

New Fiction from Adrian Bonenberger: “American Fapper 2: Still Fappin’”



I know what you’re thinking. What could this story possibly be about. Let me catch you up.

First of all, you’re wondering whether I shot Angela’s kid or Angela. The answer is: I shot neither. I shot a jihadist who spotted me. The next half hour was a blur of sniping, shooting, and explosions. Here’s how it ended: me bursting into Angela’s room and disarming her. I don’t remember many details about what happened to get me there, but I remember quite clearly what happened when I entered her bedroom. She tried to shoot me with her AK, it missed, and I wrenched it out of her hands. She tried to attack me with her fists, and I held her by her arms.

“Angela, it’s me,” I said, pausing her furious assault, but sparking no recognition in her blue eyes. I removed my helmet like Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*. “It’s your neighbor, from high school. I’m here to rescue you.”

In fact I had been sent there to kill her, but the plan changed. You’ll be happy to know that I made her my wife, and adopted her kids (we weren’t able to find her jihadist husband, I heard he joined up with ISIS later, after Angela became my girl). Now they’re at Choate, and me and Angela have a couple kids of our own.

Big changes, huh!

This story isn’t about Iraq, though—not the parts from the

first story, or the parts from when I went back to do more sniping in Mosul in 2017. It's not about my happy marriage to Angela either, though that's somewhat relevant. No, this story is about what happened when, after a long and illustrious career, having just retired, through a strange series of coincidences and serendipitous happenings I found myself in Ukraine, fighting against Russia's wicked and immoral invasion.

In Ukraine, where I encountered the greatest test of my life—one that nearly ended me, and from which I emerged triumphant only by the barest of margins.

How to set the stage for Ukraine better than to explain that my heroic rescue of Angela from the clutches of evil jihadists wrought in me a profound and lasting change? A change that, given what you already know of my sniping aptitude, probably won't be all that surprising... that's right: after marrying Angela, it was no longer necessary for me to jack it before killing some bad guy or another.

Throughout the various places I was deployed with the Navy SEALs and then later Delta, Special Activities Detachment (SAD) and a Task Force that occasionally pulled me up for off the books black ops missions, I did not fap once during a mission. People in those units already knew me as the "American Fapper" owing both to the fame of my story (with which you're likely familiar) and my unimpeachable combat record. But as is so often the case with fame and the things that bring people notoriety I had already moved on... I was no longer "fapping," nor did Angela's prodigious sexual appetite leave me much energy for anything beyond recuperation. I would look forward to two- or three-month deployments as only these were able to give me the time and space to adequately restock the vital energy I needed to do the level of sex Angela required to a standard that I felt was acceptable.

It got to the point where I could barely even remember the person who'd needed to rub one out before achieving the quiet clarity required to make a 900m headshot kill without flinching. Who was he? What odd neuroses consumed him? It was like thinking about a fictional character or trying to recollect the optimism and enthusiasm of a Christmas morning during childhood.

Countless missions later, I'd been promoted and aged out of combat operations. Angela didn't mind and neither did I. Closing in on retirement with two bad knees and a broken down back, the desk job I had once regarded with revulsion and fear came to represent a goal. Nothing pleased me more than to think about quietly retiring to my hometown to teach history or maybe join the police force. As I remembered, and observed during trips back, the sleepy town was ideal for older people to wind down their final days.

The pent up and volcanic energies of my youth, satiated and slacked by the accomplishments of my adulthood, no longer compelled in me a reckless gallop for the unknown. I was admired within my company of peers, and that group was (who could disagree?) objectively a company of heroes.

This is all to say, nothing artificial pushed me to Ukraine; it was not an escape or a restlessness. The circumstances of my life were pleasant, comfortable, and satisfying. I was perfectly content.

Then Putin invaded.

