

New Fiction from Andrew Snover: Dana and the Pretzelman



The Pretzelman died yesterday. He was shot on his corner half a block from his home, and if he has family they'll pile stuffed animals, and one of his boys will spray-paint *RIP*, and someone will take his corner. Old ladies will sometimes mention him, but that will die out as well, and the neighborhood's memory of him will fade like the colors of the teddy bears' fur and the sharpness of the letters *RIP* and the print of the newspaper clipping in its vinyl sleeve stapled to the telephone pole.

Dana knew the Pretzelman. She was a fifteen-year-old girl from up the block. She knew of the Pretzelman before he had the corner, because her eldest brother had fucked the Pretzelman's cousin for a few months, but the two of them never met until the Pretzelman took the corner and began to make himself known.

He stayed on the corner all day, unlike the men who owned neighboring blocks and took breaks on the hot days to drive around in their cars with their music and air-conditioning blasting, just to make themselves seen. He just walked down in the mornings and stayed there all day, every day. He and his boys would talk to each other, and stare down cars whose drivers they didn't recognize, and sell to those who bought.

Dana first met him one morning when her grandmother sent her out for a forty of Olde English. It was a hot Sunday, and her grandmother's favorite treatment for the brutal heat of their home was to drink something cold. The house smelled of death from the time that a great-aunt had declined and passed in the living room. Because the family had no money to keep her in a hospital, and because her bed couldn't fit up the stairs, for six months she had been in the center of all activity in the house. The stench of her sheets and her disease had slowly permeated everything, and then she had died. Dana liked being sent to the store for forties and half gallons of milk and packs of Newport 100s because it got her out of the smell.

She walked down the street, looking out for any of her friends who might be awake and out on their stoops. She didn't see anyone as she walked the block, so she crossed diagonally through the Pretzelman's intersection toward the store that stood on the corner where he usually stood with his friends. The small white awning read, "Complete Grocery and Deli," and there was a sign that said, "Hoagies Snacks Cigarettes We Appreciate Your Business."

Dana knew enough to know what groups of boys said to girls walking alone, and she knew that her age was no longer a protection now that her body had changed. That day there were three others besides the Pretzelman. As she walked up to them, and they looked at her flip-flops and her shorts and her beater and her purple bra underneath, she prepared herself to deliver an insulting reply to their comments, but no one said anything. The Pretzelman smiled at her, and she passed through them into the store.

She walked up to the glass, spoke loudly, "Olde E," to the distorted image of the lady on the other side, passed through the slot the five-dollar bill her grandmother had given her, waited for her change and the brown bag to spin on the carousel to her side, and left. As she passed back through the group, the Pretzelman said, "Have a good day now," and she didn't say anything.

That day the heat endured, so Dana was sent back to the store two more times on the same errand, and by the last trip, she had smiled at the Pretzelman. He told her to have a good night.

The Pretzelman lived in an abandoned house around the corner that he and his boys had fixed up a little bit. He said hello to the old ladies. He threw his trash in the can, at least when he was on his corner. Dana wasn't sure if he made his

boys do the same, but there wasn't much trash on his corner compared with the other three of that intersection, so she thought that he did.

He got a puppy from a man he knew who bred pits. It was a brown-and-white dog with a light nose and light eyes. He walked it on a leash down to his corner in the mornings, and then he tied it to the stop sign, and it stayed with him and his boys. They fed it chips and water ice and other things that they bought from the store. The old ladies sometimes would stop and pet it.

Dana loved dogs, and she asked the Pretzelman one day if she could pet it, and he said, "Of course," so she petted it and talked to it. After that, on trips for Newports and chips and hug juices, she would always kneel down quickly and whisper in the dog's ear, "Good pup," or "I love you." The Pretzelman would smile down at her, and she would tug on the dog's ear and then run in and finish her errand. One day as she knelt down to pet it, she looked over at a parked car and she saw a pistol sitting on top of the rear passenger side tire.

She got more comfortable around the Pretzelman through her relationship with the puppy. She asked him one day if she could see his gun. He chuckled and he said, "That stuff isn't for girls like you," but when she asked again a few weeks later, he reached into the wheel well and picked it up. He did something to it that make it rasp and click, then handed it to her. The weight of it frightened her, and she stared at it in her hand, thinking in a haze that it must weigh more than the puppy. She put her finger to the trigger, and the gun was so big that only the tip of her finger could reach around. She stood up and pointed the gun at the Pretzelman, and she heard her own voice say, "What now," and she saw the Pretzelman's face drain.

Her hand shook and her knees shook, and the Pretzelman took one step forward and snatched the gun from her hand and

slapped her in the face. She didn't cry out, but she shuddered and cried a few tears and said, "I'm sorry, I don't like that." She had scared herself as much as she scared him, and the Pretzelman saw this, and he said, "This ain't no joke. Why you think I said guns aren't for girls like you."

She talked to him a lot about guns after that. They sat on the stoop of the house next to the store, and he told her that most boys held their left arm over their face while they shot with their right because they didn't want to see what the bullets did. He said that only the crazy ones or the liars said they didn't cover their face. She asked him if he covered his face, and he didn't answer for a minute. Then he said, "Not the first time."

