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CALIBRATED TO INFINITY: STORIES FROM AFGHANISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of short stories told in the first person by an airman as he and his C-130 crew navigate a deployment in Bagram, Afghanistan during 2011. It is not the intent of these stories to function as ethical frameworks by which we can examine U.S. warfare in Afghanistan, but act as an access point to warfare that is not exclusive to the plight of the American soldier. Though fictional, the stories conveyed in the collection are informed by the author's previous enlistment in the United States Air Force. The themes explored are varied, including the tenuous relationship between U.S. service members and the Afghans who worked on base, unexpected monotony that comes with deployed life, the effects of war on both soldiers and civilians, and the status of the returned veteran in post 9/11 society.

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A Day at the Office

It was some day in early February. The power in my B-Hut had gone out during the night and I spent the waking hours of that morning huddled under several wool blankets. They provided no warmth; my teeth jangled against each other and I tried my best to still my shivering hands. They were a faded shade of purple, battered, bruised, calloused, labored. I could barely keep grip of my pencil; I was writing a letter.

Samantha wasn't exactly my girlfriend, but I think she liked blurring the line. A picture of the two of us hung from a strand of green 550 cord I strung across the room so that it canopied my bed. She was drunk and kissing my cheek while I smiled at the camera, a little drunk myself. It was the only picture with which I adorned my cramped corner of the B-Hut, my only reminder of home. I tried to scabble vague platitudes like "I'll be home before you know it" or "time will fly by" across the crumpled pink stationary she had sent me. She might not have been my girlfriend, but she was the only one who had written to me in the nearly two months I had been gone. My mom didn't, my sisters didn't, my friends didn't, only Samantha. I thought about how many other guys she'd be fucking while I was away: paranoia of a deployed serviceman unhappily wedded to his right hand, perfectly justified.

I heard the alert phone ring in Captain King's room and it made my heart jump through my shoulders before flooding my body with excessive heat. The Ambien I took the night before didn't get to run its full course before my shivers woke me. Groggy, pill hangover, not expecting the phone to ring, not at that moment. I heard King answer. "Acknowledged," he said and then hung up. Then I heard the creak of his door and he began shuffling down the narrow central hallway of the hut. I was already changing out of my PT gear and into the warmest fuzzy green socks I had

by the time he got to my room. His round, chronically smiling face peeked around the corner and said, “Omar, we’ve been alerted off of Bravo.” I was still finagling myself into my flight suit and responded with a nod and grunt. “Okay, meet for chow in ten minutes,” he told me. Always a good idea to get hot chow in before a flight—the MREs and Rip It’s on the plane hardly sounded appetizing.

I finished dressing myself. The long sleeve sand tee shirts were, thankfully, pretty decent against the cold and the socks returned sensation to my wiggling toes. I snatched my dog tags off the rusty nail from which they hung, ensuring my St. Christopher medallion still hung between them before draping the chain around my neck. My flight suit had filthy streaks of Humvee smudge and the acrid odor of hydraulic fluid plastered on it from the day prior’s mission. The locals took too long to do laundry and my other two flight suits were in no better condition. My holster and standard aircrew issue Beretta M9, always loaded, hung over the corner of my cot. Strapping the holster around my waist and grasping my Form F PDA, I was ready to go. I made my bed in about two seconds, pulled the cord to turn out the light, and left hoping I’d get back to it sooner rather than later.

It was snowing lightly. An inch or two had already accumulated atop the green sandbags lining the above ground cement bunkers and wooden B-Huts. The sky was platinum and air uncharacteristically silent in the fledging hours of that winter morning. I trudged through the snow and gravel on my way from the B-Hut community to the dining facility, occasionally stumbling by one of the shit puddles that pooled together in close proximity to the latrines. Ten years in this place and we still hadn’t improved the sewage systems—a literal shithole, how stupid of us. Still, the snow was a genuine comfort, a touch of home. In more than two years in the United States Air

Force, all I had heard from the older guys and NCOs was “the desert this and the desert that”. I got the looming mountains and white winter of Afghanistan instead.

I strolled through the chow hall line, its tile floors freshly mopped and stale smelling heating system on blast. Breakfast never changed. Powdered almost eggs and lukewarm hash browns were the order of the day; I passed on the soggy French toast and the extensive omelet line. The TCNs who worked the chow hall burnt the hell out of the coffee as consistently as the sun rises, but I needed it that day. I loaded my Styrofoam cup with enough cream and sugar to make my mixing spoon stand straight up. Then I grabbed a bottle of water, turned it upside down, and squeezed, exactly as we were instructed on day 1. No leak. The seal was intact. Not poisoned. Safe to drink. I nodded and said hello to the Afghan man standing behind the ice cream station as I walked past him. Someone told me earlier in the deployment that he was an old Mujahedeen veteran. He wore a constant expression of discontent, a small fire in his eyes that refused to go out. He stared at me for a few seconds, unblinking, and then nodded.

Captain King and Steve were already sitting and eating at a table near the door closest to the Ops building.

“Gents,” I said as I sat down to join them.

“You look like dog shit,” Steve said with a mouthful of French toast.

“Slept like it, too,” I said while peppering my almost eggs for some semblance of flavor.

“You gonna be okay to fly today, Omar?” Captain King asked me. His seafoam green eyes were alert, wide, attentive, the energizer bunny.

“Yeah, I’ll be straight once we get to preflight. I’m just happy those bastards didn’t wait the full 48 hours to finally alert us.” Steve and King both nodded. We went about eating for a minute or two. Our crew hadn’t sat a Bravo alert yet that deployment, but from what I had heard, Ops usually only used the 48 hour standby Bravo crew when something happened to another crew or an unscheduled mission came down the pipes last second. “Adam, they tell you what the mission was during the alert?”

Captain King shook his head from side to side, cheeks puffed out still chewing. He swallowed and said, “We have to wait until the Intel briefing.”

“Airdrop?” I asked him, unconvinced. Steve slapped his right hand against the table causing an audible thud and several confused glances from the locals cleaning nearby tables.

“Keep dreaming,” Steve said. I frowned, looked at my beaten hands.

“I just want one goddamn airdrop. Smardz and Trautmann each already have two,” I said, whining. The prospect looked less and less likely two months deep into the deployment.

The three of us ate quickly and headed toward the Ops building. Crossing through the chain link gate and over the dozens of wooden planks structured over yet more poo puddles, we made it to the building’s entrance, where our mail room was. I checked my box. There were still no letters or pictures or anything from my family. Boo hoo I thought; time to go to work.

Joe, Gary, and Fitz were already standing by the Ops desk checking out the flying schedule for the next day. We weren’t on it. I cleared a nervous lump in my throat. “Intel brief in 10 minutes, guys,” Captain King said. Gary and I exchanged looks that both suggested, *more than enough time for a cigarette.*

We had to keep our arms folded while we smoked, the biting air still chilling my rib cage. I didn't feel cold, but I was shaking. "Don't be nervous," Gary said. "You're more likely to die from this shit than anything we'll do out there today," he said pointing to the dying embers of his cigarette. I smiled at him. I hadn't seen Gary in almost a full day. He looked excellent, much better than at the start of the deployment.

"How much weight you lose since we been out here, Gar?"

"Fifteen fucking pounds, man. And I still crush a few Mountain Dews every flight," he said before taking another drag.

"Damn, you'll be all skin and bones by the time we get back. Congrats."

"Thanks. I can never get this kind of fucking gym time at home. I don't mind it here. It's simple." I closed my eyes for a moment and inhaled a deep drag of my Marlboro Red. What he said made sense.

"Can't imagine. Talk to the wife and kids lately?" I said.

"Yeah, Skyped my wife a couple days ago. Kids are good, my oldest got kicked out of soccer practice the other day for kicking another kid."

I snorted, laughed. "Jesus. Wonder where he gets it from," I said, grinning.

"Do yourself a favor, stay 20 forever." he said while stomping the butt of his smoke into the dirt, twisting his boot that looked more mangled than my flight suit. He looked like he had another snarky follow-up, but we were interrupted when Capt. King came outside.

"Intel brief, let's go," he said.

We went through the usual motions of sanitizing our flight suits of all identifying markings. We stripped our name patches, squadron patches, and MAJCOM patches off our flight suits and they went into our crew binder. The only one we left on was the American flag on our left shoulders. The officer leading the briefing was new: a tall, skinny, dark skinned Major who sounded like he was from Brooklyn, but I wasn't sure. He fired up the PowerPoint and began the briefing.

I missed the threat level portion at the outset of the brief. I always assumed it was the same. The ORM sheet came my way and I ignored what the Major was saying to fill it out. My name was always at the bottom. I checked everyone else's numbers: Captain Adam King, Aircraft Commander- 0; Captain Joseph Timmons, Co-Pilot- 0; Lieutenant Steven Hendricks, Navigator- 1 (personal reasons); Master Sergeant Gary Brown, Flight Engineer- 0; Master Sergeant Damon Fitzgerald, Loadmaster- 2 (personal reasons). I gave myself a 3 for insufficient sleep and handed the form back to Capt. King.

I finished just in time for the Major to begin the mission overview. "Around 0400 this morning in Mazar-I-Sharif, a suicide bomber attacked the south side of their MP compound on the German side of the base. Aside from the structural damage done to the compound there are three casualties." I clenched my jaw, tightening its muscles until my teeth hurt. "Sorry to say gentlemen, this is an HR mission. The payload and routing are simple enough. You'll take off out of Bagram empty, fly direct to Mazi and pick up the human remains, then transport them to Kabul, download, and return to Bagram for debrief. Questions?"

Not one of us made a sound. This was not only our first Bravo alert, but our first HR mission, too. I can't say it was all nerves, but the bony spot in my neck tingled and pricked each time I glanced at the screen and saw the exact spot where they had been killed. My face must have

belied my feelings because the Intel officer placed his hand on my shoulder. Without any reaction from me he said, “Nervous?” I twisted my neck around so that my gaze could meet his. His hazel eyes gleamed in the artificial glow of the fluorescent lighting and that’s when I noticed he had a small, jagged scar near the corner of his left eyebrow.

“I don’t really know. Maybe, I guess,” I said. I meant it. I had a job to do, that much I knew to be true and that was as complicated as it needed to be for me. “Sleepy I suppose.”

The Major continued, “You know, I have a theory. I don’t think God likes the Arab world very much. He’s given them the shittiest bit of real estate where hardly anything grows, they spend all their time trying to kill each other, and they’re 500 years in the past.” My eyebrow arched into my hairline. Was this supposed to comfort me? Did this dipshit know that Afghans aren’t Arabs? An Intel officer with no Intel, fairly standard as far as the military goes. Then I looked at his scar again and remembered that I was 20 and that Afghanistan wasn’t the only place we’d been in the past decade. I nodded at him and then left with Fitz and Gary for the plane.

The wind slapping my cheekbones on the walk out to the aircraft woke me up a bit more, but I was still feeling anxious. Mustiness slugged me square in the nostrils the moment I stepped through the crew entrance door’s three steps and began preflight. The webbing of the red seats was strewn about carelessly. The black anti-skid comprising the floor was worn, paint chipping away at the dual rail pallet locks. I shuffled toward the rear, near the paratroop doors. The shitter needed to be serviced. I didn’t get airsick anymore, but a mobile septic tank filled with dead bodies sounded like a lousy day at the office. I could barely remove the metal rollers from the aircraft floor, so cold my exposed fingertips stuck to them momentarily. Fitz and I played with the tinker toys in the back while Gary tested the ailerons, rudder, hydraulic systems, and a host of other

esoteric flight controls up front. Despite the plane's condition, Fitz and I finished quickly: our workload out of Bagram was light.

The two of us stood at the edge of the cargo ramp, staring off into the space where the mountains scraped the bottom of the clouds and waited for Gary to finish up front. "Fly HR before?" Fitz asked me.

I darted my eyes at him sideways, noticed his hands were clean. "You know I haven't."

"Never did any stateside?"

I chewed the inside of my cheek, looked down at my boots. My cheek bled. I swallowed it. "Thankfully, no. Plenty of medivacs up and down the east coast." The wind whistled between us. "But at least they were alive when I saw them."

Fitz stared off, wrinkled his brow as if to consider this. His tall, gaunt frame looked more emaciated than usual. His raccoon eyes had mud colored bags drooping down his face and I wondered if he slept as poorly as I did. "Something wrong?" I asked him.

He sighed, shifted his shoulders. "Janice and I are having problems," he told me.

"Still? Thought you guys worked things out?"

"Nah, it's just that...when you're married...you see...you'll understand when you're older, take it from me."

My heart sunk. I couldn't wish that upon anyone out here. Not even on Fitz.

"Sorry, Fitzzy," I said to him, hoping my words carried at least a little comfort. Teeth crept out from his lips and he smiled, weakly albeit. Samantha's face flashed through my head. I thought myself hypocritical, but it was time to fly and I couldn't do it thinking about that.

Captain King, Joe and Steve showed up shortly afterward. Like usual, we gathered in a circle near the middle of the cargo compartment and ran through the mission again. “Loadmasters, you’re cleared out of the scanning windows after we reach 10,000 feet. It’s cold out there today boys, I don’t think anyone’s gonna freeze their asses off to take pot shots at us,” Captain King said, still smiling. Always smiling.