In 2014 I'd done a training hitch in what Ukrainians call "polygon," the name for a training area, somewhere in its north. It was an off the books rotation, I'd taught a strange crew of old and young men how to do sniper activities. I'd done training missions before all over the Middle East but could honestly say I'd never had a group ingest my lessons so

quickly or completely. In fact, one of the older soldiers, a 55-year-old man named Yura who'd been in Afghanistan with the Red Army, taught *me* a couple tricks about concealment that stood me in good stead. That hadn't happened in a long time; I considered him a master sniper and a peer, though his rank was that of a regular sergeant. Their promotion system was a little wacky.

My time in Ukraine gave me a sense that this was a serious people, and I never completely forgot about them, especially as they fought against the Russians over the next years. Occasionally I'd get a note from one of them, inquiring about my health or sending an update after a particularly fierce battle. My training of them seemed to have a profound impact on their development and confidence and I tried to offer them support and conversation as I could.

One of the updates, in 2019, came from Yura's wife; Yura, it seemed, had been seriously wounded in an artillery strike in a town called Avdiivka. She related the details of his injury – the loss of his left (non-shooting) arm – asking for small monetary assistance and I thought, not for the first time and not for the last time, how different a war like his was. Getting injured or killed by a battery of Russian 300m rocket artillery pieces was never a conceivable end for me. Shot by the Taliban or AQ or ISIS, maybe, but a bomb or rockets? Forget it.

The Ukrainians were in the kind of war I'd only ever imagined or watched on TV. Even the battles for Mosul paled in comparison. I thought about this, and wondered at their ability to keep fighting against the Russians. We wired him \$1000 which his family said was a godsend. Several months after his injury and with the help of a prosthetic, Yura was back in uniform and carrying his trusty Dragonuv rifle.

I thought about that, too.

There had been a foul energy building in the world. A bad moon. Even so, when Russia invaded, I was surprised. I didn't think things like that could happen anymore.

Angela's parents, who admired me (especially her father), were nonetheless owing to their German roots somewhat skeptical of Ukraine, and I would even go so far as to say passively pro-Russian. At least in the sense that they'd totally written off Ukraine once Russian tanks crossed the border.

This prejudice against Ukraine and for Russia was deep-seated with them. Angela's grandfathers had both fought in WWII and I think after Germany's defeat were inclined to view the Russians and Soviets both as horrible and paradoxically also at the same time superior to Germans – the Russians had proved this on the battlefield. To resist or defeat the Russians was seen somehow as impossible, or not worth the cost.

They swore (Angela's father, and her mother supported him in this) that Russia would have the whole of Ukraine in two weeks. I told them as respectfully as I could that the Ukrainians would fight, knowing the people I trained, and fight they did; bravely, honorably, and against all odds, successfully. The invasion was parried in the north and south, then pushed back. In the east, however, it turned into a brutal shoving match. Mariupol and Melitopol were lost. The war itself darkened.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The first weeks of the war the Ruhrs went from seeing things their way, to seeing them my way. I shared photos that Ukrainian friends sent. Then I shared photos that friends of mine, folks who'd retired or gotten out years ago, started taking. They'd gone over to join the International Legion or volunteer. very quickly, some of them stopped coming back, either committed to the fight or dead somewhere.

Those photos and the stories you probably all saw in the media had a dramatic impact on me. Simple and humble men, good people, standing up to what everyone knew was certain death and winning, making death itself uncertain. Defeating the bullet, the red horde, standing up to it chest to chest and stopping it cold.

It got so I couldn't stop thinking about it, and then thinking about going over to do something, to help. I cleared it with Angela, who wasn't thrilled, but who basically understood, and I reached out to Yura, who was serving in the Azov Battalion. He got back the same day. "Come on over," he said on Facebook.