He took her behind his house to shoot the gun, because she asked him if she could try it. They walked through the high nettles and the broken glass and the needles, and he said, "Watch out for dog shit." He made her stop and then walked ten feet and set a bottle on the back of a chair and came back and handed her the gun and said, "Here." She pointed the gun at the bottle, and her body jerked, and her ears rang, and the smell made her eyes burn. She looked at him after the first shot, and he said, "Try again, but hurry up 'cause they'll call the cops."

She shot six more times and hit the bottle with one of the shots, but she couldn't tell which one because the cracks and the flashes didn't match up. The wall behind the bottle was soft quarried stone with lots of mica, and the divots and craters where her bullets hit were a fresher shade of gray than the rest, and they sparkled in the light. She thought through the roaring in her ears that if someone were to shoot the whole house, it would look newer than it did.

She told people about the Pretzelman because she was proud to know him. She told her friends about him and introduced a few of them to him. One Saturday night she had her friend Kiana

sleep over, and they whispered about boys until late. "He don't say anything ignorant to you, and he's even nice to the old ladies," Dana said. Kiana rolled her eyes.

"You know he's too old for you. You wouldn't even know what to do when he started to try out that nasty shit."

Dana shrieked and rolled over onto her belly. Then she said, "I would too know what to do. I would too."

That night after the girls had fallen asleep, they were awoken by a string of gunshots and then tires squealing. When it ended they ran to the windows and looked up and down the block, but they didn't see anyone. Kiana fell back asleep soon after, and Dana lay there for a long time listening to her steady breathing, thinking about situations that could be, and in them what she would do.

On her way to the bus the next morning at seven, Dana walked past the poppy store and saw the Pretzelman in his normal spot. He nodded to her, and she ducked her head. She felt a quickness in her chest and heard a buzzing in her ears. When she got on the bus, she tried to close her eyes and take a nap like she usually did on the way to school, but she couldn't find a comfortable position in her seat.

In English class that day, Dana's teacher talked about how the best characters always seem very real, yet a little too large for life. Dana raised her hand and said, "I know someone like that. He's got the corner on my block, and he has this nice dog. They call him the Pretzelman because his skin color is like the pretzel part, and that stuff he sell is white like the salt."

"He sounds like an interesting character," said the teacher. "I would enjoy reading a story about the Pretzelman."

After that Dana couldn't help but think of the Pretzelman as a character. Everything he did was covered with a thin gauze of fantasy. One of the boys on the block wanted to work for him, but they already had a lookout and the boy was too young for any of the other jobs, so they sent him on little errands. One of these errands was to take the bus to Target and buy sheets, because the Pretzelman was tired of sleeping on a bare mattress. Or at least tired of hearing his girls complain about it. The boy took the hundred dollars he was given and rode the bus for thirty-five minutes and went into Target and bought the sheets. The Pretzelman had said to him, "I don't need no change, understand?" The boy knew that the change was to be his payment for the errand, but in order to avoid looking like he was trying to profit too much, he bought the most expensive set he could find. He brought back a set of king-size sheets and proudly presented them to the Pretzelman, but they didn't fit the twin-size mattress. According to Dana, the Pretzelman didn't make the boy go back to Target and exchange them because the mistake had been his to not give the boy more specific orders. They made fun of the boy and called him King Size, and the Pretzelman slept on a twin-size mattress with sheets for a king. Dana looked at sheets the next time she was in Target, and she saw that the most expensive sheets sold there had a thread count of six hundred and cost \$89.99, plus tax.

Another time Dana walked down to the poppy store and came upon the peak of an argument between the Pretzelman and one of his girls. She was standing in the street screaming at him and making motions with her arms like she was throwing something at him. The motion was like a Frisbee, and the girl did it over and over again with each hand, and sometimes with both. But the Pretzelman, like a character in a different movie, was just standing against the wall of the store. He wasn't looking at the girl, and he wasn't looking away from her, and it looked to Dana like he hadn't noticed that there was anyone else there at all.

There was a certain face that the Pretzelman used when he was out on the corner, but this one was different. His normal stern-faced grill would crack sometimes. The corners of his eyes would crinkle up if he caught her spitting or stopping to adjust her belt or her shorts. His eyes would crinkle, and she would know he had watched her the whole time.

This face wasn't crinkling at all, no matter what the girl screamed about his shithole house and his dirty, grubbing life. Suddenly Dana saw him in the same pose, leaning with his shoulders against the wall and his feet planted, but the vista had changed. The tan car in front of him and the picket fence across the street with its peeling paint were gone, and instead he was at the edge of an enormous, planted field, looking out at the work he had done and the work yet to do. Or he was at the top of a rocky hill, and he was looking down at the river below, at the cattle or the buffalo. Or he was on the balcony of a high-rise, looking past the skyscrapers toward the lower buildings, the row homes, and the narrow streets that he owned. Or he was in the tunnel at an arena, waiting to be introduced over the loudspeakers. Waiting for the roar of the crowd. The girl in the street was still yelling, her hair and her cheeks shaking with rage. He could have been made of stone.

Dana tried to talk to the Pretzelman about how she saw him, what she thought about him. Every time she tried it, her words ran into the obstacle of his eyes on her, the smile starting to play in the corner of his mouth. One time she made it as far as telling him, "You know, you're nice. Really nice." She wanted to continue, but she could tell he was making fun of her when he replied, "Well, some people think so. I'm glad you think so."