I stood out front of the plane. “Number 3 clear,” I said through my headset. Slowly, the number 3 engine cranked. I followed this pattern for the next three. Each engine sprang to life individually while I monitored their rotations for any abnormalities. Once all four engines had started, the maintainers had removed the external power unit from the aircraft’s nose, and placed the aircraft’s chocks inside the aircraft ramp, I scrambled back into the plane, closing and locking the crew entrance door behind me. We taxied for a minute or two and then rocketed down the runway. Then we circled. Circled and circled and circled. Finally our leviathan aircraft had enough altitude to negotiate the mountains encompassing Bagram airfield. Then, through small rumbles and bumps to compliment the continuous vibrations of the plane, we broke through the overcast clouds and were greeted by the sun. I didn’t feel sleepy at all anymore.

The C-130 was our chariot. She didn’t have blinding speed or maneuverability, but it was the perfect plane to dive in and out Afghanistan’s endless supply of valleys, each of them surrounded by 360 degrees of impossibly steep mountains- their slopes nearly perpendicular to the ground. Up there, above all that, above the clouds, above the gunfire, we were free. The golden hue of the sun painted smiles on each of our faces and for a few minutes it didn’t feel like we were at war at all. It didn’t feel like we were on our way to collect dead bodies, like we were Charon preparing to ferry them to the world of the dead. The metallic tinge and cool touch of the cargo floor and metal seat rods reminded us that we were very much alive, but removed. Beyond the fog

and cracking mountainous rock and religion and national borders and history I had this 41 foot stretch of aircraft that I called mine. And that was peace.

We landed at Mazar-I-Sharif 45 minutes after takeoff. The American liaison met us at the aircraft ramp, angled downward like a wheelchair ramp, once we'd taxied to the German side of base and shut down engines. I was working on the aircraft floor, preparing it for caskets, while he briefed the rest of the crew. I only caught what was pertinent. Not Americans dead, Afghan security forces, including Kabul's police chief. Needed to get them to Kabul before sundown, family would be joining them. Family will bring them onto the plane, then we take care of the rest. No caskets available, they had to dig up litters and body bags from storage. The bodies were "leaking". There was no formal ending to his speech, as far as I could tell; no chord of sympathy or compassion, just words, floating through time and space awaiting ears to hear their meaning and whatever interpretation they might have held.

Briefings, reading, watching videos, listening to stories, none of them really prepare you for seeing the real thing. Two dozen men marched toward the aircraft, weeping, hollering in languages foreign to me, accents crackling in agony. No women. No mothers or wives. Just twenty something men who I assumed were close to the corpses they were carrying onto the plane. My crew and I stood shoulder to shoulder along the left wheel well wall and held a salute. The family didn't seem to notice.

Organization was absent. These men were on cell phones each trying to talk over one another. An Imam, judging by the way he stood over the bodies chanting to no one in particular, joined all of them, his prayers drowned out by hysterics. The liaison was right about the bodies. Viscous blood oozed from each litter as they were carried aboard the plane, splattered a few inches as they were set down. Fitz and I got going. I could feel the eyes of each Afghan, many of them

still fighting sobs and muttering into their phones, burning into my skin with intense scrutiny. I slowly, as though I were performing surgery, wove the strap around the handles of each litter. Under the microscopic examination of grieving men was no time for foolish mistakes as Fitz and I tethered their fallen friends to our cargo compartment floor.

When three large armed men approached the rear of the aircraft with a small arsenal of RPGs, machine guns, and grenades, Fitz whipped his eyes at me. I looked up as I finished ratcheting the last strap and saw that his finger was pointing to his M9. Rapidly, he chambered a round. I looked over my left shoulder at the oncoming guards and unholstered my pistol to do the same. I'd never killed anyone before and never thought I would have to, at least directly, during my career as an aviator. But, at that moment, I was inhabited by a certain thought. If I were going to hijack or blow up an airplane, I'd greet my enablers as friends. I'd greet them under the guise of tragedy. Unsuspecting, except that Fitz and I weren't.

The veins in my wrist pumped and pulsed and my breathing quickened. My right hand shook as it tried to reaffirm its hold of my weapon. With the family members in their seats, Joe guarding the flight deck, and the bodies firmly strapped down, the rest of my crew and I gathered to greet the guards. They had an interpreter with them, but it was apparent by their uniform that they were all Afghan. Captain King took the interpreter aside for a moment to discuss just what the hell was going on while Fitz, Gary, Steve and I blankly stared at the guards who were conversing with each other. "Jeez, you'd think they'd give us something better than this rinky dink pea shooter to go out into Afghanistan with, huh?" I said to Fitz, referring to the trembling pistol in my right hand.

"They're not for fighting a war. They're for anti-hijacking purposes. Keep your eyes peeled this one," Fitz whispered to me. I felt stupid.

Captain King came back to our small circle and filled us in. “Okay guys, these three are guards for the family. The liaison forgot to tell us they’d be coming along. Now, Omar, Fitz, you two keep a good eye on them back here. Their interpreter wasn’t pleased when I said they couldn’t keep their weapons.”

“Storing them up on the flight deck?” Fitz asked.

“That’s right. You see them making any moves towards the flight deck, let us know on intercom and don’t be afraid to take the shot. Don’t worry about scanning for threats this time around; I want your attention focused in here. I’m not jumping to any conclusions, but these people are hysterical and we need things to stay as calm as possible. Let’s finish the mission right and get home,” Captain King said. And with that, I hopped back out in front of the plane, ready to start engines and leave this whole scene behind me.

We rose above the clouds once again, but there were no more smiles painted on our faces. The family members and guards sat near the front of the cargo compartment in some seats Fitz and I rigged up while the two of us sat in our paratroop door seats constantly vigilant. There was no banter or chit chat between us over intercom and I could still hear the family sobbing through my headset and dull rumbling of the aircraft. I didn’t feel like they might attack us anymore. I see dead bodies in Afghanistan and want to go home; they see them and remember the sons, brothers, fathers, friends they had just lost and worry about them being properly buried. This *was* their home. My gut knotted.

Over and over again my eyes returned to the bodies lying only feet away from me. The thick liquid red drooped down the slope of the cargo compartment towards the ramp, staining everything in its path. They were dead, no denying that and I thought it strange that the first time

I should meet someone they would not be alive. But this was a war, what did I think I would see? Still, it wasn't the bodies that unnerved me. I'd seen dead people before; I can work around the idea of them. The trouble was their families. People die all the time. Every time I turn on the news I see more men and women have been killed in Iraq, Afghanistan, or whatever corner of the globe in which we're currently entangled: nothing new. But it's easy to turn off the news; you can't turn off a family when they're mourning right in front of you, like their grieving makes the dead human.

I wondered about the men lying dead next to me. Maybe they liked to fish, read, write, cook? I'd never know. What were their names? When they were kids, did they think they'd grow up to die in war? I didn't see strangers lying there. I saw two sides of the same morbid coin separated by geography and time: I, the foreigner, and they the dead, dying for their country in the way I never would. What if I had been born in Afghanistan? We weren't enemies, yet I tasted their putrefaction circling in my stomach, that I should live and they should die. Where's the end, the beginning? But I shouldn't have kid myself. A job I had to do, it was my labor, and I was not paid to have emotions. Numb: that might be the word. But I don't think words carry any meaning in hearts that no longer beat or brains that no longer think. It's simple. We're numb.

My headset crackled at one point and it hit me how quiet our crew had been the entire time. Perhaps I wasn't the only one trapped inside his own head. That is, until I heard Steve's voice come blurring through the intercom. He said, "Hey guys, here's a fun fact. This RPG is loaded!" Instantly an image of Steve looking down the barrel of a loaded rocket launcher came to mind. I looked over at Fitz to see him chuckling.

"Steven, put down the rocket propelled grenade launcher, now," Captain King said. A parent scolding his naughty child. He sounded stern, but more like he was trying to be stern over

stifled laughter. I giggled a little, too. Giggles, I thought. There were giggles from a strange 20 year old boy for the dead to hear.

We landed in Kabul. It was clear. Several other C-130s were there, engines roaring, flying about their day same as us. Engines stopped, then Fitz and I unstrapped the litters. The Afghans were not gentle; they hoisted each litter by the handles roughly. The chief left some of his brains behind and I saw Fitz' complexion turn lemon yellow. The red splattered goo laid there, a mess, and I couldn't look away: a token imprinted on my memory. Then they took the bodies away, we returned the weapons to their owners, and flew out of their lives forever.

Fitz threw up as we came upon our final landing at Bagram for the day. I couldn't blame him, but I strangely didn't feel a thing. The blood and brains still circulated about the tail end of the cargo compartment floor like old rose petals floating upon stagnant, murky water. When the maintenance crew arrived their faces turned sallow, too. Without offering an explanation, Fitz ordered the maintainers, "Make sure you clean it with the pressure washer and solvent. It's Afghan blood."

I pressed my eyebrows together at the center, flared my nostrils and asked, "The fuck's that mean?"

He looked at me calmly, facial features unchanging, color returning to normalcy in his face. "It's in the Vol. 3. Go ahead, look and read for yourself." Sure as hell, I opened my flight manual and found cleaning instructions for Third Country National bodily fluids. They included a special solvent and a pressure washer.

We reconvened at the Ops building. For all the calamity, the mission went exactly the way the higher ups had planned. I drifted through Captain King's recount of what had happened while

snapping my patches back onto my flight suit. Steve asked if anyone wanted lunch to which all but Joe declined. The moment the briefing ended, I made my way for the door back to the B-Hut. Passing the mailroom, my hand on the door handle, I caught a glimpse of an orange envelope jutting out of my mailbox. I stopped, took the letter and saw that it came from my mom.

Unlike Kabul, snow continued to gently fall in Bagram, my mountainous dwellings. I looked down at the letter in my hands. They weren't trembling any longer. When I got back to the B-Hut, I breathed deeply and exhaled, letting out an audible 'ahhhh'; the heat was working again. I didn't bother changing into my PT gear once I had taken off my holster and flight suit, nor did I remove my dog tags. I collapsed into my bed and popped an Ambien, hoping this time that it would work as advertised. I gazed at the envelope my mom sent me for a minute. I decided to read it when I woke up after drifting off to an extended sleep where I would dream of places where there were no body bags, suicide bombers, jet fuel, or RPGs. I waited for the unbroken sleep accompanied by dreams those who have taken up the company of the damned might find somewhere between chaos and serenity.

Then I would wake up and go back to work.

Interlude

Paperwork is piled on my desk. The girls and Carl in Client Development are chatting about Starbucks. They're wearing sweats, mostly, except for the few who wear makeup during the school day. "This latte is bitter. I'm so over it," Lauren says. The coffee isn't right.

I log into my computer using my Sales Manager credentials. I try to forget about the Astronomy exam I just got a B on, my lowest grade yet at school. I look over the mound of paperwork next to my keyboard. No engine exhaust. No mortars. No poo puddles. No mountain cluttered night skies. No bodies. No cargo loading. No flying. Paperwork and exams. Trivial.

Carl is an affable spaz. I can tell when he's worked on inserting an advertisement. She fills out her forms in green pen, always green, and dots his I's with smiley faces. He calculated the total price of the ad wrong, off by nearly \$200. "Carl, come in my office, please," I say. He bolts up from his chair in Client Development, stumbling and nearly plummeting onto the floor. His barely five foot frame bumbles through the threshold and into my office.

"Hi, yeah, what, what's up, what's wrong, huh?" he rattles off, quickly, processing words faster than his brain can think.

"Chill out. What's up with this ad?" I ask. "You overcharged them by almost 200 bones."

"Oh my gosh, so super sorry, I can fix that, right now," he said.

"Hang on a second, jeez. Do you know how you got it wrong?"

Blank eyes, like he were blinded by God himself. His mouth opens partially and lets loose an undefinable groan. Droning, like he's trying to think but the gears refuse to crank.

“Okay, well, it’s a national direct ad, right?” My words are met with continuous obliviousness. “But they’re running over 100 column inches, right?”

“Oh! Oh, so they get the local rate right?” he asked.

I bite the tip of my tongue, release, swallow nothing but all the words I want to say. Then I say, “Not quite. Local rate is \$13.30, yeah? National direct is \$14.70, but when they buy over 100 inches in a calendar month, their rate is \$14.00 even, remember?”

The lightbulb flickers in his exuberant eyes; his head cocks to the side, at least feigning understanding. “Man, how do you remember all those numbers, Omar?”

It’s only three fucking numbers.

The words make my stomach tingle. I stare at the blank white wall to my side, shift my shoulders. I don’t answer him right away, exhale once first.

“Part of my job in the military,” I say.

“You alright?” he says. I note the cowlicks all over his unkempt blonde hair, the marinara stain on his Penn State hoodie. His eyes are squinty and lips pursed. He waits for my response.

I tell him I’m fine.

Work

When I look back on it now, it felt as natural as morning coffee or a late night beer with an old friend. History never reveals itself as such until the moment has already passed and found its home printed upon tattered history books. Genghis Kahn's empire found an unruly enemy in the Khyber Pass. So did Alexander the Great's. Swords. Bullets. RPGs. Suicide bombers. Endless hordes of the fiercest warriors from every corner of the globe. The soil is littered with the blood and battles of human history in Afghanistan, the Graveyard of Empires.

The words of my mom's letter dug into my thoughts like a tick as we landed in Qalat. *We all just want you to come home so badly. I can't even imagine what you're going through. We love you. You make me very proud.* Funny, after over two months of radio silence from everyone at home, with the exception of Samantha, I figured they had only been imagining what it was I was going through. I stationed myself at the auxiliary hydraulic system. The gear made its usual high pitched whine as it turned on and opened the rear aircraft door. Standing sentinel as the setting Afghan sun was presented to me, the sandy dust of the barren airfield kicked up in the wake of the engines. Some flew into my mouth. I gagged.