I probably should say a few words about Azov. You read about them in the news and in Russian propaganda where everyone in Azov is supposed to be a Nazi. I can't say how things were in the past; the symbol they use looks like SS lightning bolts, and everyone there (Yura included) just about admitted that the unit was founded as a neo-Nazi paramilitary (funded, somewhat confusingly, by Kolomoisky, a Jewish oligarch) in 2014. But times change. By the time I got to Azov, in March of 2022, it was a top-tier volunteer unit in the national guard, composed of experienced veterans and motivated volunteers. Maybe something analogous to the US Army Rangers. They took their tasks seriously and had obviously trained and prepared for the fight that was unfolding around them in Mariupol. Nobody was "far right" in the sense that Russia or pro-Russians in the west attributed to them. That was all old-guard Azov; people whose influence in the unit was to tell stories about 2014 (and those stories were quickly eclipsed by the actions of 2022 and 2023).

Why didn't I go into the international legion? This is an excellent question. Mostly, I had no sense of what it was as an organization. If the Ukrainians had found a man to lead it, that might have been one thing. Certainly there were

individuals – Westerners – who were suitable for the job, and had reputations that might have imprinted discipline and unity on the organization. But these individuals were never recruited – nor, as I understand it, even asked – who’s to say whether a Petraeus or McChrystal would have even said “yes” to such an uncertain proposition? In any case, the organization was shrouded in opacity and mystery. As a SEAL, I instinctively mistrusted such an organization...

How did I get to Azov? By helicopter. Things weren’t as difficult as they’d get in April, but it was still pretty tight. I flew to Bucharest in Romania, crossed the border, took a car to Odesa, and from there, hopped a series of cars to a point that was still contested across the Dnipro, where two MI-8s were loaded with ammo and personnel. Mine had a Soviet-era camouflage paint job, and flew low, below treetop for much of the journey, until at night we reached the city and our drop-off point.

These flights were extremely risky, though I happened to be lucky; neither of the helicopters on my flight were shot down or even received much harassing fire. In the very early days, Russian soldiers hadn’t learned to shoot at everything, and owing to their local air superiority, they assumed our helicopters (the same model as their own) were Russian, though that changed later. The pilots were, like so many Ukrainians, veterans of many conflicts and much combat. The pilot on my helicopter was, like Yura, a veteran of Afghanistan, and had also been employed as a contractor in Iraq, in 2007. Small world, I thought.

Disembarking from the helicopter, my knees and back groaning after the ride, I helped unload the ammo and equipment quickly, then loaded five casualties aboard– everything was done with great urgency for reasons that would soon become apparent – and two English-speaking soldiers hustled me into a basement as the helicopters took off. The entire operation from landing to liftoff took less than five minutes.

Five minutes after that, artillery came crashing down around us, plastering the courtyard and the surrounding buildings with 152mm shells. It was a storm the likes of which I had never before endured, and it lasted for almost 15 minutes straight. They must have put an entire battery to the task of destroying the helicopters; sadly for them, the Mi-8s were long gone.

This was it, I thought as the dust settled. Real war; the kind I'd always imagined. Not gun battles, the likes of which I and my special operations comrades had touched during the invasion of Iraq, and encountered sporadically since. No—this was authentically and unarguably war, Mars walking up and down streets in BTRs and tanks, swinging his red sword and laughing joyously as it struck business, apartment, car, soldier, and child alike. It was chaos.

For a moment, during the artillery barrage, I had even experienced something I never expected to encounter – concern. Had I made a mistake, coming here? Would I ever leave alive?

Using my American optimism and iron Will, I easily shook off that morbid thought. These were Russians, not supermen. They had advantages in personnel and equipment, but who knew better the price and blind spots of pride better than a Navy SEAL... those vulnerable areas were things I could exploit as easily as shaving errant hairs from my face in the mirror.

The soldiers brought me to Yura that night. I was equipped with a sniper rifle taken from a dead Chechen, one of Khadyrov's henchmen (Azov had ambushed him in broad daylight as he walked down the street with a squad of his soldiers), and given the four magazines of ammo they had for it, totaling 120 rounds. "Make each bullet count and look out for Chechen snipers," Yura said, shaking my hand with his good hand.