In English class her teacher made the class do a writing exercise called "What everyone knows vs. What I know." Dana

continued the first sentence. "What everyone knows about the Pretzelman is his puppy, and his nickname." She quickly wrote a full page in her looping script, smiling as she pictured his eyes, his hands.

She was still going when the teacher said it was time to begin the second part. She wrote, "But what only I know is that he..."

She stopped writing then, and thought about what would happen if she wrote what she knew—really knew—about the Pretzelman. Or if she told it to him out loud. How would his eyes look if she wrote it—all of it—and then handed this letter to him, rather than turning it in to the teacher? When the class ended, her ellipsis was still open, waiting to be filled with what she knew.

Before long the Pretzelman died, and here's how it happened. He woke up on his mattress on the floor between the sheets he got by sending his boy on the bus to Target. He grabbed his gun from the floor next to his bed. He put the leash on the dog, and he hollered to the others to get up. He let himself out the back, which is what they always did so that the front could stay boarded up and keep its abandoned look. He walked around to the front of the house. He didn't carry the dog over the broken glass, as he had done when it was a smaller puppy. He might have waved hello to an old lady. He might have stopped to wait while the dog took a shit.

As he walked down the street, he heard the engine of the car roaring, and he looked up to see why someone was going that fast. He saw clearly the face behind the wheel, and then the tires screeched, and he saw clearly the other face in the back seat, before the bright flashes. He went for his gun, but the bullets spun him around and knocked him onto his belly, and his arm and the gun got pinned under his body. The dog ran off. The Pretzelman bled out onto the sidewalk while one of

the old ladies called 911, and his boys came out and saw what had happened and they ran off. Dana left her house to catch the bus and saw the cops taping off an area around a body that was covered with a heavy sheet too small for the whole creeping stain. She didn't know it was the Pretzelman until she came home that afternoon and her friends told her.

As she lay in bed that night, she thought about the dark red color and feared that she might never be able to think about anything else. She searched her feelings, wondering distantly if she was going to cry. She fell asleep thinking, but she slept well. It rained that night and the whole day after, so the stain was gone. The Pretzelman's mother placed the news clipping of his shooting inside a plastic sleeve and stapled it on the telephone pole, with a note about a reward for evidence leading to the killers. Before long the corner belonged to someone else, and there was a colorful cairn of stuffed animals piled against the fence where he'd lain, and one of the walls nearby read *RIP*. Dana noticed these things when she walked out to the store or the bus stop, and she passed them again whenever she walked back home.

New Fiction: “Old Wounds” by Therese Cox



The YouTube walkthroughs have names, like action movies or episodes of a serial TV show. *Judgment Day*. *Suffer With Me*. *Fallen Angel*. *Old Wounds*. If you were playing, you'd fire up your console, scroll through the list, pick your game, and go. But Tracey Knox doesn't play. She's only here to watch. One quick click and SchoolofHardKnox is leading the way through the war.

She's watched them all, headphones on, grinding through anti-tank fire, lobbing grenades at ditches, clamoring for weapons, hoping there'd be one, just one, with a voice-over and a *howzit goin'*. How else is she going to hear Geoff's voice? Flat Michigan vowels with those U.P. dips and stalls: a sound she doesn't get a lot of in New York. She's spent hours patrolling these deserts. It's only grown worse since she lost her job at the architecture firm. There's nowhere she has to be at 9 a.m. No project manager to look over her shoulder. No more designing cat fences for rich ladies in Connecticut. She is thirty-nine and can do as she likes.

There are thousands of views. Who was Geoff making these walkthroughs for? He didn't do voice-overs, didn't narrate, never popped up mid-scene in a Fugazi t-shirt, flashing his tats, to explain strategy. Each episode is like a movie he lived once and forgot about, one long jittery dream that Trace lives over and over.

"Old Wounds." She likes the sound of that one. He dies too soon in it but it's badass and medieval to gallop on horseback, brandishing a sword pried from a skeleton's ribcage. She clicks on the name and lets it roll.

*

It's Friday night at the Hampton Inn in DC. Tracey Knox is incumbent on a queen-sized bed, surrounded by plugs and remote controls. A screen flickers from her lap, lighting her face in flashes. Her eyes glazed, ears snug under industrial-sized headphones. She's been dressed in the same clothes for a week straight—baggy cammie trousers bought discount from the Gap, \$4.98, an end-of-summer deal, and a faded Jackass t-shirt. She's skinnier than usual. All week it's been nothing but sunflower seeds and Arizona iced tea, but then, the anniversary usually has that effect. At the moment she's knee-deep in a YouTube k-hole and doesn't care who knows it. Each fresh burst of gunfire grinds her guts with a bad longing. It calls back the barrage of explosions drifting down the hall from under Geoff's bedroom door. The on-screen desert had been Geoff's playground. Virtual Sergeant Foley, a stand-in for Dad.

Tracey's best girlfriend, Constance Lawson, is knocked up and across the room, embedded in a nest of Hampton Inn pillows. They've decided to do a girls' weekend in DC. Just the two of them, like the old days, one last hurrah before Constance, now Connie, becomes an FTM, or full-time mommy.

