toothless, emaciated figure peering wide-eyed into the slow trolling cars. In four weeks, Robin will move in with a man who needs in-home care 24/7. She has known him for eight years. Not well but they talked a lot over the years. A Polish guy, Harold. In his sixties, maybe seventies. He lived next door to a mutual friend. He sorted mail at a post office before he retired. He wanted to be a cop but, he told Robin, in those days the San Diego Police Department wouldn't hire a Pole. Injured his hip on the job and it's given him problems ever since. He's in Carmel Mountain Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center now. Comes out in about four weeks. She's ready to move in with him, ready for a room of her own. She'll sleep a lot the first couple of days, she's sure.

The median home price in San Diego County has surpassed

\$500,000 and the median monthly rent is almost \$2,800. Some studios downtown rent for \$2,000 a month. With prices like those, Robin feels grateful for the arrangement with Harold. It won't be her place but it'll be better than living in the VW, and she'll still have time to help the woman with the grandchild. With two jobs, she should do all right. She used to clerk at a day-old bread store for four years until she screwed up. Was going through a divorce.. Was going to casinos and losing money. She stole one hundred dollars from a cash register at work one afternoon. Got caught, got fired. Then one night at a casino she lost what little money she had left and in her fury she punched the window of a slot machine and broke it. Damn window must've been pretty wobbly because she didn't hit it that fucking hard. Prosecutors charged her with a Class A misdemeanor for destruction of property. Had to pay \$1,800 for that little bitty window plus the one hundred dollars she owed the bread company. People in charge don't play. Stuff follows you. Background checks screwed her when she put in job applications. She left her apartment with only her clothes and took to the streets. When she got tired of being in her car, she pitched a tent in one of the many canyons around the city. She tried to think of it as camping, but she missed her bed.

Mike sits in the driver's seat of the Chrysler, left elbow out the window like a bored taxi driver waiting for a fare. His blonde hair falls to his shoulders. One side of his scruffy beard skewed from sleep. Heavy set, he looks much younger than his sixty-one years. Thick body, his belly spills over his belt buckle. His black shirt, speckled with dandruff, stinks of his unwashed body. The stale air within his vehicle carries his funk. He rolls down the passenger window and feels the breezy crosscurrents. Steve appears in his side mirror walking up from behind the Chrysler, a skinny little dude the same age

as Mike, T-shirt and jeans sloppy with wrinkles hanging off his body. He pauses, pokes his head in, Hey. Mike. Says he'd gone to Target for coffee and dropped his phone but someone found it and gave it back to him. Pretty lucky, huh? Stressed him out. Feels exhausted. Gonna take a nap. See you, Mike. He walks to his RV, turns to face Mike again as if to fix him there. Mike makes a face, folds his arms and looks down and shakes his head. Steve'd lose his arms if it they weren't attached to his shoulders. He's OK. Harmless. Suffered a head injury in a motorcycle accident, or so he says. Might have TBI. Mike considers himself lucky that he doesn't have it. Or maybe he does. He can be forgetful. When he was in the army, a tank hatch cover fell on his head. Dropped him like a stick. He receives VA disability, about a \$1,000 a month.

The other day, he saw Katrina, and she told him that she and Teddy had found a place. They don't talk much but if he splurges on a pizza, he'll offer them a slice. Steve and Robin, too, if he has enough. Good for them. So many homeless people. Mike keeps his head down, minds his own business. If he sees someone shooting up in their car or loading a pipe, he writes the license plate number and calls the cops. They show up eventually. He tells the tweakers, I know what you're doing. Get out. He doesn't yell at them. That'd be a good way to get a gun in his face. Teddy always backed him up. Now, Mike just might have to settle for calling the police and leave it at that.

Every morning he drives four or five blocks, gets something to eat. He has received tickets for being parked in one place too long. Five of those and the city will tow him, and then where'd he be? Carl's Jr., it's close. Gas costs too much to go far. He has up-to-date tags so he's good there, and insurance, he's got that too. It's hard to get insurance being homeless. He lies. Gives the DMV an old address. They don't check. He loves to cook but can't in his car, of course. He warms soup at a 7-Eleven. McDonald's, Denny's, Jack in the

Box, they're not too expensive. His doctor says he has high cholesterol and type 2 diabetes. Blood pressure off the charts. Well, doc, I eat nothing but fast food. At Costco, he gets grapes, cherries, and water. Bananas, too, but on hot days after hours in the car they begin to turn brown and spotty. In cold weather he'll buy up to six bananas. If he eats one a day, they'll be gone before they spot.