We taxied along the dirt field, the heat of engine exhaust occasionally wafting through the rear of the aircraft, causing my eyes to burn. Joe slammed on the brakes and I collapsed onto the aircraft ramp. Fitz didn't—the experience of a perennial desert dog. “You alright?” he said through intercom. My knee crashed into the metal rollers on the ramp; blood seeped through my flightsuit.

“Fine,” I lied. “We gonna call for ERO checklist or what?”

“Yes sir, Major Omar. Absolutely, right away,” Joe said, his voice mimicking something like Foghorn Leghorn.

“Seriously, we’re sucking on exhaust and hydro fluid back here,” I said. Fitz chuckled a few feet away from me, then buried the lower half of his face into his flightsuit tee shirt.

“Alright settle down. Crew, Engine Running Onload/Offload checklist,” said Captain King. We each acknowledged the call. Then Fitz and I waited for the load team to arrive with our cargo.

Fitz and I lowered the aircraft ramp, prepared it for the onload of vehicles. Spartan missions never made clear exactly what we were carrying around the country, only the type of cargo. The next leg of the night was a relaxing three hour cruise up to Manas, Kyrgyzstan. We hadn’t been to Qalat before. I hadn’t even heard of it before that mission. An expansive terrain of absolutely nothing. It appeared the antithesis to the ominous mountains of Bagram. Barren. Brown. It looked more like the skeletal remains of a once thriving society, long since forgotten by CNN, Fox News, or any casual observer of the daily dead. What could happen in this peaceful corner of war-torn Afghanistan? Why in the world were we there?

“There’s a shitton of hadjis at 9 o’clock. Look, there, about a hundred yards,” Fitz screamed, lifting up my headset and defying the roar of the engines. He was pointing out to the left from where we were facing, bony arm outstretched. He was right. A dozen Afghans grouped together were watching us do our work. They looked like the family from a few weeks before, in Mazi. Simple clothing: white and brown turbans, white pants and long sleeve shirts under plain brown vests. All male, again.

“They’re just fucking watching, not doing anything,” I yelled back. Fitz’ eyebrows pressed together and he squinted towards the men standing on the horizon. Thankfully, a Humvee with an American flag zoomed to the rear of the aircraft and an Army Specialist exited to speak with us.

We shook hands. He was a kid, close to my age, perhaps a couple of years older. He wore jet black Oakley's and green mechanic's gloves with his camouflage ACUs. Blonde hair, manicured to perfection of the Army's high and tight regulations with a large chewing tobacco dip oozing from his lower lip: stereotypical soldier. He handed me the loading manifest.

"What've you got for us," I asked, still screaming over the unignorable noisy engines. Fumbling through his paperwork, I didn't see anything for Gators, Humvees, or any of the standard vehicles that C-130s tote from FOB to FOB.

"P-19. Three pax, too," he said.

My ears perked up and the blood from my knee trickled down my leg, matting the hair, soaking into my sock. "The hell is a P-19?" I asked, dumbfounded.

"Firetruck," he said.

There is no substitute for experience. Loadmaster flight training in Little Rock, Arkansas consisted of, at minimum, four months of being quizzed by instructors who generally had at least four combat deployments under their belt. In a cloistered cubicle, they could keep us puzzled into either the late hours of the night or small hours of the morning looking up esoteric numbers pertinent to the airplane, and our flying duties. 42,000 pounds over a supported aircraft ramp; 16 A-22 CDS bundles, each with a maximum rigged weight of 2,328 pounds, for a maximum weight of 37,248 pounds; max takeoff weight of 155,000 pounds; 36 inch adapter webbing for 15 foot extraction parachutes during heavy equipment airdrop; an endless list of numbers, rules, warnings, and cautions written in blood, the trial and error of aviation's history. But never once had I heard of a goddamn P-19 firetruck.

"Fitz!" I yelled, more so from panic than the plane's engines. He shuffled next to me.

“What is it? What’ve we got?” he asked.

“P-19.”

“The hell is that?”

“Firetruck.” Fitz’ pupils dilated. Then he smirked, color flooding his ordinarily pale complexion. The wrinkles at the corners of his mouth turned upward and he pointed back into the plane.

“Go get your pubs. This is a chapter 6 move; -9, fast, go.” I didn’t hesitate. Fitz waited for the vehicle while standing with the Army Specialist. Sprinting aboard the aircraft, coughing out a mouthful of engine exhaust, I opened my black backpack and rifled through my flight manuals until I found my -9, the loadmaster bible. I flipped through crisp, white pages, my notes scribbled into them at every turn, and arrived at chapter 6. I found instructions for a P-4, the only firetruck listed. It would have to do.

“So guess what we’re hauling for the next three hours,” I said, my tone shifting upward as I connected my headset back into the plane’s intercom.

“What’ve you got for me load,” Gary asked jovially.

“You won’t be so chipper when you try to figure out fuels for this, Eng. We’ve got ourselves a P-19 firetruck, which, according to the manifest,” I paused, cast my eyes downward at my paperwork. “Is a whopping 35,335 pounds. Plus, three passengers. Somebody’s gotta drive this damn thing, I guess. So go ahead and round total load weight up to 36k. What’s our fuel situation looking like, Gar?”

“Gimme a second, Load.” Silence. The hum of the rocking engines sounded like a lullaby through the hush of my headset. The behemoth firetruck strolled behind the aircraft, casually, like it was a totally normal occurrence. “Man, sure would be nice if C-17s could get into these smaller airfields. Anyway, Omar, we’re okay. The three hour run to Manas is gonna burn about 16k in fuel, so load that thing ass heavy, the plane’s CG will creep forward as we fly.”

Relief, like morning swims in a crisp river on a blooming spring day, the water washing over me. We could make this work. “Rodge, I’m going off headset to talk to Fitz. We’ll both be on headset for the onload, one of us on PA.”

“You got it, Omar. Be careful,” Captain King said.

“Rodge. Loadmaster going off headset again,” I said, then rushed back to Fitz and planned to load a 35 thousand pound firetruck onto an 110,000 pound plane.

The plan: one of the passengers would be the driver, the other two would monitor the aircraft ramp to ensure the truck wouldn’t scrape against the aircraft. Fitz would use the PA system to direct the driver while I watched the ground and ceiling clearances, making adjustments as necessary. Communication was key; no time for mumbled words or second guesses.

The three passengers were all Army, two Staff Sergeants and a Sergeant First Class. The latter took control of the truck while the other two stood on opposite sides of the aircraft ramp. They wore goggles, a luxury I wish I had as involuntary tears smeared my oil caked face. Fitz fared no better, but at least he was standing deeper inside of the cargo compartment. Slowly, the vehicle crept into the aircraft, poked its head up the ramp. The Staff Sergeants waved the vehicle forward, hardly paying attention to the iron mammoth inches away from them. Fitz was following

their signals. “Keep coming forward,” he said over the PA system. Then I saw it; the truck was coming in at too steep an angle, the front of the firetruck would contact the plane’s ceiling.

“Stop,” I yelled. No reaction. The leviathan crept closer. Loading mishaps grounded the aircraft. Qalat seemed inhospitable. “Stop,” I tried again. I peered back at Fitz. He was monitoring the left hand side of the aircraft and couldn’t see the inevitable collision.

Sweat slithered down the side of my face. Salty. Pins stabbing into the back of my shoulders, my whole body flooded with nervous heat. I jumped directly in front of the truck. Stretching my limbs out as wide as I could, I yelled with all of my might, “Fucking stop.” The driver halted.

“What’s up, Omar?” Fitz asked.

“That fucking truck is about a pubic hair away from colliding with the overhead trough. We gotta back this thing out and try again.”

“So what do you think we do differently?”

“Approach shoring. We just gotta make the entry angle less steep. Then it’ll glide right in. We gotta open up the front overhead hatch, too. Way too much exhaust in here.” Fitz smiled, the Cheshire cat.

“Well, you all heard the man. Back that thing out, grab some plywood out of the Humvee and let’s get the hell out of here.”

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“That was pretty quick thinking back there, Omar,” Fitz said over the static of our headsets. I looked over at him, seated in the left paratroop door, barely visible around the front of the

firetruck chained to the floor. He sat erect, beaming, looking at me receptively. I felt redness inundate my cheeks and I looked at the dirty cargo compartment floor. “I don’t know any loads who got a P-19 firetruck on their first deployment.”

“Thanks, but really, we did it together. I wouldn’t have even known to look in the -9,” I said.

“Bullshit. Don’t shortchange yourself. I’m impressed.” Pride welled up in my throat.

“Well, at least we’ve got another relaxing two and a half hours to look forward to before getting a bite and some real milk,” I said.

Trading was a way of life amongst aircrew. FOB Bagram didn’t have real milk, just powdered substitute or banana flavored kind of milk. Any runs to Kyrgyzstan or Qatar or Kuwait involved heavy raiding of the chow hall’s milk supply. Bargaining for whatever we could. The folks in Mazi went apeshit for Dr. Pepper, so we would trade that to them for Nutella. The Italians in Shindad had wine, which was a big no-no for us; we generally smuggled a meager amount of booze in from the states via care packages. Funny, the package inspectors never thought to actually see what was inside all those mouthwash bottles we received. Guess they just figured we were all adamant about oral hygiene.

Manas was a welcome change of scenery. It was dark, around 11 at night; visually seeing anything wasn’t what mattered. It was just nice to be out of Afghanistan, for whatever small time we could be. The March air hung a deadly cold in between unrelenting breezes. The ropes to the aircraft’s chocks had frozen over before we landed. We came to a stop, shut down the engines, and my ears were finally granted a reprieve from being assaulted by engine noise.

Fitz and I shook hands with the three soldiers who then drove the firetruck off of the plane and zoomed off to the next chapter of their war. Joe and Steve hustled into the chow hall for a milk run. Gary took care of refueling the airplane. Fitz, Captain King, and myself, stood feet away from the aircraft's nose, arms folded against the night's chill.

“Only two legs left of the night, should be cake from here,” I said.

“Don't jinx it. This plane always likes to give us trouble just as things are running smoothly,” said Fitz. My face warmed. I frowned.

“Just here to Jbad and then back to Bagram, right?”

“That's right,” Captain King said.

“Well the Spartan cargo manifest says pax and pallets out of here, and then they don't have anything listed for what we're supposed to take from Jbad to Bagram.” Fitz and Captain King exchanged a quick glance, like they knew something I didn't. I hated it.

Joe and Steve came back quickly with two boxes full of 2%, Strawberry and Chocolate milk. Not to mention they managed to lug two loaves of Italian bread and some sandwich supplies, too. The missing comforts of home are never missed until they're gone. A bed. Hot showers. Legitimate indoor plumbing. Sleep. Or in this case milk and sandwiches. The six of us huddled together, trying to keep warm, up on the flight deck and enjoyed a hasty luxury denied to many.

15 minutes later, the loading team arrived at the plane. Boring load. 56 passengers and 2 baggage pallets, each weighing around 2,000 pounds—the most common loading combination there is for C-130s in the AOR. That's what we were, really: quick airlift, delivery boys. One by one the passengers stepped onto the airplane through the rear ramp. One man stopped. His face

was dark in complexion, stature a measly 5'5" with a belly causing his flak vest to jut out nearly parallel to the ground. A scraggly, unkempt brown beard outlined the frame of his glasses. He was one of the last to approach the plane, but then stopped and grabbed me by the arm.

I tensed, yanked my arm away, thought about grabbing my pistol, then through grating teeth asked, "What?"

"I need to use the bathroom," he said, calmly. His voice was smooth, low in tone, at ease with the vibrations flowing between his lips.

"There's one on the plane, you can use it after we takeoff," I said pointing at the musty, dingy almost latrine we had near the aircraft ramp.

"Sure, but I understand it is a 3 hour flight and I don't think the other passengers will like me very much if I did what I need to do at the start of it."

His English was excellent, hardly a trace of any foreign accent at all. Quizzically I looked up and down his body. He had been screened before ever coming out to the plane, I assumed. Moreover, he was on our side. Plus, he wasn't wrong. The cargo compartment of a C-130 doesn't breathe very well and smells tend to linger long after engines are done spinning. Darting my eyes at what there was near the plane, I spotted a port-a-john about 100 yards away.

"Fitzy, hold off on loading the pallets, will you? I gotta take this guy to the john, be back in a minute," I yelled to Fitz while he chatted up the girl driving the forklift. He glanced at me, nodded. She had to have been 15 years his junior. Whatever, almost 3 months no girls, and marital problems, couldn't blame him.

Not 5 paces away from the plane, this man stuck his arm out, palm facing up. He smiled, looked into my eyes, and said, "I'm Hakeemi, pleased to meet you." A genuine expression of goodwill. I looked at his hand, back at his face, then returned to his hand. I removed the greasy, grime smudged flight glove from my right hand, grasped his, and said, "I'm Omar."

"Well, Omar, can I ask, if you don't mind, just how old are you?" The thousands of pin points on my face prickled in the absence of facial hair and I felt very young.

"I'll turn 21 next month."

Hakeemi's hand clasped the side of his face and he shook his head, eyes downcast. "My. You are the same age as my youngest son." He craned his head back up, shifted his eyes and crooked smile back at me. "Yet, here we are, working together."

My eyes widened, mouth left dry without anything substantial to say. Hakeemi entered the port-a-john and made himself comfortable for the next few minutes. Leaning against the adjacent john, gazing back at the plane, Fitz raised the ramp up for loading operations. *Sonofabitch never listens to me.* I banged on the side of Hakeemi's temporary bathroom with a balled fist. "Hey, Hakeemi, hurry up man or we're gonna get left behind," I said. He must have pinched it off in a hurry because a few seconds later he was out the door.