Connie had planned everything. Two queen beds and an all-you-

can-eat menu of reality TV shows and room service mocktails. Right now Connie's reading to Tracey from an upbeat email. Connie's writing a book about her experience of IVF, half memoir and half how-to. The future for mommy lit is apparently bright. She's landed a slick agent on the basis of a sample paragraph and outline and is already in negotiations for a book deal for her WIP.

"What's a W-I-P?" Tracey asks, slipping off one headphone.

"Work in Progress," says Connie, who's superstitious about names for unborn projects.

Tracey, for her part, has no reason to fire up her email on a weekend. She recoils at the memory of the last exchange before HR sent her the marching papers, a "reply all" that should very definitely not have been a "reply all." Tracey nods, says it sounds promising. She switches to half-listen mode and goes back to the screen.

On her laptop, a menu of a dozen other options pop up, all listed under her brother's screen name. She's stopped talking to people online after a Skype with their LA office went balls-up and cost Tracey her job. She's been living off her severance package above a tire shop in Greenpoint, buoyed by the salary of her Dutch bicycle-parts designing husband, Niels. Her job search is equal parts day-drinking, flirting with bartenders, and experimenting with the font size on her CV. If there's a café with free wi-fi, she's freeloader. Whenever either of her parents, divorced of course, gets her on the phone, Tracey says the same thing: she is pursuing other options.

"Do you think I should come up with a new name for TBD?" Connie asks.

"To be determined?"

"No, no, Trace, T-B-D. The Baby Dance. It's what the *What to*

Expect When You're Expecting to Be Expecting book calls sex."

"Why don't you just call it sex?"

"Because," Connie says, "That's so *louche*."

Connie reclines in yoga pants and places her hand on her swollen belly. She balances the phone on top and shows Tracey a new app, plugging in a set of hot pink earbuds. The app's main feature is the frantic liquid throb of a fetal heartbeat so Connie can eavesdrop on her unborn infant. The baby, in all its amniotic fury, pounding away. It is just a cluster of nerve endings and cells and life pushing blood through its fetal chambers, *but listen to it go*. The heartbeat hypnotizes her with its systole and diastole, evidence of its miraculous, furious progress. Connie is transfixed in the dull spell, fingers slack on the edges of her iPhone, earbuds shoved in, the better to hear the back and forth of the protean sludge. Tracey tries to ignore it but Connie insists. Through the wire comes a birdlike thrum, frantic and pulsing, the life that is both part of her yet apart from her—primordial—she is life-giving—this baby-to-be, sloshing over and over just for her, the sound (she makes Tracey listen. *Listen, Trace!*) going *mama mama mama* oh god.

"But Tracey, don't you think about it sometimes?"

Sure, Tracey thinks about it sometimes. The possibility of new life. The thing her friends are all doing, the thing she knows Niels wants. It'd be a beautiful baby: half-Dutch, half-red-blooded-American. Niels would have the kid on training wheels in no time. She could forget about the architecture. Embrace the FTM. Make their offspring her avatar.

But Tracey Knox pursues none of those things. She unhooks herself from Connie's app and slinks back to pole position, head hunched, knees curled, itching to get back to her trance. She's not even playing the game, a level way worse, just watching virtual violence, eyes glued to the stuttering

screen, explosions collapsing around her in bursts of orange and red, choppers snip-snip-snipping the sky above.

Outside the hotel room, DC lurks. Connie had come to grad school here. Tracey, dragging an art history degree behind her, had followed her out and spent a year mopping gallery floors, playing the mistress to a fastidious art buyer who lived in Dupont Circle. DC never spoke to Tracey in quite the same way it did for Connie. When Connie had first suggested it, that if they came to DC, Tracey could visit *the grave*, Tracey blanked.

"The grave," Tracey said, nodding. "Right."

As she fires up the next episode, she thinks maybe she'll look Danny up again after she gets back from DC, hit him up for a couple of cold ones and ask him more questions about what else he knows about Geoff. Now that she knows the story, or enough of the story. Maybe it's that she knows too much?

Blood and Gore Intense Violence Strong Language Suggestive Themes Mature 17+ Online Interactions Not Rated by the ESRB

Let's roll—

She adjusts the headphones so they're snug and then *wham!* she's back at the helm of the war machine, flexing assault muscles and tactical ops, leaping out of choppers as shrapnel rains from tall sheared-off buildings. Jump cuts, jittery exterior shots, implausible musculature and digitized MRAPs. Quick flash of landscape porn, desert mountains and desolate horizons, fade in then fade out, the Ken Burns effect plus amphetamines, amplified and sped up and pumped out, life through the barrel of an assault rifle. She hijacks a chopper and mainlines that view from above—*I don't see, I fly*—then *whoosh*, she's back at ground level, hand to hand combat, slow sexy focus on metal and skin and tattoo and blood. She swims and she flies with her entourage, industrial war machine overhead in twenty parts glittering. Down below in the rubble

it's all dirt and desert and fumes, the phosphorescence of foreign war, choppers rising up in clusters and scattering.