He worked as a home healthcare aide for his old man for thirty-eight years after a driver ran his dad off a highway in Arizona. It was 1979. The old man had dropped Mike off at a boy scout jamboree near the Grand Canyon and got hit on his way back home. Never did catch the guy. Mike was something like a junior in high school at the time. Yellow paint from the driver's car etched into the old man's passenger door. He flipped into a ravine. His headlights tunneled straight into the night sky. He broke about every bone that could be broken and remained in St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix for a year. Came out a paraplegic but he didn't quit living. He met a woman from San Diego, got married and moved with her to California. Mike stayed in Arizona, married his high school sweetheart and joined the Army. Bootcamp at Fort. Lewing, Washington. Served three years on the DMZ in South Korea. That was enough. Came home, got his wife pregnant. He worked at KFC, Jack in the Box, and Jiffy Lube. Bounced from one job to another. Eight months later, he and his wife divorced. Young love gets to be old love and then no love at all after a while. He had gotten into speed by then. The old man told him to come to San Diego. Mike had nothing keeping him in Arizona, so he moved, settled next door to his father in Oceanside. In 1986 he began taking care of him full time after the old man's wife left him. Like father, like son. Shot speed with his sister, who lived in Santee, a suburb.

The old man died in October 2018. Eighty-nine years old, three months shy of ninety. Had dementia in his final years. He served in Korea during the war, won a Bronze Star, three

clusters. Before he got dementia in 2011, he volunteered at the VA. Mike didn't know about the medal until he sorted through his dad's things. That sort of bothers him. After so much time together, they shouldn't have had secrets. He thought they were as tight as Siamese twins. Guess not. Goes to show. He's not sure what but it does. The old man never talked about the war to anyone so he didn't deny Mike anything he hadn't denied others. And he never confronted Mike on his drug use. Fair's, fair. But Mike wasn't anyone else. He cared for him for decades even when he was high. So much for family. Caring for the old man for so long, Mike didn't have much job experience. No résumé that'd count for shit. By May 2019, nearly a year later, almost out of money, he moved into his Chrysler. He's not using drugs now but his sister still is so he won't stay with her even if she offered to take him in which she hasn't. He stares out his windshield at Steve's RV. Steve has two grown sons. They aren't offering him a bed. So much for family.

Steve stirs from his nap as the draft from a passing car rocks his RV. He has so much crap he can't open the side door. To get out, he wriggles through the sliding window that separates the cab from the back of the RV squinching his nose, and while still on his stomach, sprawled across the driver and passenger seats, his legs bent, toes balanced against the driver's window, he opens the passenger door and crawls out to the sidewalk. Loose tennis balls and a fishing pole, follow him. He bends and tugs at his belt and a man walking past glances at him and keeps going. Steve picks up the pole and tennis balls and drops them on the passenger seat. He went fishing the night before, caught one small fish, and threw it back. Watched it swim crookedly to the bottom and felt bad he had hurt it. He decided not to fish again giving up a diversion that began in his childhood. Loved the rhythm of tossing the

line, reeling it in. Kind of hypnotic. Almost disappointed when a fish took the bait and broke the spell. He was born in San Diego but spent a big part of his childhood in a Fresno ranch house. He just saw it after God knows how many years, decades really. Super cool. He had driven his niece, Nicole, to Washington state where her husband was stationed in the Navy. She had been visiting friends in San Diego and needed a ride. When the bottom fell out of his life, Steve lived with Nicole for a time in Liberty Military Housing – Murphy Canyon until her husband was transferred to Washington. He keeps in touch with his sons, Jacob and Gabrielle. Gabriele is in the Air Force in New Mexico. Jacob lives in University Heights, San Diego. Computer guy. Steve uses his address for mail. Jacob lives with his daughter, Scout, 7, and his girlfriend. Not enough room for Steve, at least that's what he assumes. Jacob gave him one hundred dollars one time. That was nice. He wants to believe his boys have faith in him. He doesn't pull alarms. He doesn't complain.

Steve was on his way back to San Diego after he'd dropped Nicole off when he decided to stop in Fresno and check out his old childhood place. More developed now, nothing like it was in 69' when he was kid. He had pulled over and just looked at the low-slung brown house, closed his eyes and his memories played out like a movie. He took a bus to school, walked down the long driveway when it pulled up. Cows nearby strolled in their heavy, head-bobbing way, pausing to pull at grass, and chickens wandered fields. That night as he slept in his RV, someone stole the generator he had strapped to the bumper. In the morning, when he realized what had happened, he shook his head with the innocence of someone who could not fathom how such a thing could happen anymore than how he could comprehend inadvertently injuring that fish. He continued his drive back to San Diego and Othello Avenue.

The morning progresses. Emaciated weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk, vine-like and pale green. Palm trees sway. The noise of children and women drift from the Target parking lot. Gulls bob on currents staring down at the confusion below them and a few alight on the hot pavement of Othello Avenue snagging a speck of something before flapping their wings and rising again.

Katrina starts work at ten in the morning, stands behind the counter of the Häagen-Dazs store in Fashion Valley Mall and opens a box of paper cups. She wears a black T-shirt with the Häagen-Dazs logo and she ties her long hair in a ponytail. This is her time, the early hours. Gets more done working by herself, restocking for the afternoon and evening rush.

You have chocolate? Someone asks, poking their head in the door.

Of course.

I'll be by after lunch.

I'll be here, Katrina says.