The two of us jogged back to the plane under the artificial runway lighting, heavy boots colliding with cracking pavement. Fitz must have spotted us running because the forklift carrying one of the baggage pallets stopped dead in its tracks. Running past Fitz, who was standing next to the forklift as he marshalled it towards the ramp, I climbed aboard the ramp, then pulled Hakeemi aboard as well. Once inside, I walked to the edge of the ramp to spot the pallet coming onto the plane. "Don't worry about operating the locks, Steve's got them covered up front," Fitz said.

Maybe he did think about me from time to time. “I’ll take care of starting engines too. Just lock in the ramp pallet and get that guy to his seat.” He said that last bit pointing at Hakeemi with a shaking arm.

With the pallets onboard and locked in, Fitz out front getting ready to start engines, I directed Hakeemi to his seat, then stood there with him for a few more moments. “Have you ever been to Afghanistan?” he asked. The bodies from a few weeks before flashed through my memory.

“Yeah.”

“I’m from Kabul. I used to be a Prince. Now, I go to Jalalabad to work as an interpreter.” Again, words failed me. I heard the number three engine begin cranking.

“I’ve gotta get moving.”

“Well, Omar, it has been nice talking with you.” He extended his hand to me once again which I happily shook.

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Three hours later we landed at Jalalabad. It was ordinarily an ERO field, but the controller over comms told the pilots that we would need to shut down for our cargo pickup. Looking out the window, through the two dimensional green hue of my night vision goggles, the brilliant hue of an early sunrise slowly crept over the horizon. I lifted them into their stationary position, still connected to my helmet but resting atop the crown of my head, out of my field of vision. Engine rotation terminated, Fitz and I guided the two arriving forklifts, shoved each baggage pallet onto one, and then lowered the ramp so the passengers could walk off. Hakeemi nodded at me as he walked away.

Two vehicles drove to the rear of the plane, a windowless white van and a Humvee. Two soldiers stepped out of the Humvee while the van remained closed. Fitz and I greeted them, Captain King and Steve alongside us while Joe and Gary stayed in the flight deck.

“We’ve got four PUCs for you, no pallets, nothing else, just those four. Two of ours will stand guard over them,” one of the soldiers said. I raised my brow, wrinkled my nose. I turned my head toward Fitz, shrugged my shoulders.

“Persons Under Control,” he whispered to me. PUCs, it made sense, the politically correct way to say prisoner.

The soldiers opened the aft doors of the white van. Why they insisted that the van be windowless, I haven’t the faintest. Two US soldiers from within the van commanded the prisoners, one by one, step down from the van. They were hooded; the rising sun would mean little to them. The smell was atrocious. Unwashed human mixed with fecal matter, I wondered if any of these men had even heard the English word ‘shower’. I pinched my nose and felt my complexion transform a ghostly white. All four of them were wrangled outside of the van. Fitz, Captain King, Steve and I just watched. One soldier from inside the van guided a prisoner to the edge of the aircraft ramp. He barked an order to the prisoner in a language I didn’t understand. The prisoner did not move. The soldier gripped his M16 rifle like a combat staff and crushed the back of the prisoner’s skull with the butt of the gun. The prisoner doubled over, moved to all fours. The soldier snagged him by the soldier, hoisted him back onto his feet before shouting the same command in the same language I still did not comprehend. The prisoner stepped onto the plane.

My fists clenched, veins bulged from my neck. White heat poured from my hairline while every muscle in my body tensed. It must have showed. One of the soldiers from the Humvee said

to me, “Don’t feel bad for these cocksuckers.” He spit. “They killed three Americans a couple days ago.” My muscles relaxed, but heart still pummeled the inside of my sternum. I didn’t feel quite so angry.

The soldiers followed suit with the next two prisoners. I looked at my crewmates. Fitz’ expression signaled nothing; Adam looked consigned to indifference, sinking eyes weighed down by heavy bags; Steve drank milk. The last prisoner approached the plane bow legged and awkward. Liquid seeped through his pants from his crotch, dripped by his ankles. I backed away a step. He listened to the soldier’s command, but his body began writhing when he was marched inside the cargo compartment, piss trailing with him. The other prisoners didn’t sit in seats; a strap was snapped tightly across each of their bellies as they were restrained directly against the aircraft floor.

“Jesus Christ. What’s going through his head, it’s only an airplane,” Steve said.

“Steve, you think any of these guys have ever been inside an airplane, even seen one?” Captain King said. “I’d be pissing myself, too, if I were going to where he’s going.” The irony swept over me like an avalanche. We were going to where he was going, Bagram: the largest detainee facility in all of Southwest Asia. Yet, we most definitely were not pissing ourselves. I wiped my palms against my flightsuit.

The last prisoner was uncontrollable. Even after he was rounded up next to where the other prisoners were strapped down, and even after taking a butt stroke from an M16 to the ribs and head, he still couldn’t be calmed enough to actually sit on the floor. The soldier seemed fed up. He settled for the prisoner sitting on one of the red seats near the front of the cargo compartment. As

he and Captain King walked towards the flight deck, passing the prisoners, Steve pointed to the last one and said, “Why the fuck does he get a seat?”

Captain King sighed, shoulders relaxed and arms slumped at his sides. “What, Steven? You think these are the terrorist masterminds we’re after? Look at them, they’re fucking kids.” I’d never heard Captain King swear before. I couldn’t see their faces, but somehow, what Captain King said rang true. Pawns. Children indoctrinated to kill the infidels. Squash one, five more rush to take his place. I thought about how many top al-Qaeda officials we have killed throughout the last decade, how the machine just keeps rolling. The Penrose stairs. There will always be the next enemy.

It was a mere twenty minute hop from Jalalabad to Bagram, time enough for two of the prisoners to vomit into their hoods. A soldier reached under their hoods and wiped away some of the puke from their faces with baby wipes he had in his front breast pocket. He probably expected this. The PUCs just had to sit there and deal with it, zip tied hands. When we landed, the freshly risen sun cast the morning purple across the mountains and the valley. I took my helmet off, the night vision goggles a constant pain in the neck.

The plane was immobile. Another windowless white van approached. The prisoners were released; each time a soldier exclaimed an order they followed it to a tee, or so I judged by the lack of butt strokes to the cranium. They couldn’t see the sunrise through their opaque grey hoods. They couldn’t see anything at all. The soldiers loaded them into the van and then carried them off to whatever interrogatory hell imaginable.

Fitz and I were cleaning up the cargo compartment and gathering our gear. Two maintenance troops came aboard and went about their work. They looked tired—sunken, bloodshot eyes and frowning lips.

“Hey,” I said. The younger of the two responded, met my gaze. “You want some milk?” His frown inversed itself and his posture straightened. He nodded rapidly. I tossed him a pint of milk like it were a fresh beer.

“Thank you,” he said.

I sharply exhaled air through my nose and smiled. “No problem.” Then my crew and I left him.

Walking back to the B-hut I looked toward the sky. It was a magnificent blue amplifying the cascading snowfall down the rugged mountain slopes, melting away. It would be spring soon. That meant only two months left in the deployment. I had two months to figure out how to return to life inside of cafes, cookouts with friends from home in the backyard, a game of fetch with my dog. But that morning, I only wanted to take in the sky, to look around me, and remember.

Night Vision

Floating between the endless horizon and jagged mountain peaks we flew under cover of darkness. I sat in the right paratroop door staring out into the nothingness. The night vision goggles painted everything in a dreamy two-dimensional green hue, illuminating what couldn't be seen, the ambient light flickering here and there. Slowly, I rolled my head, trying to crack away the discomfort in my neck, the weight from the goggles unevenly distributed on my forehead. Thoughts of home, the end of the deployment, drinking legally, my family played out while I gazed into the strange part of Afghanistan where the mountains recede into desert—another country altogether. I imagined the hero's welcome beer commercials promised me, drowning in hops and barley and the scent of alcohol I hadn't welcomed in months. It was routine. The aircraft's constant vibrations were rhythmic, practically lulling me to sleep in a place where I didn't get much.

And then, fireworks. Tracers from two groups on the ground, launched back and forth pummeled my eyes. Firefights were rare, but when I did see them, I was thankful to be sitting thousands of feet above them.

"Whoa," I said through the headset, straining my voice so that it wouldn't give away my rising heartbeat. War drums. "We've got small arms fire, low, three o'clock, not directed at the aircraft." Green tracers aimed to kill, hurling back and forth.

"I see it," Joe said. A moment of silence circled my ears, sheltered by my headphones, before Joe said, "Man, Omar's got the best seat in the house."

A few more fleeting gunfire exchanges, then nothing. The desert returned to its somber stillness, a normal night where I could almost make believe that I was in a peaceful place. "Firefight still going on, Omar?" Captain King asked.

“Negative,” I said. I pressed my molars together until my cheeks clenched, tooth dust drizzling a foul taste on my tongue, until my cheek muscles pressed against my rubber earpieces. “Somebody won.” Static crackled through my headset. Then we made a left turn.

It isn't that NVGs make the unseen visible. They work with the assistance of ambient light. Too much, and it turns you blind, whiting out everything. Too little, and you're better off pointing a flashlight at the ground. But with the right amount, a finely lit moon, clear sky, night unveils itself to things you could never see otherwise. Shadows retreat behind their mountains, what few rivers there were glistened, and the power outages that stretched for miles of Afghan terrain flashed themselves into squalor. But the stars were always what were most captivating. Ancient luminous bodies gave their light so I might see men kill each other—my sorrow not for their loss of life, but for their terrestrial confinement. It was a war; I should see. Stars, city lights, gunfire, aircraft, NVGs didn't discriminate—they captured all of it, their only need a spectator who might be lucky enough to see what was calibrated to infinity.

The sky was our office, the celestial diamonds our executive window view, and the sloping peaks our courtyard garden.

Bin Laden

Even after the head of a snake has been lopped off, it can still bite, still deliver lethal venom. The twin towers fell when I was still a kid, only 11 years old. Now, days after my 21st birthday, a decade of war, and four months of my personal foray in Afghanistan, he was dead. The face of the Global War on Terrorism, Osama bin Laden, had been obliterated. Like most Americans, I found out from the news.

It was the morning of May 2nd in Afghanistan, but it was still May 1st for everyone in the states. The weather was splendid in Bagram. Warm sunshine made the mountains shimmer, the snows had melted away to reveal trees in bloom along the bases of the mammoth summits. The night before, we returned to Bagram flying low level, careening through the winding sierras. On approach, we flew over kids playing soccer near their homes. Warm enough for playing, warm enough for fighting. I was wearing my blue PT shorts and gray PT tee shirt. The winter had nearly made me forget what it felt like for the breeze to flow through the small hairs on my arms, cool the perspiration on my forehead. Nothing seemed abnormal. Things, when I had time and presence of mind to notice them, were actually beautiful.

That is until I approached the entrance to the chow hall. We weren't flying until later that night. After we'd landed the night before, I helped myself to an Ambien and a little of the rum my sister smuggled to me for my birthday. I fell asleep before I could catch a buzz. The resulting hangover in the morning reminded me it was a stupid idea. The sunshine, while marvelous, was a pain in my cracked, crusted, and dry eyes. I focused on the gravel, knew to make the left past the latrine. Even if I were blind, I would have known to make that left—the stench singular in the way it could offend my nostrils, make the tiny hairs inside them burn. After another hundred feet, I

knew I was getting close. And then, my eyes still cast toward the ground, two sets of sand colored combat boots entered my vision.

I stopped, raised my head. What stood before me were two Army Sergeants dressed in full combat gear, armor and helmets included, and armed with M4s. This, indeed, was peculiar. Ordinarily, I could strut right through the front door, go through the motions in the hand washing area, have my ID scanned by the services personnel waiting inside, and then serve myself the same food that was available every day. However, these two were standing directly in my path. Their faces were unflinching, square jaws framed by the same standard issue sunglasses.

“I.D.” one of them said.

“What gives?” I asked.

“I.D.” he repeated. He had a shit eaten grin plastered across his face. He knew as well as I did that this was unusual, but giving an explanation must not have been part of his orders. I strained my right index finger, hooked it so it could open the Velcro closing the small pocket in my shorts. I gave him my ID; he alternated between 5 second stares at my ID, then me, and then my ID again, like a bouncer trying to decide if I was cool enough to get into his club. Without a word, he shoved the ID back into my chest, knocking me back a step. After regaining my balance and placing my ID back into my pocket, I angled my shoulders sideways and stepped past them. Turning around after a few steps, my eyebrow raised, I asked them, “So, can you tell me what’s going on?” They turned their heads to look at each other and exchanged large smiles. Then one turned further to look at me.

“You’ll see,” he said.

Everything looked the way it always did inside the chow hall. Long lines for the omelets, staples like wet sausage links and scrambled egg substitute. If twelve year olds replaced the camouflage uniforms and foreigners working the food lines, it would look just like my middle school cafeteria. I shuffled through the line and made it to the coffee dispenser.

The coffee was always too hot, the beans' flavor burned right out of them. It was a silver cylinder at the end of the line, extending out into the general eating area. At the far end, in a corner near one of the exits, was a large TV. AFN generally blared through the screens, their public service announcements and non-adult content programming just politically correct enough to air 24/7—I never missed regular American commercials more. Fox News also made appearances from time to time. But what I never saw was CNN, the left wing devil for news as far as most of my contemporaries were concerned. Except that day. There, standing at the coffee maker, I saw CNN on the TV. I began pouring my coffee into a Styrofoam cup. Glancing again at the TV I made out the headline: **Osama bin Laden is Dead.** I shrugged, even repeated the words to myself aloud. “Huh, bin Laden is dead.” Then it clicked, the soldier's quiet knowing outside made plenty of sense. Slowly, the muscles in my neck twisted so I could read it again, just to make sure I wasn't under the guise of an Ambien induced illusion. There it was written, plain as paper. I yanked my hand into my ribcage when the coffee started to burn it. I had nearly forgotten about it; in the five seconds since I started pouring, my world had changed.