She's shooting lasers from what looks like a souped-up staple gun, exuding godlike luster in a landscape of smoke and red sand. She's busting into hideouts and blowing up bodies, dodging the splurge of vermilion enemy blood, no time even to blow on the smoking gun. Here she is no one, she is cranked up to full speed and smoothed down to her essentials—blood and muscle and armor—kicking down doors, spitting steel. She has no womb, no wounds. Tracey Knox is a killing machine, trained to close and destroy, breach and clear, dismantling all the architecture, trafficking in the invincible.

*

When Geoff Knox came back from his first deployment in Afghanistan, he was full of stories. They weren't usually what you would think of as war stories but more about things going wrong—stupid stuff, just everyday things: bad latrines and gravity-fed showers and pranks with packages. Over time the Afghan villagers had picked up certain American phrases. Sex was “up-and-down.” Bombs were “bang-bang.” The one word pretty much all of them knew was “killed.”

One day, Geoff said, there'd been a bomb in a neighboring village. The usual shit—IED—and their interpreter—their “terp,” Geoff called him—was off meeting with some village elders. So there's Geoff, asking around, trying to get a tally of the civilian dead. There was this one kid, maybe eleven or twelve, name of Omar, who spoke some English and was trying to translate. And the kid had told Geoff, “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.”

Geoff scratched his head. “Two killed, not dead? The hell does that mean?”

Omar kept saying it. “One killed, dead. Two killed, not dead.” It took Geoff some time to realize that by “killed, not dead,”

Omar was trying to say "hurt." The kid didn't know the word for "hurt."

There's a lesson in that now, Tracey thinks. Every wound, especially in the war, *killed* you. It's just that some wounds left you dead, and others left you alive.

I have two siblings, Tracey Knox says. She'll say it to this day, will say it to the end, whenever anyone asks. *I have two siblings, a sister and a brother*. One older sister: killed, not dead. One younger brother: killed, dead.

Tracey lost her brother, and her brother was in the war. At thirty-nine years old it was her saddest story. Some days it was her only story. Maybe she should just fix people in the eye and say, *My brother died in the war*. Or: *My brother was killed*? She's always hated the passive voice, hated the linguistic gymnastics she had to do around the topic of her brother, who was dead, and it had nothing to do with just causes. He didn't die in the war, he died during the war. And that's as close as Tracey will ever get to telling Connie the truth.

*

After 9/11, Geoff Knox marched up to Lake Superior State University to the fold-out desk. The Army recruiter had been a bemused bruiser who, learning he had an eager fourteen-year-old kid on his hands, didn't change much about his pitch. Geoff didn't tell the recruiter about his big sister Tracey, who was living in New York when it happened. The desk was busy that September.

The Soho firm had been Tracey's first job after architecture school. She'd landed a position with an architecture firm in the city and had been downtown when the planes struck the towers. She got to the eighth-floor window just in time to see the fireball roar through the second tower. Through glass she watched the haggard red stripes of flame rip the steel beams

and the confetti of paper and debris that had fluttered out of the twin towers from gaping black maws. She called home, unable to get through till almost midnight, called that night and every night after to talk to their mom and Geoff, trying to describe the scene. What does she remember? The smoke, mostly. There was the smoke, first the black plumes and then the blanket of white ash and then the nauseating waves of air for days after, the rank stink of rent steel and rotting flesh.

As for New York? Vigilance—that was the word on the street. That was the order. Be vigilant. But what did it mean to be vigilant? *Semper Vigilans*. You'd better know, because you were supposed to be it at all times. If you see something, say something. The city's nervous system ran on a code. Orange alert. Red alert. Tracey played into the system like the compliant citizen she was trained to be, reduced to stimulus/response. Tracey tried with the subway but she couldn't be underground. She started taking buses. Goddamn buses. They were inefficient and made her late. But she had to see the world through windows, had to be near the yellow tape so she could press it at the first sign of mayhem and get the fuck out.

The American flag hung in every window. Stars and stripes stabbed into every lapel. Passing strangers on street corners, or sharing an stuffy elevator ride, Tracey looked into their eyes and asked them with her eyes, *If I look at you, if I show you my humanity right now, can I stop you from blowing yourself up? Or: If this top floor gets blown to kingdom come, will you hold hands with me?* She looked down at a stranger's hand and pictured its entangled with her own. She pictured their two hands, severed, fingers entwined, lying on a pile of smoking wreckage. She saw the first responders finding their mutilated remains, heard the heavy goods vehicle carting off the load to Fresh Kills, all in the time it took an elevator to climb four floors and the stranger to scratch his nose.

There'd been the thing with the shoe bombs and the nitroglycerin. There'd been the anthrax letters. Investigating, Tracey learned the word *cutaneous*. Cutaneous, subcutaneous, airborne: it could get you any of those ways. Weeks of tension and indigestion. Ash and aftermath. Couldn't look at headlines. While Tracey Knox was commuting to work in Soho and coming home to hide in her Tribeca basement bunker, workers ten blocks south were down there shoveling through the rubble. Firemen, policemen, EMTs, contractors and volunteers, picking through smoking wreckage. Deadly particles seeping into skin, latching onto lungs. Outside the Century 21, finding actual human remains. But then somehow, over time, the terror here was wrapped up, boxed, and shunted back to its place over there. Till Ground Zero became just another construction site. Till the whole thing just deteriorated into a cycle of hearsay and fear—whispers and rumors—a ticker tape terror feeding the twenty-four-hour newsroom beast. Till the rumor of war had hardened into the certainty of war. A war that, fifteen years on, would know no end.