She has worked part-time at the store for about a year and earns about \$1,600 a month. A customer, a four-year-old girl named Sophie, recently asked her to be her best friend. Katrina smiled and agreed. Another asks for pumpkin ice cream, a combination that sounds disgusting to Katrina. She has gotten to know a hairdresser and her three daughters. Another customer said he'd miss her when she told him she had applied for a job at the Target store where she and Teddy park. It would be a wonderful opportunity to work there and so convenient. Even after they move, it would be closer than Fashion Valley and better pay with benefits.

She finds a stepladder and climbs onto the bottom rung so she can reach a box of styrofoam bowls from a shelf. Raising her arms, she arches her back. Her body curves, her shirt and pants tight to her body. A man pauses by the door and admires her. She grins. It's good to be noticed. Good to feel attractive. Good to like herself, her figure. She pulls the box and sets it on the counter. Reminds herself to call her mother. She normally does every morning but she was running late today.

Katrina was born in Orem, Utah, and moved to Huntsville, Utah, when she was eight. She liked Huntsville, a small, quiet town. No weirdos. As a little girl she could hang out with friends in a park at night and play hide-and-seek near their elementary school. Rode their bikes. In the winter they met at the ice-skating rink. Father a diesel mechanic. She has two brothers in Washington near the Canadian border. Can't recall the town. Another one still lives in Utah. Doesn't hear from any of them.

Her senior year in high school she met a guy and got pregnant four months before graduation. She doesn't know what she liked about him. He was cute: she was in love. They were young and she thought he was perfect. Even when she realized he wasn't, she stayed with him. Her parents had divorced and she didn't want her kids to grow up like that.

Stupid, she says to herself.

He didn't work, sold drugs and introduced her to heroin and pills. In 2016, they divorced. She kept the kids until her mother informed the Department of Social Services about her drug use. Katrina had tried to hide it from her, but she knew. She saw her hanging out a lot with a crowd that looked like they hadn't bathed in a month. Katrina didn't allow her to see the kids because she didn't want her mother to see her. So, yeah, she knew. Her ex-husband's aunt ended up raising the children. A blessing, Katrina thinks now. They've done better

without her. A twenty-year-old son joined the Marines; her eighteen-year-old son is about to graduate high school, and her thirteen-year-old daughter joined the girls 'eighth grade wrestling team. She hasn't spoken to them in two, three years. The last time they talked, it didn't go well. Pissed off at her for leaving them. They'll come around. She's different now. She writes letters and sends gifts, tries not to beat herself up. Does it hurt? Yeah. Does she feel bad? Yeah, but she can't change the past. Guilt makes her want to get high. She's no good to them high. That's how she lost them. A lot of tweakers don't quit. Or they do but just for a minute. They stop and look around and all they see are the bushes and dirt where they live. They start thinking about the mess they've made of their lives and they get high to stop thinking. So, yeah, she feels bad but she's happy for her children. And for herself now.

Katrina did four months in a Utah prison for theft and other charges resulting from her drug use including prescription fraud. When she got out, she met a truck driver whose route included California, Colorado and Utah. He'd stop at the Flying J Truck stop in Ogden where Katrina panhandled for drug money. The trucker bought her a sandwich from Denny's every time he came through. They became good acquaintances if not friends and after five years, he told her if she ever cleaned up he'd put her up in his San Diego home. In 2017, she got on a Greyhound bus and took him up on it. He died a year later at sixty-two of cancer. Katrina started using meth again and stayed in Presidio Park. She met Teddy about the same time outside of a 7-Eleven, tall, skinny and handsome and high on speed. He had just done a ten year stretch for drug crimes. He kept getting busted until his most recent release from prison in January 2019 when he decided to clean up. He told Katrina he was through with drugs and had even stopped smoking cigarettes. He wouldn't see her unless she also quit. She did. When they received their housing voucher Teddy told her to leave him, that she'd have better luck finding a place alone.

His extensive prison record, he said, would hold her back. Why would I leave you when you helped me get clean? she asked him.

With Katrina at work Teddy awakens alone. On his off days, he hustles with the instincts he honed scoring drugs. He found twenty-six helmets from the dumpster behind Cycle Gear one night. Abandoned shirts, pants and jackets he sells at swap meets fifty cents to a dollar. Jewelry, iPhones, he finds it all. He buys aluminum cans from homeless people, a penny a pop, and sells them to recycling centers. He has \$250 worth of cans in the Winnebago. The cats squat on the sacked piles like royalty. His babies, Teddy calls them. Coils of tattoos snake down his arm and both sides of his neck. Braided hair down his back. Not like he was when Katrina met him but filled out. Buffed. A presence. He stops shoplifters busting out the back doors of Target with carts full of stolen stuff. One man yelled at him, At least let me keep the shoes! He didn't. Teddy runs Othello Avenue.