"I will," I said, though this was unnecessary.

Yura made a jerking off motion, then winked. "American

jerker," he said. "The best."

"Number one," I said. The nickname didn't bother me, and I didn't bother to correct him – it was Fapper, not jerker, or masturbator, both of which I had heard. Getting hung up on that particular always felt like a waste of time, for one thing, and for another, appearing to care about anything usually produced the opposite result from which one hoped, in the military.

I chatted with Yura and his boss, and got a basic sense for the A0. We hammered out a plan for where I could operate, and how to get in touch with Azov if I got cut off (as I planned and hoped to do – one does one's best sniping behind enemy lines). They gave me a manageably light ruck with a couple days of food and water that I would replenish during my forays through the city, warned me again about the threat of Chechen snipers, I grabbed a few hours of sleep, and set out into the early morning before sunup.

Mariupol – what to say about the city. People told me after I returned home that it was a formerly Greek, and this was true up to a point. The city was built on the site of an Ancient Greek colony, but the modern city was a much more recent phenomenon – and attempts to "Hellenize" its identity, similar to attempts to retroactively Hellenize other parts of Ukraine in Crimea and on the Black Sea were inventions by Catherine the Great and other Russian leaders hoping to connect their nation's history more firmly to posterity.

What I saw in Mariupol was a shattered city; nothing of Greece, or anything beyond pro-Ukrainian spirit among the residents, a desire for peace, and a lot of Russian targets dancing through rubble.

Yura had explained to me how the Russians would attack, and I figured out pretty quickly a solid plan for taking as many of

them as I could. First, I'd set up a position adjacent to where I knew there would be a firefight, but offset by 150-200m, preferably with a nice bit of stand-off from streets directly adjacent to the fight. When Russian soldiers popped up, I'd track one, and as soon as the shooting started I'd shoot, my fire masked by a machinegun or tank, then retreat from my wall or apartment or window or rooftop. I'd say my hit rate was around 100%; I can't say for sure about the wounded / kill rate, body armor or helmets might have cheated my bullets, but as I understood from media coverage afterwards the Russians provided very little field medicine to their soldiers during that stage of the invasion, and even a relatively minor wound could result in a kill. In this fashion I was able to hit about 10 soldiers a day without taking any fire.

For about a week I was able to keep this up, old and battered as my poor body was, and in my head I started to think that I was probably informally closing in on Chris Kyle's mark. As we were working, though, we were also falling back – always retreating – the noose slowly closing around our neck. It dawned on me that, American and rather notorious in certain circles as I was, doubly so as a sniper, my odds of surviving captivity were pretty slim – and the means by which they'd dispatch me were almost certain to be unpleasant.

Block by block, house by house we fought, and at some point during that second week, the Russians seemed to figure out that I was there. Maybe a prisoner talked, maybe I had worked enough squads that folks sort of figured out the routine. I suppose it was inevitable. Still, not knowing bothered me; I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong, so I could correct it in the future.

By then I'd shot (again, I want to be careful to caveat that I never stuck around long enough to see the result) nearly 100 Russian soldiers, and going by the killed/wounded ratio my guess is that at least 50 of those had been kills. But I

really can't say for sure.

Some of the kills I'd seen – the Chechen fighters Kaderov sent didn't always like to wear helmets for some reason, and I headshotted about a dozen of them – those, I know I killed. There was something familiar and comfortable about those kills; I suppose the targets reminded me of Taliban or ISIS, with their beards, and swaggering overconfidence. I didn't headshot many of the regular Russian soldiers. Most were wearing helmets, and even a lousy steel WWII era helmet can deflect a bullet at the right angle. Russian soldiers I tried to killshot to the gut, I suspect with some effectiveness.