Not long after I took a seat the President came on screen and made his speech. He recounted 9/11, the intelligence gathering and preparation for the operation. He mentioned Abbottabad Pakistan where bin Laden was found and killed and I remembered flying into Islamabad not two weeks before. The sonofabitch was in spitting distance from us and we had no idea. Then the President reaffirmed what I already knew; the fight doesn't end because the leader of al-Qaeda

was dead. Cockroaches multiplying after the biggest of them had been squished. The President concluded his address and the chow hall applauded, myself included. During the cheering, I could see two of the Afghans in the dining facility whispering to each other. I stopped clapping.

I waved Steve down when I saw him walk into the eating area. Amazing, for someone who was 5'8 and maybe 170 pounds, he could consume a mountain of eggs and French toast.

“What’s up, Omar? You know what’s going on with the extra security?” he said. I tipped the end of my fork towards the TV. He looked ahead, figured it out. “Whoa,” he said, cheeks starting to light with color, eyes beaming as if they captured the electricity in the air.

“You just missed the President’s speech,” I said. “Says they took him out in Pakistan, not far from where we were the other day.” The TV showed frenzied crowds chanting ‘USA’ around the White House and the slow realization that was broadcasted live at the Phillies game.

“No kidding?” he said while drizzling maple syrup from a packet over his food. The clatter of silverware and conversation resumed their normalcy. “Who knew?”

“President said he found out in August, just had to build things up until now.”

“Doubt that dipshit knew anything about it until it started happening,” Steve said, not looking at me, his face still concentrated on his full tray. I said nothing. We ate quietly for a minute.

“I saw something weird though, after he finished talking,” I said.

“After who finished talking?”

I shifted my head back, angled my head sideways. “Uh, the fucking President?”

“Oh, right,” he said with a light, casual intonation. I shook my head. “Well, what was it?” Steve asked.

“I dunno, just, I mean everyone was clapping except for a couple of hadjis I saw standing over there,” I said, pointing to the wall adjacent to the exit. “Seems strange doesn’t it?”

He nodded upward, cocked his head to one side. Then, after stifling a belch, he said, “Not really,” and crammed more feed into his mouth. I didn’t get it. If there were a time when President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” banner would have had its appropriate moment, I felt like it should have been then. A coalition of Western powers invaded Afghanistan to depose the Taliban and frag this motherfucker. Wouldn’t they be happy that he’s dead; wouldn’t it mean we’d be leaving soon? “Can you pass me a napkin?” Steve said. He had syrup drizzling down his jaw.

“Just seems like it’d be something they’d want, no?” I said, handing him the crumpled up thin brown paper.

His eyes, an intense shade of powder blue, usually sharp and attuned to his environment, especially inside the plane, were relaxed, even friendly. “You notice that all of the mortars and shellings come after dinner chow, when they all go home for the night?” he said. The truth was, I rarely had to acknowledge it. The handful of mortars that had fallen on Bagram air base up to that point came well after dark, true, but so distant that they never sounded menacing. Meekly, I nodded. “We know there are some who have ties to the Taliban. We give them jobs anyway. We give them an opportunity for steady pay and a secure alternative,” he said. I thought about the Afghans shoveling up the shit that pooled together in various spots along the gravel. “And they just turn around and fuck us anyway.”

“I doubt it’s that simple,” I said.

“Fine. You know, if someone put a gun to my kid’s head and said ‘go blow up the Americans’ I’d probably go blow up the Americans.” I leaned back, surprised. “But you’re sitting

in a chow hall with hundreds of other people. You don't think that looks like a juicy target for them?" I looked from side to side and felt very small. I hadn't considered that I might die with a mouth and belly full of imitation eggs, or lying in my cot sleeping off an Ambien. The possibility always existed, that in a flash it could be over before I figured out what happened. I just never thought it actually would happen.

"Not much different from being lit up in a drive-by on Bragg Boulevard," I said remembering that, most days, Afghanistan was infinitely preferable to Fayetteville, North Carolina."

"Bullshit," he said. "Ah, but who cares. We're leaving in a week brother, and besides, this is a good day." He smiled, assuaged the growing argument. It wasn't possible for me to stay mad at him. Aside from ejecting the aircraft's flares all over Kabul's runway our first time flying there, his performance had been flawless. He kept us from becoming a smoldering hole on the side of a mountain more than once. "I'm gonna go to the bazaar after this if you want to come. Got to get something for the wife and my mom." I agreed and the two of us left the chow hall.

Bagram was always an important location within Afghanistan. In the past decade we've transformed it into a super city—a megastructure nestled in the heart of unforgiving mountains. It had become the hub for airlift within the Middle East and departing from it. That's why it was so safe—trying to successfully mortar the place was like tossing pebbles at a speeding freight train hoping to make a dent. "Adam told me the other day that we just rented this place out for another 50 years," Steve said. It made sense.

In Shindad, the Italians were allowed to drink wine. The Germans in Mazar-I-Sharif had schnitzel and large pretzels. A TGI Friday's in Kandahar, a Dairy Queen in al-Udeid, and

Jalalabread in Jalalabad. Wherever we went, no matter how foreign the setting, the imposition of our culture followed. Bagram was no exception. Strolling down Disney drive we passed under the tree where birds gathered by the hundreds, tempting pedestrians to look up. To the right was a Green Bean Coffee, a GNC, small convenience shoppettes that sold dollar bin movies and cigarettes by the carton. A bit further down stood a shop in a cramped, dilapidated grey shack about the size of my high school football weight room that was controlled by the Afghans. It wasn't the bazaar—nothing organic to Afghanistan was being sold there. Instead, it was a bastion for pirated merchandise. DVDs that hadn't been released yet, expensive knives, Xbox and PlayStation games by the score, lots of posters and rugs. Prices varied. Everything was negotiable. Everything was illegal.

This wasn't exactly the case when Steve and I arrived at the bazaar. Tents in shades of purple, orange and green were erected side by side forming a horseshoe. The first item to pique my interest was a snow leopard pelt resting conspicuously near the bazaar's entrance. It was listed for \$900, but I felt confident I could get them down to \$700. Regardless, I took it as a big fuck you; selling the dumb Americans items they know will be revoked the instant customs lays their eyes on it. "Check it out," I said to Steve, elbowing him in the ribs.

"Hmmp," he muttered through closed lips. He pulled out a tin of chewing tobacco and an empty plastic water bottle. He raised his eyebrows at me and extended the tin in my direction.

"Sorry, only smoke." Steve nodded at this, packed a strawberry sized wad of tobacco and nestled it inside his mouth, and then returned the plastic bottle into his draw string backpack.

An onslaught of colors, scents and history pervaded every tent. The first we entered had incense burning. It was loaded with artifacts left over from the cold war era. Antique pistols, wool

caps with ear flaps bearing the communist sickle and hammer, books with tattered and yellowing pages written in languages I didn't understand. The Afghan tending the products didn't introduce himself, didn't try to sell us anything. He was tall, lean faced with a beard that resembled push broom bristles. He stood behind a small wooden desk and let us peruse what he had for sale at our leisure.

Every item came from their history which, like ours, seemed to be endlessly entangled in war. A few posters and tapestries were hung on the far side of the wall. One in particular was in black and white. It depicted, judging by the uniform, a Russian soldier, his anger expressed through bared teeth, narrow eyes and tightly flexed facial muscles while he broke an AK-47 over his knee. Russian writing was inscribed over his head.

"Excuse me," I said to the Afghan, making sure to wave with my right hand. He towered over me, his hazel eyes downcast to meet mine. Again with my right hand, I pointed to the poster and said, "Can you tell me what that means?" He didn't budge for a second and it occurred to me that he might not speak English. Then he turned around, inspected the drawing.

"War over. We can home go," he said. Syntax and word order were a bit messed up, but I got the gist. The war was over. They could go home. He turned back around. It wasn't a grin, but his eyes seemed to soften. Then they were sharp, hostile, and darted to what was behind me. "You! Out, get out!" he yelled. A long, bony index finger hovered over my shoulder until I turned around to see Steve spitting into his bottle. "Out!" he said again. Steve scurried out through the opening flaps and descended down its few wooden stairs with me following closely behind.

"Right in front of him? You couldn't wait?" I said once we got back outside.

"I was about to overflow. Would you rather I spat at his feet?"

I rolled my eyes. Dust had kicked up in the air with our hasty exit, the commotion catching the eyes of other Afghans. Scanning each tent, more Afghans were pouring out, looking directly at us, mumbling to each other. I couldn't remember a time before bin Laden was killed when tobacco offended them so greatly. "Steve," I said, but he was one step ahead of me. He already hooked the dip from out of his gum, then placed it in the bottle and put it back into his opaque black draw string bag. "Should we leave?"

He shook his head. "We didn't get anything but angry looks. Come on, we'll make it quick."

A rose colored tent had a sign for shawls and jewelry at its entry. The interior required a gas mask. The air thickened with potent perfumes, an almost less desirable contrast than the ambient smell of feces throughout the airbase. Too sweet smelling, my eyes began to water. Again, a single man presided over the tent—not one Afghan woman in the whole damn place. I bought silk shawls painted in lavender, white, gold and magenta for my mom and older sister. For my two younger sisters, ceramic jewelry boxes adorned with jade and turquois.

"You grabbing anything for that girly of yours?" Steve said.

Samantha. I had forgotten about Samantha. She hadn't written to me in months, my imagination running to the darkest places.

"She's not my girlfriend," I said.

"So you hang that picture in your room for, what? Shits n' gigs?"

I thought about it. She made me feel like I was her boyfriend sometimes, made me feel like shit for leaving but promised to write me all the time. But we never had the talk about how we'd

handle things. We just pretended, left things unsaid, no firm commitment. When I tried to bring it up, she asked that we didn't talk about it. She said it was so that neither of us got hurt. I think what she meant was that I wasn't convenient.

“Just like to pretend I have something to look forward to when we get back, I guess.”

Near sunset, dressed in our flight suits, Steve and I joined the rest of our crew in the Ops building. It was the first time we'd seen anybody since the news broke out that morning.

“I only wish it happened while Bush was President,” Fitz said.

Adam, pearly white teeth smiling through pale, freckle spotted chubby cheeks said, ‘Dead is dead, Fitzy. Who cares how?’ Fitz crossed his arms, went to sit in the Intel room by himself before our briefing. With only a week left in the deployment, and an out-processing briefing the following night, we knew this would be one of our last missions. Given recent events, we had reason to be overly cautious.

“Nothing reported from any of the day's earlier sorties,” the Intel officer reported. “But stay focused. Watch out for anything and everything. This is right around when the Taliban likes to start their spring fighting season, which, in addition to this morning's events, gives us plenty of reason to be cautious.”

Before he bin Laden was killed, getting shot at wasn't a common occurrence. When it happened, the AAA fire, surface to air missiles, RPGs or whatever they used generally missed the aircraft by a wide margin. That mission, Gary saw orange tracers flashing up into the sky, toward us, not even two minutes after takeoff. “I think the hornets have been properly stirred,” Gary said after the plane leveled out from our jostling defensive maneuver.

The rest of the mission went smoothly and we slept through the night after the mission's completion. I puttered around the next day, trying to pass time until our out-processing briefing that night. I had laundry I could pick up, but laundry was never a fun task. The locals washed our clothes and they were often returned to us smelling worse. The arrangement we had with them was simple: we drop off our clothes in green bags with a small paper inventory of everything inside of them. Things tended to go missing. A lost tee shirt here, missing socks there, even underwear vanished occasionally. It was a process, but thankfully they were pretty good about getting our clothes cleaned within two or three days. I had dropped off nearly all of my underwear three days earlier when I approached the laundry tent.

"Receipt?" the man behind the counter asked me. He held his hand outstretched, nostrils flaring slightly and looked at me with critical, coffee-colored eyes. I unfolded the white piece of crinkled paper. He snatched it out of my hand before I could hand it to him. After scurrying to a back room, he returned to the desk with only my receipt in his hand. "Check back, five o'clock," he said placing my receipt atop the desk. The phrase was something to which I'd grown accustomed.

"What? Come on, man I gave you guys that bag three days ago. I've been wearing the same pair of skivvies for two days," I said.

"Check back, five o'clock," he repeated. It was useless. I groaned, then grabbed the paper and returned it to my small pocket. I didn't have any choice but to check back at fucking five o'clock.

"Fine, whatever. Have a good day," I said. My frail attempt at being amicable.

“You have a good day too, sir,” he said. He spoke slowly, deliberately, like he knew the punchline to a joke I hadn’t heard. His eyes tightened their focus, sharpened to a point. His gums and teeth then vaguely smiled, but his eyes weren’t. Up to that point in the deployment, before bin Laden was killed, they spared me pleasantries. The exchange was a wordless one, I played my role, he played his, and then we went our separate ways. But this man was speaking directly at me, even called me ‘sir’. But something about the deep baritone of his voice, the rhythm of his words sounded false. I turned my shoulders away, took two steps, and looked back at the man to see him still smiling.