Robin knows a lot of people, even a few with homes. There's a woman she works with now while she waits for the postal worker to get out of rehab. She helps her raise a two-year-old granddaughter. The girl's mother runs the streets. This woman, the grandmother, used to live on the streets. Just got a place. Everybody Robin knows needs a little bit of help, and she's not afraid to help herself. Robin loves to work. Never once was she on welfare. Always found some kind of job even if it was only day labor. She passed those values onto her daughter, now thirty-years old living in Colorado working as a teacher's aide. Married with two kids. Robin can go out and see her anytime but she ain't no beggar. She'll visit when she

has money. She's never been like the guy she sees now on the sidewalk by the shopping center, flat on his back, using his T-shirt to cover his face from the sun. No, never that bad. She always had a tent, a stove, and a good place near a highway or in a canyon when she got tired of the cramped conditions of her car. Police charged her with vagrancy more than a few times. She probably still has bench warrants from all her citations. Was it vagrancy or trespassing? She doesn't know. Whichever, it's not worth the time of any cop that's not an asshole to bother her about it. She's met all kinds of homeless people: the desperate, the meth heads, and the general trouble kind. One guy slammed her face with a rock in a Starbucks parking lot in Clairmont. Crazy. What did she do? Nothing. Still sees him jabbering to himself. Robin knows she's a mess but she's not crazy. A little touched maybe. Takes that to survive out here.

Steve has a 1973 sHonda CT90 in a carrier on the rear of the RV. Sweet little ride. Nice orange job. Sort of a keepsake, he guesses, from his good, younger days. He was into motorcycles as a kid. In high school, he rode a Honda Cl 175. He loved the way it turned, getting low to the road. Wind in his hair bugs, in his teeth. It was all that. Not a team sport, really, motorcycling. Just him and his bike and the road. All that. He moved up to a BSA DB350 and then a Yamaha RD 400. It was fast but heavy, it felt like he was riding a bus. He traded it for a Yamaha RD 350. Smooth better handling. Nimble. An extension of himself. His wife Sandi would sit behind him, arms wrapped around his waist. First date with her was on the last day of his senior year in high school, 1979. Pretty as all get out. Captain of the drill team. They had a history class together. Married in 1985. He scrolls through old photographs on his phone. There he is in a blue helmet showing all his teeth in a wide grin; there he is crouched low over the handlebars; there

he is posing with a white Labrador retriever, his two young sons and Sandi, her mouth open with the same tooth dazzling smile he has.

Steve stopped riding after he crashed his 350 in November 1988. He was out with his buddies on California-78 and Banner Grade when they stopped for a break.. A beautiful day. One of those clear days where the sky stretches forever. The road ran into a flat stretch flanked by scrub and desert. Steve had a sip of a friend's beer, put his helmet back on and said, I'm going to see the rest of this road. Sightseeing, staring at distant mountains going eighty miles an hour. Not paying attention. He skidded, lost control and hit the pavement striking his head, brains scrambled. He remained in a hospital for three weeks. Sandi had just given birth to Jacob three months earlier. Steve tried to return to work but he couldn't focus on any one task for very long. He forgot what he was doing almost as soon as he began it. At home, he tried to help Sandi with Jacob. He understood he needed five scoops of formula to make his bottle but he couldn't remember how to count to five.

He lost his job but found another as a maintenance man with a packing company. His boss wrote down what she wanted him to do so he wouldn't forget. He was named an employee of the month one year but was laid off a short time afterward. In 2009, after years of taking odd jobs, he went on disability. Eight years later, he found a love letter to Sandi in the glove compartment of her car from another man. Steve called her all kinds of names and she slapped him and he shouted, Hit me like you gotta pair, bitch! She moved out the next day. He remained in the house until 2019 when they sold it, and then he moved in with a woman he had met on an online dating site. After two months and endless arguments, he left her and stayed with Nicole and her husband. When they left for Washington, he settled into his RV. He doesn't know where his money from the sale of the house went. He believes the IRS took thousands of

dollars for back taxes but he doesn't know why and amid all his junk he can't find any documentation to confirm that. He cashed out some of his savings with the idea of moving to Mexico but he thinks he left the money in a bag somewhere or did something else with it. Whatever. He doesn't have it. He knows that much. Some days, he scrolls through his phone and looks at old family photos. He sends angry texts to friends condemning Sandi. *She's a narcissist, cheated. I discovered her dirty, little secret.* He looks at pictures of his bikes like a lover. My beloved RD350. My beautiful RD 400. My gorgeous Super Sport 750 Ducati.

This morning, he considers the mess inside the RV. He has an older brother, Joe, in Las Vegas, a retired maintenance man. Move in with me, Joe has suggested. His son, Joe Jr., runs a pest control business in San Antonio. Steve could work for him. They've talked about it but he can't decide. Should he move to Las Vegas and be with his brother or San Antonio and work for Joe Jr? He doesn't know. He feels so overwhelmed sometimes his head hurts. Today, I'll throw away trash, he tells himself. He needs to do something.

A damp breeze tosses crumpled food wrappers across Othello Avenue. Pigeons strut, pecking at the ground. A slow moving semi-truck rattles a rusted sewer lid as it turns into the driveway of Wentworth Automotive. The driver swings out holding a clipboard and walks with a determined stride toward a door. Clouds collect in the distance above downtown .