I noticed that *they* had noticed me, or were aware of my presence, when near the end of the second week, squads began scanning windows and rooftops before charging into an area. It could be I suppose that they had encountered snipers in other, different locations – that it had nothing to do with me, personally. But there they were, looking – seeking. And where soldiers look and seek, where they take precautions, one can be sure, there are other snipers lurking – Chechen or Russian.

My numbers fell – I had to change my standard operating procedure. I needed the break, anyway, my body had unlocked new ways of experiencing fatigue and pain. Now I wasn't plinking soldiers or officers – I was in counter-sniper mode. By any reasonable measure my work in this department was exceptional; as soon as I started looking, I found the new or unseasoned or experienced but not battle-tested snipers in their usual spots, and was able to take them out using precisely the same trick that I'd used to shoot soldiers. The snipers I knew that I killed, as everyone was headshotted while they looked for me, or someone like me. One. Two. Six, I tallied them all.

It took me about a week to kill 10 snipers, and by then, I

felt a kind of confidence that's difficult to describe. I knew – the way one knows that a table is a table or a tree is a tree – that I was the best sniper in the city; something like a master of the place. Nobody else in the city could do what I was doing. Furthermore, nobody could, now; the opportunity had come and gone, the low hanging fruit was almost all gathered, picked up from the grass with the minimum necessary effort.

The Russians moved in my area only with great caution, perhaps with something bordering on terror. Many people believe that the word terror is synonymous with horror, but this is not the case... horror is a type of extreme fear, whereas terror is spiritual or religious, the state one enters when confronted by the divine. People would peer and creep where before they had run. Snipers were rarely seen at all; more often, what would happen now was tanks or APCs would spray the windows of upper floors whether fire was coming from them or not. Artillery fire and rocket artillery fire was applied liberally on similar logic. The Russians and Chechens had encountered mortality – death, in the form of my steady hand – and they did what they could to destroy instead of fighting the war incompetently, as they had before. Rather than evolve as an army, they devolved – they were little better than heavily armed gangsters with artillery.

Even under these conditions I was still able to work. I tripled my precautions and began hunting, firing opportunistically and with as little rhyme or reason as I could muster, like a serial killer throwing detectives off his scent. In this way I was also able to replenish my ammunition somewhat, which was down to critical levels. One day I took the uniform from a Russian soldier and infiltrated far into the city, taking a terrible risk (I spoke no Russian or Ukrainian) until I found a headquarters, then crawled in the window of a former bank, walked and lifted myself up a set of stairs, my worn muscles afire with exertion, and (finally) set

up in a room across from an emergency exit that fed out onto the roof of an adjacent building. I waited until someone important appeared, canoed him, then made good my escape as the HQ erupted in gunfire and confusion.

This audacious act (one of many) was, though I did not realize it at the time, to create the conditions by which I would encounter my greatest test of all. Jogging along my escape route, all I could think of was the surprised expression on the large, bulldog-faced man – colonel? General? - who had until he met my bullet been under the mistaken impression that he commanded a unit, a group of men, a space in which his authority was absolute.

This very lesson was nearly imparted on me scarcely a day later. Our defensive perimeter was shrinking by the day, collapsing onto the massive Azovstal factory-fortress where Azov regiment and many Ukrainian marines would make a last stand. Almost as soon as Russia invaded again, Azov had begun preparing the factory as a redoubt of last hope, stockpiling food, water, ammunition, and everything necessary to withstand a siege.

Between the factory and the city was a fetid swamp, which as the ground rose to the north, turned into a ghetto or shantytown. Then, more substantial buildings emerged, and one could say that the city itself began, atop the ridge line. We held that, and about a half a kilometer further.

Ill omens had arrived as the sun rose; a murder of crows had flown overhead as I moved toward my sector, the zipper on my jacket got stuck halfway and I realized I'd need to discard it, and "Yankee sniper go home" had been spray painted overnight on the wall of a prominent building. With a start, I realized that it was the 15th; the Ides of March. When I reached the line of contact to set up a position, struggling

to move a table into place quietly, one of the two magazines I had remaining slipped out of its pouch and onto the floor. My pouches were customized for my rifle's magazines, and the narrower Soviet-era magazines used by the Russians and Chechens were an imperfect fit, which drove me crazy.