Nightfall came and we gathered in the old Russian control tower—a physical remnant of the USSR’s lasting impact. The briefing was carried out quickly and I was thankful for it—I had just finished eating dinner. Friday was steak and lobster night. This wasn’t just the case in Bagram, but was the standard order of the evening across every dining facility throughout the AOR. The steak flexed in opposite directions like decaying shoe rubber and the imitation lobster had the culinary refinement of \$1 chicken wings outside of a Fayetteville strip club at 2 am. My gut rumbled and somersaulted throughout the briefing. When it concluded, I told my crew I was heading to the gym, the only place besides the showers you were not allowed to carry your weapon. Then I dashed to the nearest latrine.

Sitting atop the toilet, I thought about the mundane. What muscle groups I would exercise in the gym, taking care of paperwork I needed to file before we redeployed, small thoughts that take up space while I tried to kill time. Even in Afghanistan, the toilet was a place where I could let my guard down, a place where I had privacy, a place where it felt okay to be vulnerable.

When the first mortar exploded, I barely budged. My knuckles whitened, asshole tightened, pupils dilate, and my heart rate quickened, but I was still sitting atop a toilet. My forearm muscles

tensed and I hoisted my shorts up before bursting out of the stall. A maintainer stood in front of one of the urinals, his ABU pants sloppily hanging over his muck covered boots. He sighed. Then, as if annoyed, he dipped his arm low so that he could snag the radio strapped around his leg. “Yeah. Yeah, no, we just got mortared,” he said into the radio. His vocal cords sounded like nicotine sludge, each word uttered a nuisance. Perhaps I was overacting. A lot of the time, EOD would destroy ordinance that the enemy tried to hit us with, but failed to burst on impact. The mortars that had detonated up until that point felt imaginary; they were never that close, never close enough to make my wrist hairs stand at attention.

When the second mortar crashed, I knew it wasn't an accident. My legs transformed into turbines before the faint ringing left my ears. It felt close, the rumble reverberating in my ribs. Shouldering my way through the latrine's entrance, leaping over the five creaky wooden steps that separated it from the gravel, I sprinted. Faster and harder than ever before, I sprinted. A handful of soldiers fully decked in combat armor and armed with their M4s ran by me, one of them shouting solid advice: “Get to a bunker!” Wherever they ran, whatever they saw after that, I only know it wasn't what I saw—that their war was not my own.

A third mortar came corkscrewing through the dusk, illuminating a black, mountain cluttered sky. It collided with the runway, into an aircraft with engines running. Engines running meant people onboard operating them. My brain told my legs faster, hamstrings tearing and stretching past their limit carrying me past B-hut after B-hut. Then, finally, I made it to the above ground cement bunker located just outside my B-hut. While somewhere in the distance a fourth mortar made a sound I was by then reluctantly familiar with, my heart continued to tap dance with the grace of a sumo wrestler atop my sternum. For grunts, this type of attack was probably normal operating level, nothing unusual and nothing remarkable.

After minutes of panting and wondering where everyone was, wondering if this small skirmish would make the news, I looked up and noticed that Captain King was sitting next to me. “Adam,” I said to him, my voice faltering slightly still. “You okay? Know where anyone else is?”

He frowned toward the ground at nothing in particular, then said, “Yeah, I was at the chow hall with Steve. He took off after the first one went off.” He bit the inside of his cheek, jutting his lower lip out slightly. “Those assholes wouldn’t let me finish my ice cream.” I shut my mouth, felt the heat from my face wash away, and waited in silence for the all-clear call to be announced over the airfield’s speaker system. Normally, by the time the “incoming” calls went off, the attack was already over.

After the “all-clear” call finally came, Captain King and I exited the bunker and then stood in the central hallway of our B-hut and waited for the rest of our crew to join us. Joe came along shortly, his story nearly identical to my own. Fitz and Gary took a little while longer; they’d been on their way to the bazaar. “I’m gonna go talk to OSI; I saw one of the mortars come down. Anyone else see anything?” Fitz said. I lied and said I didn’t. While Fitz ducked into his room to grab something, I noticed Gary shaking his head. I nudged him with my elbow and raised my eyebrow when he looked at me.

“Fucking Fitz, man. We’re walking along the road when all that crazy shit started. We pretty much dove into a bunker and while we were in there, Fitz looked at a kid younger looking than you and started chewing him out,” Gary whispered to me.

“For what?”

“Poor kid didn’t have his PT shirt tucked in.” I felt my eyelids open wide, a little air involuntarily leave my chest. Fitz and his priorities, a company man.

Steve was the last of us to rally. When he entered the B-hut, all of us instinctively rushed to his side. Bright blood poured from his temple and dripped onto his PT shirt. “Jesus Christ, Steve, what the hell happened? You alright?” Captain King said.

Steve waved us off with a dismissive hand. His cheeks flushed a bit and he stomped his foot lightly before telling us, “I hit my head getting into the bunker.” We laughed at him.

Gary went with Fitz to OSI while Captain King had to report to Ops that our crew was fully accounted for and injury free. Steve, Joe, and I were left with the B-hut to ourselves.

“Omar, where’s your whiskey?” The same thought had occurred to me. I pulled out a Colgate mouthwash bottle from under my bed and inside the care package my sister sent me for my birthday. The two of them joined me in my room. I held it up so that my arm was at a 90 degree angle, removed the cap, and opened my mouth to take a drink.

“Sure this is a good idea?” I asked just before sipping. Joe grinned, gestured with his hand that he wanted the bottle. I handed it to him.

“Fuck it. If we’re getting bombed,” he said with his free hand stretched out wide, then pointed at his chest with his thumb, “*I’m* getting bombed.”

It didn’t take much; the three of us were only a third of the way through the bottle before I felt drunk. Joe and I sat side by side on my cot while Steve sat on the floor, his back pressed against the wall where my flight suit hung.

“I lied to Fitz earlier,” I told them. “I did see something. Saw one of the mortars hit a plane. Engines running.” Joe grumbled a little, but that’s all. Steve rubbed the wound on his temple.

Before bin Laden was killed, I hadn't touched alcohol in Afghanistan. None of us had, to my knowledge. Somehow, things felt more urgent. And then, Joe said something I hadn't yet considered.

"To think, we still have a week left in this place." A sensation like rushing water swooped down my chest and into my stomach. For a second I thought I was going to vomit. A week seemed much shorter before bin Laden was killed than it did after.

"And that's only if our replacements arrive on time," Steve said. Replacements. We were leaving, but others had to fill our void. The mortars wouldn't stop falling simply because we had left. Likely, more Americans will die as a result. Many more Afghans, too. Part of me thought that blood had seeped too far into our history. And to think, it started with 9/11, started with bin Laden. It will end somewhere else. Our unit would depart from Afghanistan, but *we* would never leave. And, as I think is the case for all who have been there, Afghanistan would never leave me.

Westward

Tbilisi, Georgia was another planet altogether in the springtime. That morning, I woke up in the same flimsy B-hut in the same uncomfortable cot that I'd called home for over four months. Everything in Bagram looked bleak, as if the mountains blocked out the rest of nature. The two places weren't without their similarities: both had small white buildings dotting the valleys between each hilltop, kids out playing in the pleasant spring weather. The difference was color. Bagram was colorless and dreary; Tbilisi, the opposite. For miles and miles, stretching to the horizon and beyond, Tbilisi spanned lush verdant hills rolling past imagination and caressing the azure sky. And it was only a fuel stop for us—a gas station in our journey west.

When we landed in Burgas, Bulgaria for the night, we were treated to a cooler full of beer after going through customs. Zagorka, a Bulgarian beer outfitted in a green and silver aluminum can. We guzzled can after can while a downtown city scape complete with high rise buildings and shopping malls passed us by. Modernity. Crossing over Afghanistan's mountains was like diving five hundred years into the past; now we were back and civilization seemed jarring.

The hotel we arrived at was a testament to all the luxuries we hadn't seen in a long time. On the first floor was a Gucci department store with white marble floors and real trees lining the hallways. To the right of the concierge's sleek, oak colored desk was a five star restaurant—one of the best in the country, we were told. The concierge also informed us that there were five pools throughout the hotel's confines and that we could use them at any time. All of our rooms would have balcony views overlooking a courtyard populated with pink, purple and green trees stretching up to the overcast sky, as well as the Black Sea. The hotel's staff looked pleased with our expressions. Or they had dollar signs in their eyes. Either way, the place was a stiff departure from the Operations building and ambient scent of human waste in Bagram.

In my room, I stared at myself in the mirror, outlined by shimmering green marble, for the first time. My eyes looked the same, though more narrow. Jaw line had grown tighter, muscles firmer. I saw with clarity that the person within the figure was no more, replaced by something hungrier, something fiercer, something that was determined to survive, but would dull outside of the mountains. Then I stepped into a steam shower. And as the hot mist engulfed my skin from every angle, I felt the weight I had piled onto my shoulders melt away and sink down the drain.

Not long after, downstairs in the restaurant, the owner approached our table. Hours before, I considered working heat and air conditioning in our B-hut the height of luxury. Now, the owner offered us the gambit of earthly pleasures: steak, oysters, white and red wine, fresh vegetables, drugs, the whole spectrum of vice. He even offered us whores who he said could be here within minutes if we so desired. While tempting, we settled on Joe buying Johnny Walker Blue Label for the table.

Later in the evening I found myself sitting on the balcony with Gary, Fitz, Joe and Steve. Joe continued to buy us round after round. Drunkenly, we sat there while Joe tried to persuade me to become an officer.

“Dude...dude, just listen, listen to me, alright? I’m a dumbass, you’re a dumbass, we’re just muscle, okay? But I’m an O, which means, it means you can be an O. Right? We all think it,” he looked to the others for reassurance.

“Some days back there all I could think was ‘this kid belongs up front with us,’” Gary said, his cheeks rosier than usual. He was of course referring to himself, the flight engineer, and Joe and Steve, the officers. “There’s no crime in leaving your enlistment to go to the academy or OCS.” I was teetering on the fence.

“My whole plan was to get out after four years,” I said, my chin was tucked into my chest slightly and I stuck my feet out, one leg resting atop the other.

“Listen, I’m gonna get real,” Joe said. He hit the side of my shoulder to make sure he had my undivided attention. He had it. “Your old man’s gone, right? Mine too. Never get to see your family right?” I felt salty water welling around my eyes, heart strings fluttering a bit.

“What’s this got to do with me getting out?” I asked.

“If you’re gonna lead this kind of life, you should lead and make a decent buck at least,” Joe said. His phrases were becoming tangled, speech less decipherable. I could see it, the next twenty years of my life planned out. A career, promotions, steady pay, community, travel, the lifestyle wasn’t without its perks.

“An officer,” I said. Whether I did it intentionally or my eyes drifted to him accidentally, I leaned my head to that my eyes met Fitz’s. I didn’t ask or say anything to him.

“Have I ever told you what you should do with your career,” he said. It wasn’t a question, he knew he hadn’t. For months, nobody had aggravated me more. Maybe it was because he and I did the same job in the back of the plane while everyone else had their duties up front, maybe it was because he was a Master Sergeant and I was an Airman First Class, maybe it was because mentors have an uncanny ability to point out more of our flaws than we would like, but Fitz got under my skin at almost every turn. But I knew I needed him. And he wasn’t wrong; he could tell me how to do everything inside of the plane, but never what to do with my career. Inside the plane, most decisions need to be made decisively, sometimes in split seconds. Decisions about my career Fitz left to me.

“I love my sisters, my mom, my friends from home. But this, you guys, you’re the only family I need.”

“Then why in the fucking world do you want to get out?” Joe said, his intonation rising sharply towards the end. A breeze rustled the branches of the courtyard trees, their leaves drifting into the sea.

“Maybe I don’t want this anymore,” I said before biting the inside of my cheek. Under the dark sky, stars hidden by clouds, the sea continued to crash into the sand and for a fleeting instant the waves sounded just like mortars. It was my last memory of the night before the liquor caused me to black out.

When I woke up, I was collapsed on the floor wedged between my perfectly made hotel bed and a mini fridge, opened and with two depleted bottles of water. My brain was split in two by a hangover machete. My first thought was that they left me. I wobbled until I stood upright, and then placed myself in front of the TV to discover it was only 7:30 and we had another two hours until bus time. It wasn’t until after I had drifted to my balcony to take in the view one last time and limped to the bathroom that I got a look at myself. I was adorned in a zebra print robe, compliments of the hotel. I stripped, vomited, and then clothed myself in a clean flight suit before descending the elevator for breakfast.

I sat with Joe and the two of us ate like starving dogs. He wanted to take pictures by the sea to which I had no objection. After scarfing down a hangover cure, we stood out front of the hotel with a few maintainers to have a cigarette. A man walked by. He was dressed in a brown overcoat, the stitching coming apart at the arms exposing wool. A small grey beard underscored kind eyes and a beige Herringbone cap. In his hand was an old camera, not a part of the digital

age, but an antique of a time when photography took real talent. He pointed at his camera and motioned for us to group together. He snapped a handful of photographs, clicking meticulously, capturing the light just right. Then, he smiled widely, removed his hat and tipped it in our direction. Then he walked out of our lives forever.

There was a church plastered in swastikas from foundation to roof shingle where the town met the beach. Crossing it, letting our boots alter the shape of the sand, I heard Joe say with certain nonchalance in his voice, "Hey, check it out. Two naked men." I peered over my left shoulder. Two grown men were stripping down to nothing, not swimming, just relaxing. They were the only other two on the beach.

We touched the water and I let the sea salt burn the cuts and abrasions on my hands. Sitting at the base of the sea, where its vastness finally meets hard ground, Joe asked me, "So, after last night, you ready for Germany?"