A man pauses by Mike's car.  
Two guys tried to break into my ride.

What they look like? Mike asks.

No idea. Had gray hoodies. When they saw I was in it they ran. Thanks for the intel.

Be careful, the guy says.

Same to you.

Mike sighs. A tweaker robbed him at gunpoint not too long ago. Ninety-five percent of the time Othello is quiet but not that day. Bastard got seven dollars, his eyes the size of dinner plates. Fucking tweaker.

Maybe it was payback for his own drug-addled days. When he was twenty-seven and doing speed with his sister, her neighbor, also a speed freak, accused him of abusing her fourteen-year-old daughter after he told her he had no dope to give. She hangs around your house a lot, she said. Maybe that's because you're fucked up all the time. She filed a complaint and the police arrested him. A public defender told him to plead guilty and she'd get him five years probation. You know what they do to child abusers in prison if you're convicted? she asked him. Scared, he took the deal. He thinks now that his lawyer screwed him to make her job easier. He checks in with the police once every thirty days. Has done that for thirty-six years. Nothing else on his record but parking tickets. He can forget about finding housing and a job. A background check will take him out faster than he can say, I didn't touch that girl. Othello Avenue allows him a kind of peace. Here he experiences no judgment.

Teddy scours neighborhoods on blue days, the days of the week when households put out their blue recycling bins. He knows the hotspots. One week he made \$1,000, and he and Katrina bought the Winnebago. He was ten years old when he arrived with his mother in San Diego in 1993, refugees from poverty

and civil war in Ethiopia and devout Muslims. His mother tried to steer him away from the street, but he saw drugs as a fast way to make money and followed a different path than the one she had chosen for him. He had money and women until he didn't. Before he met Katrina, he lived for four years camped in a parking lot. He has two kids in grammar school, one son at Georgia State University. His wages are garnished for child support. He doesn't complain. Past is past. He won't say more. Doesn't need just anyone to know his business. He lives for the future. He changed course, follows a different path.

The cats in the Winnebago settle on the dashboard and watch Katrina walk toward them after a coworker dropped her off from work. She opens a door and they rub against her ankles until she scoops food from a bag into their bowls. After being on her feet all day she would like to sit and relax but she knows if she does that she wouldn't get up again. Instead she finds a broom, goes back outside and begins sweeping the sidewalk, her way of showing appreciation for being allowed to park there 24/7. Teddy found a perfectly good generator in a dumpster that she'll use later to power a vacuum and clean the Winnebago. They purposely work opposite shifts so one of them is at the RV at all times to prevent a breaks-in. Once they move into their apartment, they'll try to work the same hours so they can spend more time together.

When she lived on the street, Katrina spent her evenings at a soup kitchen downtown. After she quit using drugs, she stopped by to show the staff she had changed. She wore makeup, had on a perky pink blouse and designer jeans. Teeth fixed. Told everyone to call her by her full name instead of her street name, Trinny. She wasn't that person anymore.

It'll be so good to get off Othello. People drive down it at seventy miles an hour, tow trucks barrel ass. What if someone hit the Winnebago while she was in it? There was an accident one time in the Target parking lot. A guy's car got smashed in a hit and run. Katrina heard the noise inside the Winnebago. The guy whose car got hit was dazed but unhurt. The airbag had knocked him almost cold. At first he didn't know where he was. She comforted him until the police came. He was so grateful that he invited her to his beauty parlor and did her hair.

She rummages for a jar of peanut butter to make Steve a sandwich. He forgets to eat sometimes. And Mike and Robin. They might want one. She won't be back here, she knows. She won't forget about them, but there's no need to return. She'll no longer be bound by the experience that now connects them. Being homeless isn't a group sport but they do look out for one another. So, while she's here. While she's homeless. Sheltered homeless, as social workers call it because she lives in a vehicle. She supposes that sounds better than plain old homeless but whatever they call it, it still sucks. A distinction devised by people who haven't been on the street, she's sure. She reaches for a loaf of white bread, removes six slices. After she makes the sandwiches, she puts them in a bag maneuvers around the cats and steps outside.

Thank you, Steve tells her in a breathless voice that reminds her of a child.

Thank you, Robin says.

She stops at Mike's van.

Thank you, he says taking the last sandwich.

I'll see you tomorrow.

I'll be here.

Shadows spread over Othello Avenue as late afternoon progresses into evening. A clear night concealing in its depths the sounds of desolate, unsettled sleep in the cramped confines of vehicles. Except for Katrina. She looks at the clear, night sky and stares into the light of one star until its yellow glow is all she sees. Her mind clears. She dreams in that kind of emptiness. Dreams quiet dreams of a yard, birdsong, and a cute little garden. Something small. Something clean. Something safe.

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## **New Essay: To Honor a Hero by Claudia Hinz**



2017 MCAS Miramar Air Show

It's story time at the base library here at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, San Diego, home to the 3rd Marine Aircraft

Wing (3rd MAW). A girl in a pink dress and sequined sneakers toddles after her mother into the children's room. They are greeted by the singsong voice of the librarian, who welcomes them into the circle of other children and their parents.