In this case the accident was serendipitous... the magazine slipped out of the pouch, and as I bent to retrieve it the concrete wall where my head had been an instant earlier sprouted a deep divot.

I'd been fired upon; a sniper – a talented sniper – had me zeroed in. I grabbed my rifle from the table and knocked the table over for concealment, pocketed the magazine, and made my retreat; another two bullets punched through table behind me as I left the room, scrambling on my hands and knees and barely avoiding an ass full of splinters or bullets.

I didn't stop in the hall; I made for the staircase and engaged my evacuation route immediately. Just as I exited the building, it erupted – a tank had begun pummeling any room I could be in. I went through a couple buildings and paused, then moved to the first floor of an abandoned house to take stock and recuperate, gulping in air like a drowning man, ragged with adrenaline and vitality.

When I checked my gear, I saw that there was a bullet hole in the collar of my uniform's jacket. That's how close it had been. Sheer luck, and I'd made it out alive.

My first rational thought, examining the situation calmly, is that the sniper had been waiting for me. That was the only explanation. They'd set up to catch a sniper, and I was the sniper to catch. So they'd tried to kill me, personally.

It felt personal, anyway.

Three choices confronted me. One: chalk it up to coincidence and go back to work – work that still urgently needed to be

done. Or two: go into emergency protocol, and hunt this specific sniper. Three involved telling Yura I was done, but I wasn't ready for that. No, now something needed doing, and a head needed taking.

I'd been tracking snipers and taking them out for nearly a week, but this was different. A high-level sniper – elite, certainly. They'd laid a trap for me, and sheer chance had robbed them of the kill. I had to acknowledge that before anything else. By all rights I should have been dead. God had preserved me for some other purpose, though I had no idea what that purpose could be.

I made a quick survey of the area and calculated what would be necessary to spring my own trap. First I'd need this person to think that I was taking the first course of action. Leaving was leaving – staying was staying. I'd have to gamble that the sniper I was fighting – a Chechen? Had to be – would both feel cheated by fate, and suppose that I was the type of proud person who'd go out for revenge and/or ignore the incident as bad luck. Besides, we had to protect our territory. Just that day we'd lost an entire block to the Russian forces to our west.

This gave me a day, three streets or so, worth of houses to make my move. I'd have to get as high as I could without going onto a rooftop (where drones could spot me), but not so high that tanks would bring me under fire before I could find the sniper stalking me. I'd have to predict the rate of advance of the Russians, and also predict how the sniper would predict my own movements. There was a lot of guessing involved. I've never played chess, but this felt a lot like it. I felt like both a King. Or a Queen. Or both. You get the point.

Over the next several hours I scoured our territory looking for the perfect place to spring my plan. Nothing seemed

adequate – where my room was good, there was no suitable place for an opposing sniper. Where my enemy had excellent fields of fire (like those he'd encountered in Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria, I assumed, trying to get into his head) there was no good place for me to establish my counter-position.

Just as I was ready to give up, I found the position that made perfect sense. It was 1500, and I had plenty of time to prepare a fake position using a mannequin, watching over a likely sniper location *but not* the location an expert would take – this was the bait.

I clothed my doppelgänger with my uniform and rifle – everything needed to be the same – and concealed them. Yura had brought up another sniper rifle (sadly there were more rifles, now, than people to use them), an old M14, one with which I was familiar owing to time spent deploying to assist the Army earlier in my career. As the fighting around us raged I zeroed the rifle and made sure that its optics worked. Actually, it felt great in my hands – brought back memories of a younger me, one who had their entire future ahead of them. A me who never could have imagined that one day I'd end up with Angela.