There's a longer history than the story she tells herself. But she still thinks back to that blue-sky morning. The day when, fresh out of Harvard, from the eighth floor of the architectural firm, she watched the towers burn.

Maybe Tracey feels at fault for the stories she has told. But the truth is, it didn't matter at all what she had or hadn't said all those years ago. All he had to be was an American citizen, clap eyes on those collapsing towers, and his mind would be made up. He would want to do something for his country. For his sister. For all the usual words. Freedom. Terror. These are laden words. Tracey doesn't get them, didn't then and doesn't now. She understands form and function, angles and AutoCAD, blueprints and markups. Geoff hadn't seen the things she saw. He lived in a different aftermath. For a while, he put off enlisting. There was that degree he'd decided he wanted after all. He was so close to not being a

part of it. That scholarship, Tracey thought, had saved him. But through four years of university, through a trail of tailgates and chemistry lectures and test prep on Red Bull and Adderall, he never forgot the towers. After all, Geoff Knox went off to war.

*

The third tour was to be the last. It is three years since Tracey stood in that moon-drenched kitchen and heard the story of Geoff's death, and she can't shake that phone call. Elyssa—it's always Elyssa who's the first to know everything—calls to tell her sister the news.

So it's happened at last. Their brother has died in Afghanistan. The first thing Tracey thinks when she get the news is that it's not Geoff who's died. She doesn't think of her brother dying in Afghanistan. She can't. She thinks of her brother, alive, in Michigan. She thinks of him back from basic training, planting green plastic army men on the Christmas tree for hide-and-seek the way they used to do as kids. The sniper was always the hardest to find, laying low in the bristles and garland, aiming his plastic gun at this ornament or that: the macaroni candy cane, the cradle in the manger. Or she thinks of her brother with skinned knees and gap teeth, climbing the crabapple tree in their old backyard. Or maybe she's remembering how he was the last time she saw him, at home on the couch at Thanksgiving, lean and muscled and laconic, eyes glazed after his second tour, dream-weaving his way through Call of Duty while she was trying to talk to him, you know, actually *talk* to him about his deployment. But she's hard-wired against accepting such bullshit, that her brother would actually go to Afghanistan and get himself killed, of all things.

All evidence to the contrary—in four days she'll be carrying that urn—and she refuses to believe Geoff's mortal. Won't buy that it's her little brother who died in the war. She's going

to watch him get hitched to some cute, fake-tanned Michigan chick and raise a crop of cornfed kids. He'll settle down in some government job, spend his weekends with his buddies at the Joe watching the Red Wings lose, eat red meat and wipe his ass with *Foreign Affairs*. Such news—her brother dying in Afghanistan—doesn't register. And as Elyssa keeps talking, the details really don't line up. In this story, there are no notifying officers, no Army chaplain. There are ER doctors and paramedics. She distinctly hears the word *Detroit*.

And so when it turns out that her brother dies but it's not in Afghanistan, that Geoff never went back on that last tour like he said he was going to, when it turns out her brother dies less than a mile down the road from DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital, that he's died all right, but it's in a squat with festering walls and peeling linoleum floors, when it happens that Geoff's been kicked out of the Army and OD'ed on oxycodone, Tracey tries to piece together the unbelievable story she's hearing with the scenario she didn't even know to imagine. And none of it makes sense.

Tracey books the flights from JFK to Toronto, Toronto to Sault Ste. Marie, pronto. She pays way too much for the tickets but what is she going to do, it's her brother's funeral. She flies back to Sault Ste. Marie with Niels, who is Dutch and has never been to an American funeral before.

One day after the phone call, just before she flies home for the funeral, Tracey meets up with Danny, Geoff's war buddy, and gets a debriefing in a Queens sports bar en route to the airport. Tracey rings Danny on their way to JFK because he's local and he'd once given her his number and said, *If you ever need anything, give me a ring*. The place reeks of Windex and buffalo wings. Tracey and Niels sit next to Danny at the sticky bar under flickering screens. They bear hug and order a round.

"You didn't know about Geoff's TBI?"

Danny blinks at Tracey, then at Niels, dipping a wing in sauce and gnawing chicken from the bone. Know about it? Tracey doesn't even know what the letters mean. Danny has to spell it out for her. Traumatic Brain Injury.

"Is that like PTSD?" she asks, timid. It's hard to make herself heard over the din of the bar and the Eagles-Patriots game.

Danny talks, gesturing to his temple with the chicken bone. "After the blast. He was bleeding from the ears, man. It scrambled his brains. He was all messed up. They had to send him off to the unit."

Tracey doesn't get it. Danny washes down the gnawed meat with a Rolling Rock and tells all. Things that didn't make sense before start to make sense. Geoff's fuzzy details about the last deployment. Her letter, stamped *Return to Sender*. And the discharge, unearned in Danny's humble opinion, of Other Than Honorable. Tracey feels her face flush. She hasn't touched her Jack and Coke. Danny, wide eyed, looks from Tracey to Niels, Niels back to Tracey.

"You don't know he spent that time on a wounded warrior unit?"