The base library is spic and span. The architecture is '70s style, with a flat roof and concrete walls. On the display shelves, new hardcovers shine in protective plastic sheathes. The walls of the library are decorated with paintings of Marines: Marines bowing their heads against a sandstorm in Iraq; Marines in an Afghan village, conversing with elders; an Afghani man fingering prayer beads.

Miramar's Outreach Officer, Second Lieutenant Fredrick D. Walker, leads me into a conference room next to the children's reading room. Lieutenant Walker is courteous in a way that seems old-fashioned. In one day on base, I will be called "ma'am" more than I ever have in my entire life.

Second Lieutenant Walker has arranged for me to meet with First Lieutenant David Guerin, a pilot with the Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron (HMH) 465, also known as Warhorse. Lt. Guerin flies the CH-53E, the largest and most powerful helicopter in the world. He was a colleague and good friend of twenty-seven-year-old Captain Samuel Durand Phillips, who was killed along with the entire crew when their helicopter went down in a training exercise in the desert north of Miramar on April 3. Also killed in the crash were Captain Samuel A. Schultz, 28, of Huntington Valley, Pennsylvania; Gunnery Sergeant Derik R. Holley, 33, of Dayton, Ohio; and Lance Corporal Taylor Conrad, 24, of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A Naval investigation is underway. No one will speak on the specifics of the crash.

Lieutenant Guerin could be out of central casting with his high and tight, his standard green utilities ("cammies"), his dog tags snug in the laces of this boot. He looks to be in his mid-to-late twenties, not much older than my own son. It is a

jarring realization: the majority of the Marines at Miramar are men (and a handful of women) in their twenties. A whole base of young people, whose daily training involves risks that I have never once faced in my fifty years.

Lieutenant Guerin does not ask why I'm here. All he knows is that I want to write a story about Captain Samuel Durand Phillips, a man I've never met, who grew up in the same small town in Oregon as me and graduated from the same high school my three children attended.

"I really miss Sam a lot," Lieutenant Guerin says. "He was one of the most gentle people you could ever know." A civilian employee tiptoes into the room to retrieve boxes. Before she closes the door behind her, I hear the children's librarian singing in the adjacent room. Lt. Guerin grasps the black bracelet on his wrist. It is a remembrance bracelet engraved with Captain Phillips' name and those of the three other Marines who were killed in the crash.

Lieutenant Guerin was not scheduled to fly the day Captain Phillips and his crew were killed. Instead, Guerin was back on base; he took the call that reported the CH-53E helicopter had gone down. It was his job to call in fire and rescue teams. His eyes cut away from me. He shakes his head and swallows. "I'd been to that area," Guerin says. "That area" is the desert near the Naval Air Facility near El Centro, California, where many military training exercises take place—the "austere" conditions mimic the challenging "improvised" landings Marines may be forced to make in combat zones.

I ask Guerin if he hesitated to fly after the crash. He pauses and then says, "No." I ask if his friend's death has changed him. "Yes," he replies, after a pause. "It created a desire in me to be better at my job...it added fuel to the fire." Guerin tells me Phillips was "a good pilot...smooth on the controls." He was a relentlessly hard worker, regularly staying late to plan flights, arriving on base early to review flight plans and

double-checking every detail. He was also incredibly smart, a quick study of new syllabuses for pilot qualifications. Guerin says Phillips would have made a great instructor because he was “passionate about teaching” and “loved teaching Marines.”

In spite of what I’ve heard about the exhaustive preparations required before every flight, no matter how routine, I am curious whether Lieutenant Guerin will concede to some failure, human or mechanical. “Do you do anything differently now before going up in the air?” I ask him.

“Yes.” He pauses again. “I make sure I leave my family the right way.” He says he can’t discipline his son before he walks out the door. Every time he says goodbye, Guerin tells his family, “I love you and I’ll be home soon.”

He looks away again. “You can’t take for granted the life that you have...you have to have your ducks in order in case something happens to you.”



Two CH-53E Super Stallion helicopters from Helicopter Combat

Support Squadron 4 (HC-4) pass over the island during a flight out of United States Naval Air Station.

Like most Marine pilots, Captain Phillips attended Officer Candidate School after college. He graduated from the University of Idaho and commissioned with the Corps. After OCS and flight school, Captain Phillips chose to specialize in the CH-53E and pursued additional training specific to the aircraft. On Miramar's base are F/A-18 fighter jets, C-130s, enormous carriers which trundle as if in slow motion through the sky; MV-22 Ospreys—a hybridized tilt-rotor aircraft with the versatility of a plane's fixed wings and the flexibility of a helicopter, able to take off and land on a dime—and, last but not least, the CH-53E. The Super Stallion of the sky.