Yura also handed me a set of thermals, which I'd need to spot the sniper's infil, though not to shoot. I'd make sure the rifle was already in position, so when he showed up that night to take up his position, I'd be ready to pay him back the favor he'd done me.

Wrapping myself in a Mylar poncho, I found my place in a room behind a shot-out window overlooking what had been a rich man's balcony. The overwatch was itself concealed by a large and well-manicured pine bush. It was an improbable location, which made it perfect – the sniper wouldn't, in the darkness, even know that it was there, and if somehow he did notice it, the angle was off from his perspective. I chuckled to myself. Once again, I felt in sync with the world and the city. As it

breathed, I did. As I exhaled, it did. Then I waited.

It happened at 0200. The city was quiet – sleeping, mostly, with sporadic gunfire erupting between soldiers and APCs, or artillery booming nearby or in the distance. I felt it before I saw it. The sniper entered the room; tentatively at first – moving delicately and with care – and I recoiled within my thermal-dampening suit reflexively as the sniper scanned my room, presumably with some cheap (but sufficient) Chinese knockoff. He hesitated – something compelled him to look more deeply at my position – and I thought, did I leave a chink of warmth uncovered? Had I walked into a trap of my own? Was this the end of “The American Fapper?”

But then, the sniper continued scanning, until they found my dummy position. I’d placed an electric heater under the mannequin and concealed it, so while visible, barely, it was not conspicuous. When the sniper started setting up to shoot my double, I knew I had them.

Once they were settled on a table, I got ready to end things – no point in extending it, I thought, I’d had plenty of luck on my side and didn’t feel like testing God twice. Just before I lay the thermals down to site in the M14, though, a movement by the sniper startled me. They were undoing their pants and – was it possible? Were they about to do my move *on me*?

A wave of anger rolled over me, but before I had time to process the uncharacteristic emotion, I was struck by another, even greater shock; the sniper, as I could see from the means by which they were satisfying their vile urge, was a woman.

I’d heard of female snipers and knew the Ukrainian military fielded them (I saw none during my time in Mariupol but believe several were stationed there at that time), but for some reason it had never occurred to me that my own foe would be one – that the second greatest sniper in the city was, in

fact, a woman. One who had by rights killed me, but for a trick of fate.

The thermal could tell me that much, but I did not know anything else about the target; whether she was old or young, pretty, or plain. One thing was certain: she was observing a version of me that I had placed to entrap her, and had, and was vigorously pleasing herself.

Here I encountered my third shock of the night. I went to leave the thermals, shrouding myself in darkness, to take the shot with the M14, and... I couldn't. Suddenly, I was back in Iraq, paralyzed by an inability to take and therefore make the necessary shot. My target was writhing in ecstasy before me, helpless, and there was nothing I could do.

Should I retreat, I thought? No – I probably wouldn't get another chance like this, certainly not after she realized the ruse. This was it. Do or die. I was trapped, paralyzed. There was nothing to be done.

Unless...

Then I realized. Of course. It had to be this way. I could explain to Angela later. Or maybe not. Maybe this would never come between us. Maybe, it was this one moment, this last target that the universe was offering me, some kind of redemption for my past, here in a fallen city.

Without touching the rifle, I did my thing, quickly and efficiently. I finished, then slowly felt for the M14's cold wooden buttstock, laying my hands on its worn grains, bringing my cheek to the correct place, lining everything up. A flash in the sniper's window briefly illuminated her in the scope, allowing me to move the crosshairs ever so slightly over her (as I could see it) short-cropped blond hair and yes, attractive face, and placed my last shot as a sniper square between her gray eyes.

The story of how I managed to escape Mariupol before its fall, and Yura and Azov's brave stand alongside Ukrainian marines in the Azovstal fortress are stories known to all, and don't bear repeating. For myself, I'll always look back on those days as the pinnacle of my sniping career. Sometimes you get lucky. I did. Twice!