"Geoff's Humvee *got hit with an IED* and he didn't tell you?"

Well, and what if he didn't? That was always Geoff's way. If he was sick, he wouldn't admit it. Wanted to take care of himself, always did, didn't cry even when he was six and Tracey, who'd more or less brought him up, went off to college. And here's the big sister, not one but two higher degrees. Graduates from Michigan with honors, goes off to Harvard and can't tell when her own brother is lying about his last deployment. But why would Geoff do that that to her, to all of them? Who had he been trying to save?

Trace feels sick so they leave the bar early. They hail a cab on the parkway to take them to the airport. Niels loads her

luggage in the trunk. Tracey's eyes are hot with rage. The driver rollercoasters them to the terminal, and all Tracey can think about is their mom. Geoff's not going to have the military burial, that's one thing. Their mom had been hysterical about him going off to war in the first place, said she had a premonition. Now the premonition's come true, so good luck with that anxiety disorder. At JFK Tracey pushes her purse down the conveyer belt, is patted down by TSA, goes with Niels to the gate. There's that sense of being cheated. There's that Other Than Honorable. The discharge hung Geoff out to dry, now it's going to leave their mom without any benefits. Mom's on disability, their stepdad's a barely functioning alcoholic, and their dad, their real dad, oblivious in Grand Rapids with his new wife, will be no help at all. Remember when their mom was a successful marine biologist? Remember when Geoff was still alive? Tracey does. That life. What is it now but history?

At the gate, Tracey goes online to find out what's she's missing. She learns a lot of really awful vocabulary in the process, like the word *repatriate*, but she does gain some intel. It turns out when you take the whole foreign war component out of it the whole thing can be over and done in a lot faster than you imagine. The body didn't die in Afghanistan, so it doesn't have to be repatriated, it doesn't have to be flown into Dover on a military plane. A quick trip in a fast ambulance to the ER of DMC Detroit Receiving Hospital doesn't cost as much, and it's much quicker. You can place a notice in the paper days later of the general death and keep details quiet. All you have to say is "in a private ceremony" and everyone has to respect that. They won't ask, you don't tell. Except when it's your best friend involved, and you happen to lob her a fib. Then it gets complicated.

He wished to be cremated, so they honored his wishes.

She'd been distraught at the sight of the urn. Who wouldn't be? She'd always imagined it as an elegant container, a silver

goblet with a name engraved, displayed on a mantelpiece. This, though, was decidedly not that. This had been an industrial plastic tub stamped on one side *Detroit Crematorium* in an inelegant sans serif. The plastic lid screwed on and off. It looked like it held weed killer.

There'd been debate after the ceremony about what to do with the ashes. This was the Knoxes. Of course there was debate. The whole thing was ghoulish, Geoff's body stashed into a Ziploc in the *Detroit Crematorium* tub, but Tracey had wanted to give him the honors he deserved. And so the day before she'd flown back to New York, Tracey had unscrewed the lid and made off with a scoop of her brother's ashes. Is this the story she is supposed to be telling Connie over room service mocktails?

Because there's the story Tracey told Constance, the story she'd told all her friends. The one about the military burial, about Geoff dying in the goddamn war. And here is Tracey Knox, anniversary number three, stationed for two days in hallowed DC. From the Hampton Inn, Tracey Google Maps the directions: 2.3 miles from that cemetery. That great green ground of tended graves. She ought to do something. She ought to lay it to rest.

*

It's bone-chill weather, mid-November. Week before Thanksgiving. Tracey is stalking the grounds near Washington Mall alone. She gets to thinking about monuments. You can't avoid it. Here, Lincoln parked in an armchair on that grand staircase. There, that obscene obelisk, rising up out of the ground like Mother Earth with a concrete hard-on. Tracey takes it in, drinking coffee from a to-go cup, her hands in mittens. A couple of people with clipboards and smiles, college kids, come at Tracey on the curvilinear walkway wrapped in bright red smocks that say *Save the Children*. Tracey dodges them, staring at her feet as she hurries past. Does she have a few

minutes today for saving children? It would seem not. She cannot save children. She couldn't even take care of her little brother, the one child that had ever been entrusted to her. She let him go into that war. Is the people in the red smocks' plan to not let the children go fight wars in foreign countries? Because maybe she'd have a few minutes for that.

Tracey pitches her coffee in the trash and keeps walking, hands in her pockets. There's the packet of ash in her right pocket. She feels its uneven lumps through her mittens. She thinks maybe she'll find another Knox, a namesake, and scatter the dust there. But so far, no Knoxes, and the mission's making her sweat.

Tracey dreams, as she walks, about designing a monument for Geoff. Or no, monument isn't the right word. A memorial. She thinks back to her architecture school days and calls up a quote from Lewis Mumford. "The more shaky the institution, the more solid the monument." So, a memorial then. She can imagine it. There's a field lit in a haze. Lemon-colored light. Reeds and grass and stems. There's a crop of pink and red poppies, swaying and bending. She'd call it "The Poppy Field." It would be a vast stretch of land designed so you could walk through it. No sign would tell you not to touch the flowers or not to step certain places. You could press the velvet-soft petals of the poppies to your cheek. Or you could stand in the middle of the field and let the wind blow through your hair. You could breathe in the scent of earth, of sweet prairie grass and Queen Anne's lace. There would be no bodies buried underground. There would be no bodies at all, no ash, and no plaque to tell you what to think about. No why, no when, no who.