The hangars housing these aircraft line the southern border of Miramar. The base is much like one sees in movies: a little city unto itself, although not nearly as big as nearby Pendleton, home to 70,000 military and civilian personnel. Military Police guard the entrances to Miramar's base, and there is a steady stream of cars coming and going. Many are civilians employed by the Department of Defense. There is a commissary for former and active military personnel and their families, retail stores known as the PX or post-exchange; medical clinics; online learning centers for Marines working toward a degree; playgrounds, a sports bar, gyms; Dunkin' Donuts, a Taco Bell, and a Starbucks under construction. Unlike Pendleton, most Marines of the 3rd MAW and their families live off-base, but there is a small complex of barracks, which, from the outside, resemble college dorms.

Marines in varied uniforms jog on sidewalks outside the flight line, which is wrapped in concertina wire. Today, F/A-18s are parked on the flight line. President Trump stood in front of these fighter jets back in March of 2018 and addressed the troops of Miramar, promising to replace the aging fleet of Super Stallions and introduce new "weaponry that we've never had before or seen before."

Outside the officer's quarters, a flag with three stars alerts everyone that a three-star general is on base. A Marine's rank is fundamental to every exchange. Officers are addressed by the enlisted as "sir" or "ma'am" and typically saluted. As Marines approach us, my escort, Second Lieutenant Walker, checks uniforms to identify rank and look for the "shine" of the enlisted service personnel's stripes.

"Rah, Lance Corporal," he says when an enlisted Marine passes by. To the more senior Executive Officer of 465, he says, "Ma'am."

We pass through security check points and enter the building of the HMH-465. The men and one woman, the executive officer, wear green flight suits with the symbol of their squadron, Warhorse, on a badge over their right breasts. When we head out to the hangar, I am instructed not to report how many CH-53Es are associated with the 465 squadron—it's a matter of operational security—but suffice it to say, there are more than a few.

I had watched videos of the CH-53E on YouTube, but it isn't until I'm standing next to the Super Stallion that I realize how truly massive it is. It would be more appropriate to call it "The Beast." It's hard to imagine how it gets off the ground, let alone lug 32,000 pounds of cargo, fifty-five Marines, artillery, and tanks. The aircraft is one hundred feet long and weighs more than 33,000 pounds on its own. It is designed for combat assault support, which means weapons can be affixed to the rear, but its main purpose is to bring in supplies, artillery, and troops, and to get Marines out. The 3rd MAW did all of these things in 2002, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, in their support of the 1st Marine Division. Crewmembers say the '53 is "all about the guys on the ground."

Typically, this helicopter has a crew of four, including two pilots—one commander, one co-pilot—and two additional Marines to scout the ground during flight. The Super Stallion is so

large that in spite of its sophisticated instrumentation, Marines must be positioned along the side and rear of the cabin to assist the pilots in eyeballing the terrain from open windows. The enormity and heft of the CH-53E presents a whole host of challenges when it comes to flying the aircraft, to say nothing of what it takes to land one. Every crewmember has to rely 100% on a high level of training. When I asked Lieutenant Guerin why he chose to fly this particular aircraft, he described a "crew mentality": "you have to trust the people in the back, and the guys in the back have to trust the guys up front." This dependence on one's fellow Marines is not so different from other Corps jobs, for which only the most rigorous and grueling training prepares a Marine for war, instilling faith that every Marine has each other's back. Preparing the '53 for battle requires rehearsing different flight patterns and training for a variety of landing scenarios. The training is inherently dangerous, and yet, as Guerin notes, it "builds safety" by "mitigating risk in the future." "If we didn't train to do this stuff all the time, we wouldn't be ready."

The "Ready Room" is where I meet First Lieutenant Jason Burns, who was the schedule writer with Captain Phillips on his last flight. Schedule writers take the flight plan, designed in weekly meetings, and then review every single detail regarding the assigned crew and the aircraft itself. It is an extensive and exhaustive process, from making sure that each person onboard has the proper qualifications for that particular flight's training exercise, to confirming that every safety feature has been reviewed at least twice. A pilot or crew member who is congested or was up all night with a newborn could be sent home at the last minute, the flight cancelled. Every single precaution is taken, every risk assessed, and yet, as Guerin quotes the Navy, "If safety was the number one priority, no plane would ever leave the ground." Risk is part of the job, and while it is assiduously assessed and minimized, it is always, always present.

Lieutenant Burns says Phillips was a solid pilot who was fastidious about details. He was tough on himself and would beat himself up if every single aspect of a flight didn't go perfectly according to plan. And yet, off duty, Phillips was a "light-hearted and easy-going" guy. "Everyone loved him."

Burns was teaching Phillips to surf, and while they didn't get much time off, Phillips was really taking to the sport. Mostly, Burns says, they just played around in the white water while Phillips got the hang of standing up on the board. Burns fingers his own black remembrance bracelet. "I had to remind him not to look back at me when he got up on his board," Burns says, smiling. Phillips was always turning around for approval, always with a huge grin on his face.