I furrowed my brow, focused on the point where the platinum sky graced the ash colored sea. I swallowed. The sea breeze cooled my face, its scent natural and pleasing, not man made shit pooling where people walk daily. "The truth?" I say. "The world is so big. I've seen hardly any of it. But it's nothing like I thought. Everywhere isn't what I thought."

"What's different?" he asked. I knew how much he loved the job, loved the work, loved the life. I gazed down at my hands, still discolored, still beaten, their fingernails the tip of the spear in global conflict.

"What's the same?" I asked him. He looked right back at me before he too stared out into the distance where the edge of the Earth met the heavens. I thought about that man and his photograph: the strange Americans on their way home. What legacy would it leave? How long

would it be relevant? Perhaps it would be a relic, something he passed down to his children, and their children thereafter. Perhaps his story of the picture will be a grand myth for them to cherish, a legend his kids pass down about how their father met us that day. And then it would be forgotten. He would not know our names, our hometowns, our stories, our bond. He would merely look at it from time to time and marvel at what soldiers returning home look like: nameless faces upon a boundless beach, each of them a grain of sand strewn about history, waiting to be washed away with the relenting tide.

Subjunctive

It's Veterans' Day. The Pennsylvania sky is silver overcast and the wind is divesting the tress of their crimson, yellow, and brown. The coffee shop I'm sitting in provides a view of downtown, students shuffling, their faces turned downward towards their cell phones. I'm wearing my desert boots and fatigue ball cap, my own personal reminder. My face is buried in my Spanish translation textbook. The text parses through transforming the Spanish subjunctive into English—a part of communicating of which most English speakers remain unaware. To me, it seems a pretty easy concept. You use the subjunctive when you're talking about an impossibility in your own reality.

The girls sitting to my right scan my hat a few times. One's eyes narrow and I blush when she catches me looking at her looking at me. Though I have my headphones in with classical music playing lightly, I hear fragments of what she says when she looks to her friend. "Free meals for veterans...just hope they at least tip." I chuckle to myself, shake my head slightly. Is that what she thinks? Poor girl, if she only knew I've worked more inside a kitchen than I ever did on airplanes. I don't indicate that I heard her. I internalize it, sip my coffee and go back to reading.

Jack Martini walks in. He's dressed more or less like me with the exception of the cap. He still kept the hair on his head trim and proper, but his beard looked like it could support its own ecosystem. He sports a little beer gut that protrudes through a skin tight t-shirt, sleeves tightly hugging brawny, tattooed arms. I motion for him to stop when he starts walking toward me. Darting a look at that girl one last time, I pack my books into the same bag that went everywhere with me in the world and get up to leave.

“What’s up with that? I wanted a sandwich before the ceremony,” Jack says, patting my back heartily as I walk to his side. It jolts my spine; he hadn’t lost any of his active duty strength. We exit the café and head towards campus for the Veteran’s Day ceremony at Old Main.

“Sorry man. Some girl in there said something that really bugged me,” I say fishing my pack of Marlboro Reds out of my jacket pocket. I light one for myself before offering another to Jack. He smiles his crooked smile, grasps a smoke.

“Thought you said you were quitting?” he says before flicking the lighter.

“Man, I’ve been trying to quit for,” I quickly counted how long it had been since I separated from Active Duty and say, “about three and a half years.”

Jack laughs, exhales smoke. He looks back at the café, raises his eyebrow and asks, “What’d the girl say back there?”

I watch squirrels cross the sidewalk, then a flock of baby ducklings following mama down trim green lawn at the edge of the town’s main road. “Didn’t quite catch all of it,” I say, exhaling a cloud. “Had my headphones in, but it was something like ‘oh, I hope veterans tip their waitresses even though their meals are free’.”

He laughs as he exhales. “Omar,” he says, eyes downcast, grinning, “do I need to rent a tractor?” The hair from Jack’s upper lip curls into his gums he’s grinning so much.

“What on Earth are you talking about?” I say, truly dumbfounded.

“So that I can excavate the sand out of your vagina,” he says. Definitely pleased with himself.

“You’re a dumbass,” I say.

“And you’re an uptight pussy. Or is that the first time somebody’s said something stupid?”

I take a deep drag. The dumb phrases and questions, misinformation, and the impossible amount of people who say they have best friends or brothers who are Navy SEALs run through my head on repeat. *Ever kill anybody? Any of your friends die? So wait, you were a pilot?* Not entirely their fault. They didn’t do anything wrong by not joining the military. We did, they didn’t, for whatever reasons, and that’s the extent of the separation—but sometimes ignorance is corrosive. Probably just best to be at peace with a certain degree of unexplainability.

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Good, then let that shit roll off your back.” I’m amazed with his level of indifference. Jack is older than me, 28 to my 25: dinosaurs as far as the eighteen year old freshmen are concerned. It wasn’t Jack’s years, but the life within them. He was an Army medic. Six year enlistment; five combat deployments, four Iraq, one Afghanistan. Like most of the soldiers I know, he spent more time deployed than he did at home station. Oddly enough, he was stationed at Ft. Bragg and was jump qualified. There is a fair to high chance that he has jumped out of an airplane a crew and I were flying somewhere over North Carolina. He tells me about the endless stream of soldiers cycling in and out of Womack Army Medical Center with jump related injuries. I tell him stories of first time jumpers pissing themselves before being kicked out of the paratroop door by crusty old Jumpmasters. The funny stories, the entertaining stories. I don’t ask him about his deployments. Occasionally, he reveals more than he had planned, and then his eyes take a distinct glow. Then generally, I switch the subject. My stories will not compare, so I don’t try. Everyone’s war is different.

“You want to get a beer after this?” I ask him.

“Naturally. Come with me, the Veterans frat is gonna walk over to Darkhorse right after.”

I hesitate. I have nothing against them. I like talking with other veterans. I’m not “the guy who was in the military” to them—I’m just another dude. But I don’t stack up. Some of them are Marine grunts, Army infantry, all of the things that people visualize when they think of a soldier. And I’m a flyboy who actually flew, but it doesn’t touch the intimacy they have with war. They carry the invisible scars that I don’t, so I do everything I can to claim that they are the ones who deserve the thanks. I was more or less a glorified delivery boy in comparison; the military’s taxi service for all-inclusive vacations to Iraq and Afghanistan. What can Blue do for you?

“Sure thing, sounds good,” I say reluctantly.

The ceremony starts and it’s easy to figure out who is who. Most of the veterans have beards or still keep themselves clean cut and are wearing some sort of military apparel, but not in uniform. The ROTC cadets are dressed sharply in their respective services’ dress uniform. Parents, other family, VIPs, and faculty are dressed nicely with the men in suits and women in dresses with overcoats to fight the chill. The Pennsylvania and United States flags dance in the wind, looming over Old Main and its immaculate lawn. Moments of silence are captivated, everyone’s memory reaching for the names they want to recall. Some cry.

My eyes stay dry. I think about how lucky we are to be able to celebrate our veterans this way. I love that there is a gathering place for us to collectively remember, each in our own way. It wasn’t always so. Today we’re venerated, mostly. I thought about the homecoming Vietnam vets received, the volley of insults like ‘baby killer’. And most of them went involuntarily. I think about Penn State offering Veterans priority class registration. I think about graduating debt free. The scholarship for America’s poor and willing. I think about the stranger at the airport in Denver who

paid for my breakfast simply because I was in uniform. Military discounts at restaurants. Military discounts at movie theaters. Military discounts on identity. People genuinely give a damn. We are able to make a spectacle of our armed forces, me included, because what happened wasn't easy. Missed Christmases, missed birthdays, missed ballet recitals, missed little league games, missed anniversaries, the list sprawls on and on. And so, as long as we're at a comfortable distance, as long as we're a collective commodity that can be analyzed and used for political gain, as long as we're data to be interpreted, it remains fashionable for people to say "Thank you for your service." Is it weird to say thank you to somebody thanking you?

The ceremony concludes and I join Jack's group of vet frat brothers. I'm shorter than nearly all of them and one of few who don't have tattoos. I'm surprised when most of them get excited to hear that I was a C-130 loadmaster. "No shit man, we'd get stuff airdropped to us by them all the time downrange," one of them says. And in that instant, it all feels worth it, my part in the machine, it matters. I tell him my crew always tried to hook up our guys on the ground. We'd strap chocolates, magazines, all kinds of snacky food to the sides of CDS airdrop bundles. No porn thanks to General Order 1 Bravo, but we were happy to just give them reading material, whatever might help them escape for just a moment. He brings me close, drapes his arm over my shoulders. He tells me his name is O'Callaghan, Shamus O'Callaghan, Jack's best friend in the frat. I am more accepted than I accept.

As we approach College Ave, strolling on sidewalks spanning the lawn and slight hill descending from Old Main, Jack's phone rings. We stop and wait for the light to change before crossing the street. Jack picks up.

"Sullivan! Jesus, dude, I haven't heard from you in forever, how's it going?" Jack says. Then there is no sound but cars accelerating and ambient chatter. I turn to see Jack's face losing

color quickly. His cheeks screw up and contort, pupils turn to pinpoints. He falls to his knees, drops the phone. Then Jack makes a noise that reminds me of the family that day my crew and I picked up the bodies in Mazar-I-Sharif. Suffering. Loss. The sound is unmistakable, but from Jack it is a roar. He unleashes a flurry of haymakers to the cement, knuckles cracking and blood splattering around him. It takes Shamus and a couple larger members of the frat to restrain him, keep him from breaking more parts of his hands. As they scurry him across the street, he doesn't stop wailing. I let myself drift behind them. He needs something I can't give him. Shamus and his other brothers are better equipped to support him. Eventually, after following behind for a block or so, I let them go. I light up a cigarette. I don't know what happened, but I know someone is dead.

Hours pass and I'm back at my apartment watching other Veterans Day ceremonies on TV. Shamus texts me; he must have gotten my number from Jack.

Hey man, sorry for leaving you behind earlier, didn't mean it. Martini's best friend from Active Duty committed suicide.

"Jesus. Fuck," I say aloud to myself. I call him.

"Yeah, really fucked up," Shamus told me. "Medic, too. Went on as many deployments as Martini." Last names only, Shamus hadn't let that part go. "Guy was apparently a walking checklist for PTSD, had problems with his wife, lots of pills from the VA mixed with alcohol. It was the guy's mom who called Martini. Just sucks man, just really fucking sucks." *Too common a story*, I think. "Listen, we shouldn't let him be alone too much. I've got death by exams tomorrow, but we should hang with him Friday night." I agree and we make plans to sit around his apartment and watch movies. Then we hang up and I'm left alone in my apartment.

Shamus strikes me as intelligent, if nothing else, and caring. What he proposes isn't new. Penn State's psychology courses tell me that combat veterans have been getting together and telling their stories as healing mechanisms since Vietnam. A shared experience, a gathering of empathy, a way to make human what is represented on excel spreadsheets. Near the end of the month, important men in nice suits will sit in a room in our nation's capital. There, they will review the number of Veteran and Active Duty military suicides that have occurred over the past month. They will dissect all of the relevant details pertinent to each suicide. How they did it, where? Why? Did they let on? Did they withdraw? Substance abuse? Domestic abuse? Outbursts of rage? Then, after sifting through the tragic debris, after thoroughly scouring the sordid parts, they will decide on Suicide Awareness information to disseminate via PowerPoints at all commander's calls and other forms of leadership briefings. Finally, they will stand up, shake hands, and say "See you next month."

I think about this as I pull out a small wooden box from underneath my couch. I open it and grab rolling papers and a bag of quality sativa while I think about the VA's shortage of qualified specialists, lengthy waiting lists, and abundance of prescription pills. Carefully, I roll a joint while wondering, earnestly, if it is an alternative to booze. Can't say I don't still drink too much here and there. But the narrative I know all too well, the military veteran, dependent upon alcohol, life slowly unraveling at thread's end. I've seen it with men and women with whom I flew. I think about how it has impacted my own life while igniting the far end, think about my father: the Vietnam vet whose alcohol dependency ultimately culminated in his own suicide. A shiver rushes up my spine and my eyes pop as I exhale and I grip my left thigh tightly with my free hand. Usually, the drug takes my mind to place where I don't think about my deployments, people who hate us, suicides, any of it. I use it to go blank and relax. Tonight, it's no use. I sit in

my apartment alone, lights off. I inhale and exhale with tears occasionally dripping down my cheeks until sleep takes me.

It's morning and my Spanish professor is talking about how best to translate idiomatic expressions. Word for word, they're nonsensical. Certain words will carry meaning for some while remaining utterly meaningless to others. Her example is "Qué pedo" which in English translates literally to "What fart." But she tells us that in Mexico, it is a common way for friends to greet each other. I think about how words hardly ever mean what they mean; it's people who make sense of babel. Across cultures, some of the weight of the words goes missing. Time and again, I wish I knew this in Afghanistan.

I take notes, listen to lectures, sit in the front row, do all I can to keep my brain occupied. It doesn't matter, my mind keeps returning to Jack. Around lunch time, Shamus texts me again. More details have surfaced about Jack's friend. His name was Sgt. Nick Sullivan, originally from Kansas City, Missouri. It was one of those rare instances in the course of a military life where two friends remain with each other from beginning to end. He and Jack went through boot together, training together, even two of their deployments together. He was found with a shotgun lying next to him and a note that read: **You're welcome for my service**. Sensation floods away from my forearms and my chest strangles my throat. Homework seems insignificant.