What can she say about the evenly spaced rows, the dignified engravings, the markers of moral purpose and patriotism? She can only wonder: Where is my brother? Where was I for him? She is insurgent milling through the manicured lawns. As she walks, she thinks about the memorial she wants to design, the

one with the poppy field, and thinks it shouldn't be called "The Poppy Field." It should be called "Old Wounds."

Tracey hadn't meant to tell Constance, those years ago, an untrue story about her brother's death. It had started as a story Tracey was telling to herself, a story she could use to comfort herself with, a story that he had died for a just cause. She wasn't thinking when she typed it into a screen and hit send, and then the whole story had gotten out of hand. Tracey doesn't know how to say it. That she never flew to DC for the funeral. That there had been no honors, no gun salute. That they'd scattered most of her brother's ashes in Chippewa County into the St. Marys River between Michigan and Canada. All Tracey knows is, she didn't tell the real story right away, and at some point—who knows when?—it had become too late. Connie, who has planned the whole weekend, has carved out a grave-shaped space into Sunday, assuming Tracey will want to use the time to visit her brother's grave in Arlington National Cemetery. And who is Tracey to say that Geoff is not buried there?

That morning, Connie had asked if Tracey wanted company when she went to visit "the grave." Now, coming back into the hotel room, cheeks flushed from the cold, it's all Tracey can do is turn to her best friend and say, "Geoff's not here, Connie." It's her attempt to come clean, and Connie misses it entirely. She thinks Tracey is being figurative, that it's something spiritual. So close to telling the truth, Tracey lets the confession drop. She hangs her coat from the plywood hanger where it swings, the packet of ash still sitting in her right coat pocket.

That night, Tracey crawls into the hard bed and snaps on the bedside light. She takes it out of its drawer, the little green Gideon's Bible. But all she's thinking about as she rifles through the tissue-thin pages is Geoff's copy of *The Art of War* and how she'd claimed it as her own. Geoff's secondhand paperback copy, underlined and dog-eared, is the

closest she's come to his idea of a theology. The book's not with her. She hears Connie's breathing deepen. Tracey puts down Gideon and opens her laptop. She opens a browser tab and searches Geoff's username until she finds what she's looking for. No graphics, no explosions, just a careful set of instructions. She reads through the list for "Suffer with Me."

Throw a knife at the guard at the post.

Spam the FIRE button when Woods climbs to the first guard post.

Survive enemy RPG blast which causes collateral damage (to buildings).

Her tasks, here, are clear. Destroy enemy chopper with mortar round. Destroy tank with anti-tank mine. Her eye scrolls down to the last lines.

Kill 8 enemies in the clinic.

Collect all Intel.

Do not die.

From *The Art of War* to Call of Duty, military theory boiled down to one order: Do not die.

And if you do?

Tracey dips her head, plugs in the headphones, goes back down into the Black Ops forest.

*

"All Hunter victors, this is Sergeant Foley. Prepare to engage. We're taking sniper fire from multiple directions."

"Prepare to engage, we're going in! Spin it up!"

The screen is flecked with blurs and drops of crimson. It's an

ambush. She moves forward but with difficulty. The explosions now have ceased to be controlled, now she surges forward with a deep nausea through the exploding mortar and shrapnel. Tracey hears the breath of the soldier come in hard, heavy bursts, so intense she can't tell if it's the soldier breathing or if it's her. A message flashes on the screen: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." The hands in front of her, her hands, Geoff's hands, stay set on the gun as they stumble deliriously through the wreckage.

They are under sniper fire. She sees clothes and rags draped on a clothes line, a banner on which something is written in Arabic. Her head jars with every lurch. It feels like she is under fire from the very infrastructure. Her hands don't leave the rifle. She falls into an alley between a chain-link fence and a corrugated steel shed. The sky is a smudge of smoke and rifle fire, the tracers of bullets garlanding the background. It feels like being drunk, stumbling to find a doorway she cannot find. Gunfire goes off but it's a muted spray. She can hear Sergeant Foley screaming directions through a walkie-talkie but she can't move her mouth to answer. Breathe. Breathe. The message flashes again, small, insistent: "You are Hurt. Get to cover." Geoff does not get to cover. Tracey is spinning with him, stumbling each inch forward. She cannot rescue him, cannot get him to cover. The screen is streaked with fog, her eyes stung with shattered glass, drops of crimson, this is the way the world ends, not with a bang but—

"Trace."

Tracers, rocket launchers. Connie is saying her name. How long has she been saying it? How long has Tracey been holed up in this hotel room in DC with her pregnant friend? There is nowhere to go. Her neck is clammy with sweat, her heartbeat going like mad, its pulse wild and lone and unmeasured. The screen is flashing but the sound no longer fills her ears. A desert stretches up to her feet, all the way up to the dull upholstery of the olive-colored couch, the beige wallpaper,

the styrofoam coffee cups. Her hands, shaking. It would be so easy to snap the laptop shut, but she can't bring her hands to do it. She's still waiting for orders.

Photo Credit: [the yes man](#)