Pacific Beach, San Diego

Leaving base elicits a strange feeling. Within 1,000 meters, I am back in the civilian world, but it feels like another country. The vegetation is, of course, the same; rows of palm trees bend in the dim light of low cloud cover. Second Lieutenant Walker takes me to a Denny's where I'll wait for my Uber. Walker hurries around his truck to open the door for me

and thanks me for my time. A few minutes later, the Uber driver pulls up. Like the taxi driver who picked me up at the airport, this driver has never set foot on base, although he has driven along the perimeter countless times over the years. Like other neighbors of Miramar's 3rd MAW, he may look up when he hears the F/A-18's roar or the Super Stallion lumbering off to the desert to practice landings on "unimproved" land like where Captain Phillips and his crew crashed. Civilians live side by side with the servicemen and women of the base, and yet, there is little, if any, intersection between these worlds.

Back in downtown San Diego, the news is all about the NFL's decision to fine players who kneel during the National Anthem. Sitting down for dinner in the Gaslamp district, I look through my notes of my day on base. Behind me, a noisy table clinks glasses, and I turn around to see them throw back shots. It is happy hour, and I assume that they are colleagues glad to escape the office. They seem to be celebrating. One woman stands and dumps a handful of plastic bracelets in the middle of the table. They are rainbow colored. The other people wiggle their hands through the bracelets, while the gift giver explains why she chose them. "I got one for my son, too." she says, explaining that there is a blessing that goes along with them: "You are precious. You are loved. You are blessed." The guy to her left says, "Aw!" before planting a kiss on her cheek. I look out the window in time to see a woman on a scooter crossing the intersection. A giant tote bag printed with the American flag hangs from her wrist.

I am aware of my own hand circling my opposite wrist. Part of me wishes I, too, had a memorial bracelet like those worn by Lieutenant Guerin and Lieutenant Burns, but I've never served in the military. No one in my immediate family has served. And I never met Captain Phillips, although I'd like to think that at some point I crossed paths with him in our small town. I have friends who knew and grieve him; coaches, parents, and

their grown children, who loved him and remember him as a standout athlete, the ideal teammate, and just the nicest guy. When I learned of Captain Phillip's death, I tried unsuccessfully to get the flags in our town lowered to half-staff in his honor. I thought there should be some physical reminder of him and who he was, how he chose to live his life, how he was willing to die in service of this country. It's why I'd like a bracelet, why I'd like everyone in our small town to wear a bracelet with Phillips' name on it, to remember what we owe him and his crew, what we owe the Marines who at this very minute are going up in the Super Stallion.

When I go onto the 3rd MAW's Twitter page, I see the photos of troops returning from a six-month deployment in Japan. On the tarmac, Marines in green flight suits squat with arms outstretched as their children race into them. There is a photo of two children holding a poster with small red-and-blue handprints that reads, "These are the hands that prayed for your safe return."

And for those who do not return safely from deployment, from a war zone or a training exercise in the desert, what are, as Woodrow Wilson once asked in a cemetery in Suresnes, France, "the unspoken mandates of our dead"? What is our part to play, our due to the men and women who risk everything, who put service to their country ahead of their own families, every day? If we choose not to serve, what must we, in turn, do? Insist on improved healthcare and healthcare access for veterans and their families? Protest sending troops to wars we'll never win? Support organizations that work with combat veterans and their families who are coping with post-traumatic stress? Is any of this enough?

Boarding the plane home, I wait behind a man in sand-colored fatigues. His backpack looks heavy. It is covered in badges naming Helmand Province; one sports the bony jeer of a skull. When the soldier turns a little in my direction, I say, "Thank you for your service." And without missing a beat he replies,

“Thank you for your support.”

While in flight, I think about the mother of the little girl in sequined sneakers back in the library on base. She must have been a wife of a Marine. I wish I had thanked her, although I don't know what words I might have chosen to acknowledge her sacrifices, her willingness to endure the uncertainty and worry every time her husband goes up in the air. I wonder if she knows the smell of the 53's cockpit, if she's seen the rosy glow of hydraulic fluid on the cabin floor, the worn leather on the pilot seats, the stretchers folded up against the side of the cabin. I wonder what she feels every time her husband walks out the door, every time he hugs them goodbye.

Back home, the news continues to roil with debate over the NFL's policy on players kneeling during the anthem. Twitter is full of thoughtful comments, some from veterans about how they fought to defend our freedom of expression and support athletes' choices to take a knee to protest police brutality. And yet, I am left wondering if the gestures of professional athletes are insufficient. While their protests may be an important expression of their constitutional rights, they do not presage real or significant action. There are other, more outraged voices on Twitter, but even the most compelling and well-articulated arguments are merely performative, and we scroll ever on.

There is a black and white photo of Captain Phillips in the obituary that ran in our local paper. He looks different to me now. I still don't know the color of his eyes. Lieutenant Burns told me Phillips didn't like the cold of the Pacific and wore a wet suit when he surfed. I try to picture him, sleek in his black suit, smiling back at his buddy, the sun reflected in his eyes. I picture him now just above the cloud cover, over the terrain where the Super Stallion lumbers by, rehearsing a mission to help. I think of the bracelets, the Marines' in metal and the civilians' in plastic. I wonder if

words are ever enough to memorialize the sacrifices of those who step up to serve.