The day passes in a blur and Friday night comes on quickly. I'm apprehensive about seeing Jack, how he's dealing with it. I know his family life is strained, shit, whose among us isn't? I'm hoping Shamus has been able to help. I doubt how much a difference I will make. I walk to Shamus' apartment, mentally rehearsing things I could say to him. How hollow sounds the phrase "I'm sorry for your loss"? Fucking platitudes, language's laziest noncontributors. There is no way to say what needs to be said. Sometimes words are inadequate.

Shamus lives in one of the high rise apartment buildings on the East side of town. The sun had only set a couple of hours before, yet someone had already taken the liberty to vomit all over the elevator floor. I opt for the stairs and climb six flights. The stairwell reeks of stale beer and weed, the walls filthy and steps grime-streaked. I tuck my nose under my shirt, my own body odor preferable to this. I remember basic training in San Antonio, and Loadmaster flight training in Little Rock after that, when I was 18 and 19 years old. If so much as a pubic hair was found lying on an otherwise pristine floor, the whole flight did pushups. No mommy or daddy to clean up here; must be hard.

I stop in front of the threshold to Shamus' apartment. Down the hall, rap music blares and I can hear people hollering. I look at my feet, run my hands through my hair a few times, think about getting it cut. I've never felt more anxious about sitting around and watching movies. I shift my lips into an o, exhale through them sharply, and then knock on the door. Shamus greets me with a handshake. Five steps in and I see Jack sitting on a leather couch that's brown and tattered at the corner with small amounts of stuffing jutting out. He holds a glass of whiskey. I walk closer and he stands up. Face to face, neither of us say anything. My eyes lock onto his and I see his beard dip, his jaw slacken and eyes soften. He embraces me, practically grinding my rib cage into sawdust. And he held it, even sobbed some, snot and dribble leaking onto my shoulder. I pat him on the back before we separate and he sits down.

"Whiskey?" he asks me. By his feet are two bottles of Jameson Select Reserve Black Barrel, one already opened. I look over my shoulder to see Shamus with a glass as well. He nods.

Shamus says, "You want a glass er," he pauses, furrows his brow a little and grins. "Sorry, didn't catch your last name." He picks up a glass and stretches his hand out to me.

“Just Omar is good,” I say

“O’Callaghan is a real shit head,” Jack says. His voice is monotone, still laden with grief. But somehow, we knew it to be playful. “Guy just can’t let the Marine leave him,” he says before taking a large slug of whiskey.

I take the drink. My mind races, questioning how good an idea it is to pump alcohol down Jack’s throat. “Honestly, Omar is fine. Aircrew is a different animal. Nobody used my last name after loadmaster flight school. In my squadron I was always just Omar.”

“No shit? Your unit was cool with first names?” And then it hits me how unnatural an element aircrew is within the military. The level of familiarity between officers and enlisted is enough to make the people who write rules and regulations shit themselves in horror.

“Never thought of it, but yeah. I always called my pilots and navigators by their first names, unless there was a real dickhead around who would give me trouble. Everyone did. Didn’t make sense not to, man. If the plane crashes into a mountain, everyone dies. The mountain doesn’t give a shit about your rank.”

“Did it ever cause problems? I mean, like, dissent?”

I drank. The smoky liquid burns its way down into my stomach, the good burn, the familiar burn. I remind myself that I was the only one from any crew during our Afghanistan deployment to separate from the military. “No, but I was lucky. I flew with the best.”

Shamus lifts his glass up high, nods at Jack and me as if to beckon us to follow suit. The three of us move to the center of the living room, standing close to each other. Shamus places a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “To our brothers and sisters in arms, the ones still here, and the ones we

remember.” I notice Jack’s lower lip quiver marginally. All of mine are still living; all of theirs, not so. The three of us clang our glasses together and consume our full glasses before reopening the bottle and helping ourselves to more.

The first bottle is depleted with headway made on the second by the time our first movie, *Anchorman*, ends. Shamus asks me questions about the Air Force the whole time it plays while Jack remains silent. Amazing, here I am thinking he wouldn’t want to talk to me at all because the “Chair Force” is notoriously derided for being a do-nothing branch. Yet, he’s more curious than any of the college students I’ve met over the years. My skin feels warm and my voice carries words out of my mouth faster than my brain can process them. The two of us trade some minor stories as the credits round out. Then, looking at his phone, mouth agape and eyes full, Jack says, “We’ve gotta turn on the news.” Shamus and I look at him puzzled. None of us were big fans of the media. More concerning is Jack’s expression. He’s been mostly aloof, quiet, and reserved through the night, but something in him now is anxious and urgent. Jack answers our arched brows and twisted mouths, “Paris is under attack.”

The three of us watch it play out. Terrorists have taken over a concert hall, so many people already dead. More whiskey. Shamus’ fists are clenched, knuckles turning cream colored. ISIS is all the pundits want to talk about, how we’ve been handling them, how they can be stopped. Jack’s eyes are focused, not meandering away from the TV for a second. Not since 9/11 has television made it a point to display this kind of terrorist spectacle. I guess that’s what happens when white westerners start getting killed. Hours pass. We finish the whiskey.

“Dunno why the fuck we ever left,” Jack says. He has a lumpy wad of chewing tobacco nestled in his lower gum. “Shit’s just gonna keep on happening.” He’s drunk, t’s and s’s slurring together.

“Those people won’t rest till we’re dead,” Shamus says. Even through my tingly hot pink eared drunkenness, I am taken aback. “Telling them we were leaving was a mistake, now look.” I know what he means by ‘those people’ and ‘them’. I wonder, within the confines and silence of my own thoughts, had my skin been a few shades darker, and with my name, would these guys look at me the same?

“Want to know what I think?” I say, liquid courage bulging through my chest. The two of them look at me and wait. For an instant, I don’t want to say anything. “I think we only care about terrorism when it happens to people who look like us.” Jack spits a gob of tobacco into an empty plastic bottle. The two of them sit there, Shamus with his chin resting upon a hand propped up, elbow against knee like a kick stand, before asking me to continue. “It’s just something I think about studying language. It’s a lot easier to fight and kill what’s not human. We do it every time. Kraut. Jap. Zipperhead. Hadji. Any word that makes them less than human, just easier to fight a war that way.”

“Forgot to tell you, Omar is a bit of a libtard,” Jack says hiccupping. I knew it was coming. He isn’t the only one who disagrees with me. Still, Shamus, although a bit wobbly, raises his torso so that he sits up straight. He strokes his jaw a few times.

“You don’t think they do the same?” Shamus says. “Worse than that?”

“I’m sure they do. But they don’t have the strongest military in the world and they’re not invading countries,” I say. I can feel the words arrive more rapidly towards the end, nervously trying to escape.

“No,” he says, “they’re the ones executing hostages and blowing up buildings.” Jack nods, turns his attention back to the TV. “I wish these idiots would realize that it is a very, very bad idea

to piss off the United States. When we go places, we don't leave." There he had a point with which I fully agreed.

"You're right," I say. A sudden rush of vomit storms up my esophagus. Luckily, with inflated cheeks, I force it back down and leave it at that. I don't tell him that ISIS is a byproduct of our invasions. I don't tell him that most terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic extremists target other Muslims. I don't tell him that we're the privileged ones in these wars, that people want to hear our stories, the soldier stories, not the stories of the people we occupied. I don't tell him that our armed forces are the most amazing people I've ever met, the brothers I never had. I don't tell him how it's possible to love your country and hate your government at the same time. "I'm gonna head home, either of you guys want a cigarette before I leave?" They both decline, but we agree to get breakfast tomorrow after the hangovers wear off. I leave alone.

It's late. Or early, I guess it depends on perspective. The bars downtown have been closed for a while and food wrappers litter the streets. It's unusually quiet, all the kids who went out for the night back at their homes. It's a pretty town, quaint and tailor-made for college students. Small shops, clothing outlets, restaurants and bars line parallel streets across from campus. Rolling hills surround the central Pennsylvania community. I grasp my pack of smokes, pull them from my pocket, and place one in my mouth. Before lighting it, I take a good look at my hands. Afghanistan never left them. They still carry small scars, cuts, deformities, reminders that I was there and my body will never let me forget it. I take the cigarette out of my mouth, tear it in two, and throw it in a garbage can along with the rest of the pack. I breathe in the fresh night air and I know that I am safe.

I decide I want to go on campus, one place in particular. My thoughts are surprisingly lucid though my feet drag and step sloppily. I pass by Old Main where just two days before everything

was fine, more or less. The building's clock tower and front pillars are cast under vivid orange light, contrasting the black night. The flags never come down, they still wave in the crepuscular hours before sunrise. Tomorrow they'd be lowered to half-mast. I walk across the cement slab at the building's entrance and take a left toward my destination.

Lt. Michael Murphy was among the most decorated Navy SEALs. Anyone who has read or seen *Lone Survivor* knows how immeasurable his character was. The memorial erected in his honor, as well as the honor of all Penn State veterans, was completed my freshman year. It is a circular structure at the edge of Pollock road. A small grass lawn is encircled by cement and stone, benches on the sidewalks so that passersby can sit down and admire. The stone at the far edge increases in height like a standard distribution, reaching its zenith in the center while sloping downward from there until it eventually rejoins the ground. Located in the lawn's center is an object. It's low to the ground, circular, black, and when viewed from the top I can see a ripple effect like water, strangely tranquil. I think it was Jack who told me it is meant to represent a warrior's shield. On the far end of the stone, where it reaches its highest, there is an inscription emblazoned in bold, black letters in a language that's not English. It's Greek. I don't speak Greek, don't read it either. Yet, I know exactly what it says. "Come back with your shield, or on it." I stand before the monument, not another soul on campus moving at this time. Then, with the first instance of light flooding over the horizon and into the valley, I turn my head east and watch the sun rise.

Academic Vita
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EDUCATION

Bachelor of Arts, English (in progress) May 2016
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Honors in English

Bachelor of Arts, Spanish (in progress) May 2016
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Senior Honors Thesis January 2015 – May 2016
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

- Crafted series of short stories through the Department of English under the mentorship of Charlotte Holmes, in fulfillment of requirements set forth by the university honors college.
- Conducted research into the form and style of post 9/11 war memoirs, post 9/11 war fiction, and psychological studies of returning combat veterans.
- Produced final manuscript (in progress).

Ronald E. McNair Summer Research Program May 2015 – August 2015
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

- Conducted independent research for nine weeks exploring the limitations of utilizing soldier narratives as an ethical framework by which we may examine the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan under the mentorship of Dr. Ebony Coletu.
- Performed extensive literature review including autobiographical and fictitious war narratives, current psychological analyses of PTSD and moral injury frameworks, philosophical anthropology, narrative theory, critical analyses of Just War Theory, texts examining Situationalism, and narratives translated from Arabic.
- Wrote manuscript to be published in Penn State's 2015 McNair Research Journal.
- Gave oral presentation at the 2015 Ronald E. McNair Summer Research Symposium at The Pennsylvania State University – University Park campus.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Advertising Sales Manager January 2015 – May 2015
The Daily Collegian, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

- Worked 20-25 hours per week overseeing the day-to-day operations of The Daily Collegian's sales department.
- Led team of 15 Account Executives to gross over \$300,000 in advertising sales revenue.
- Hired, trained, and assimilated 8 new account executives into the sales department.
- Implemented new training and cold calling initiatives grossing over \$10,000 in additional sales revenue.

Client Development Manager

April 2014 – January 2015

The Daily Collegian, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

- Managed team of 14 representatives in office finance accounting and client satisfaction.
- Hired, trained, and assimilated 4 new representatives into the department.
- Created, developed, and implemented new schedule, training, and cold calling policies which acquired 6 new contract clients.
- Communicated with businesses, both local and national, on a personal level establishing rapport and continuing successful business relationships.
- Responsible for timely and correct insertions of all national advertisements.

C-130 Aircraft Loadmaster

July 2008 – July 2012

United States Air Force, Pope Army Airfield, Pope AAF, NC

- Planned, directed and supervised on-load and off-load operations on the \$32 million C-130H2 tactical weapon system.
- Computed weight and balance, total aircraft weight, load center of gravity and aircraft structural limitations.
- Conducted cargo and personnel airdrops as directed to include the use of night vision devices for low visibility in austere locations around the globe.
- Determined hazardous cargo compatibility and maintained knowledge of emergency equipment and procedures.

GRANTS AND AWARDS

- Bunton Waller Scholarship (2015-2016)
- Kent A. Petersen Memorial Scholarship (2014-2015)
- Linda Brodsky Strumpf & Jonathan A. Strumpf Trustee Scholarship (2014-2015)
- Milton B. Dolinger Endowed Scholarship (2014-2015)
- Le Chard Trustee Scholarship (2013)

HONORS

- Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Scholars Program (2014-2016)
- Schreyer Honors College of the Pennsylvania State University (2014-2016)
- University Dean's List (2013-2015)
- Airman of the Year, 43rd Airlift Wing, Pope AAF, NC (2010)

RELEVANT COURSEWORK

- **English:** Rhetoric and Civic Life, What is Literature, Intro to literary Theory and Criticism, British Literature to 1798, Intro to Fiction Writing, More Human than Human (honors seminar), Creative Writing and Writing Creatively (honors seminar), Writing Revolution (honors seminar), American Literature to 1900, Advanced Fiction Writing.
- **Spanish:** Intensive Spanish, Intermediate Grammatical Concepts, Intro to Hispanic Literature, Advanced Grammar and Computation, Masterpieces of Spanish-American Literature, Advanced Oral Expression, Translation, Spanish for Business, Interpretation.
- **Linguistics:** Foundation of Linguistics, Intro to Spanish Linguistics, Evolution of Spanish